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GTA

# Doug Ford says ‘take a break from negativity.’ These Ontarians say good luck with that

By **Nadine Yousif** Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Wed., April 7, 2021 | 4 min. read

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Being happy is Julie Whish's full-time job.

As a “happiness officer” for a Toronto-based small-tech company, her job focuses on planning celebrations and mental health initiatives to create a positive space for her colleagues so they can remain excited and motivated to come to work.

But when Whish heard the news Wednesday of another province-wide stay-at-home order, she knew her colleagues would feel demoralized — and her own optimism was replaced by frustration and confusion, at yet another measure to curb the spread of COVID seemingly too late.

“Anytime I hop on to Twitter, everyone is saying the same thing, which is ‘What’s happening?’” Whish said. “Everyone’s so upset.”

Premier Doug Ford ended Wednesday’s announcement by telling Ontarians to “take a break from negativity” for the next four weeks. But a break may not be on the cards.

Ontario’s announcement is new, but for people living in the regions of Peel, York and Toronto, it’s a continuation of yo-yo-ing lockdown measures since November. It is the province’s third state of emergency. Despite these measures, [COVID-19](#) rates only dipped for a short period before they spiked again, and ICUs across the region are now meeting worst-case scenario predictions by experts.

For many Ontarians, the province’s approach seems futile at curbing the spread of the virus. Anger and frustration have hit an all-time high since last year, with a population that’s become worn out from a pandemic whose end is not quite in sight. Even the vaccine, once seen as a light at the end of a long tunnel, has become a sore point due to its slow rollout and inequitable access.

As Ford urges the province to focus on the positive, some say that’s hard to do.

“What’s a bit frustrating for people with comments like that from the premier — and it’s not to say the intentions are not in a good place — but it can feel quite invalidating,” said Toula Kourgiantakis, a social worker and assistant professor at the University of Toronto.

Everyone is affected — from hospital workers who pleaded with the province for weeks to consider tighter restrictions, to teachers who constantly fear catching the virus in the classroom, to small-business owners who have to pivot yet again under new measures.

Those who are working from home are also struggling, Whish said. Her role to inspire other colleagues virtually has become more challenging as the pandemic draws on.

“The last thing you want to do is hop on (Zoom), even if it’s a fun theme or something exciting to do,” she said. “Nowadays, it feels like the best thing to do sometimes is nothing.”

Ongoing research shows the pandemic continues to affect our mental health in worrying ways. The most recent numbers from Mental Health Research Canada’s poll in February revealed 21 per cent of Ontarians are feeling high levels of depression since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The data is only two months old, but Kourgiantakis said these numbers are likely only exacerbated by the recent news.

“The situation is not getting better,” she said, adding the pandemic continues to erode people’s resiliency, especially for those who are marginalized or have pre-existing mental health conditions.

The reasons for rising frustrations are many: [warehouses](#), [factories](#) and [construction sites](#), which are responsible for the highest levels of workplace spread in the province, are not targeted by stay-at-home measures. The vaccine rollout is still confusing for many, all while most Americans are able to secure a dose south of the border. Many essential workers still have no access to paid sick leave.

Chris Sierzputowski of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., said this wave of the pandemic has brought “huge amounts of anxiety and apprehension on a daily basis.” The slow rollout of the vaccine, the 61-year-old said, has only added to this.

For Bonnie Carter, a 56-year-old who lives north of Belleville and is immunocompromised, the hardest part about the pandemic remains not being able to see her father, who lives in Barrie, since Thanksgiving of 2019.

“He doesn’t want me travelling there and risking getting the virus myself, let alone me giving it to him,” she said. “He’s over 80, so we know every day that he wakes up is a blessing.”

People in the restaurant business say they’ve grown numb to the blows their industry continues to face as a result of rapidly changing measures to curb the virus — none of which seem to be working.

“When you’re a restaurant owner, you’ve put your entire life into something that has been taken away from you suddenly,” said Tomas Morana of Bar Volo in Toronto. “People can argue that things can go back to normal, but I’m really concerned about the psychological change this might have on people.”

With four more weeks of lockdown ahead, Kourgiantakis said it’s important that people find healthy ways to cope with their anger and frustration. Carter said she’s leaned on meditation to guide her through. Sierzputowski said his new dog, which he got at the onset of the pandemic, has been “the greatest coping mechanism” for him and his family.

For Whish, the happiness officer, it’s been the joy of experiencing the world through the eyes of her 17-month-old son.

“In a way, it’s nice because he’ll never remember this,” Whish said.

“It’s watching him be so excited about every little thing, and he has no idea.”



**Nadine Yousif** is a Toronto-based reporter for the Star covering mental health. Her reporting is funded by the Canadian government through its Local Journalism Initiative. Follow her on Twitter: [@nadineyousif](#)

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