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Breaking the cycle of IBD's impact on mental health

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In any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental health challenge – and for Canadians living with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), evidence shows they are at heightened risk for being among that cohort.

Through a three-year research grant, Crohn's and Colitis Canada is targeting this vital area in need of more research: the impact of IBD on mental health, and how we can help patients.

This grant was awarded to **Dr. Dean Tripp**, a professor of psychology at Queen's University who has long studied the psychosocial impact of pain. A rising swell of research in recent years has revealed alarming patterns of depression and suicidal ideation among people with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis.

“These threats are more prominent than we previously thought, and we must act now to help patients of all ages,” says Dr. Tripp, whose research underscores pain's link to depression and a poorer quality of life for IBD patients.

This grant enables the first longitudinal study to explore how symptom flare-ups impact mental health, relationships and social interaction, work and disability, and other variables tied to quality of life. Dr. Tripp is also tackling the difficult subject of suicide, seeking to provide new insights in targeting psychological management for those most at risk, and helping them cope with the disease.

Dr. Tripp says it's important to uncover the precipitating factors that lead to mental health struggles in those who live with IBD.

“We know disease activity is one such factor – for example, when a teen starts to experience signs of IBD and it affects their social life, even their ability to go to school,” says Dr. Tripp. “The disease itself is a major promoter of these adjustment problems and stressors, because inflammation and changes in our microbiome directly impact our mood, sleep, and physical mobility – even our desire to be around other people.”

What results is a cycle of physical symptoms that drive negative thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, which in turn create higher inflammation and disease activity. If the body is ill, the mind tends to get ill.

“How you feel physically, what you do in your world, and then how you feel about the world and yourself – we are exploring this now more deeply to understand some of the most difficult psychological factors at play when a patient is coping with this disease.”

Dr. Tripp stresses that the early moments – the months and years after someone is diagnosed – may be the most critical in terms of supporting mental health. During this time of adjustment for patients and families, there is stress, possible surgeries, and body image and illness stigma to ward off.

“The onset of IBD is like throwing a heavy rock in a calm pond,” Dr. Tripp says. “It’s a mini tsunami of distress that can be a serious struggle. We must focus research on this crucial period of adjustment.”

There is an urgent need to develop new strategies and resources to help patients with IBD. This grant, Dr. Tripp says, will drive results he hopes will help compel action to improve their psychological welfare.

“We must reach a stage of action, not exist in a stage of investigation,” Dr. Tripp says. “Crohn’s and Colitis Canada is really helping move the needle with regards to research in this much-needed direction.”

- [Read the original article here](#)
- [If you or someone you know is struggling, please proceed here.](#)
- [Read more about Dr. Tripp’s research and other Crohn’s and Colitis Canada funded research.](#)
- [Watch Dr. Tripp speak at our Gutsy Learning Series on psychological and social risk factors affecting pain.](#)