

December 20, 2021

## Don't Let the Grinch Steal Christmas: A Letter from a Concerned Psychologist

Dear fellow Canadians,

Did the Grinch just steal Christmas? In recent weeks, BC's Public Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry stated that British Columbians should only gather with "safe, vaccinated" people over the holidays, implying that unvaccinated individuals are unsafe and should be excluded from all social and family traditions and activities. On December 17, 2021, she took this a step further, ordering British Columbians not to gather with family and friends who are unvaccinated, thus making social exclusion and marginalization of unvaccinated individuals a public health order, separating friends and families just before the holidays until the end of January at least.

I am a Registered Psychologist in British Columbia and have a PhD in clinical psychology with extensive experience in developmental and social psychology. I'm deeply concerned by our provincial health leaders' recommendations and the recent restrictions and frightened for the well-being of my fellow British Columbians. To understand why, you need to know a bit about my clinical and research expertise which focuses on *attachment theory* and *the need to belong*.

*Attachment and the need to belong* refer to the fundamental human need to maintain close social bonds and stay connected in psychologically and physically safe relationships from cradle to grave. One of the major contributions of psychology research has been to demonstrate that maintaining healthy and secure attachment and belonging is more than a psychological need: Attachment and belonging are primary and critical determinants of mental and physical health. Research in social psychology and neuroscience demonstrates that human beings' neurobiological response to social exclusion mirrors their response to physical pain and suggests that social exclusion is one of the most painful and threatening events a person can experience. While it's not surprising that social exclusion and disturbances in attachment lead to negative emotions and thoughts, what's less intuitive is that a large body of research has demonstrated that social exclusion is toxic to humans, leading to enduring changes in the brain and biological systems that regulate stress, weakening of the immune system, mental and physical illness, and earlier death.

To date the narrative around social restrictions has been, "*Well yes, social isolation is hard but restrictions are for the greater good!*" But let's be clear: The newest restrictions are not your run-of-the-mill isolation requirements. These restrictions require British Columbians to *selectively exclude and marginalize* their unvaccinated friends and loved ones during the most significant season for social gatherings and celebrations. This is painful for everyone involved, but especially those who will be excluded and spending the holidays alone. It is also qualitatively different from previous social isolation requirements where *we were all in it together*. Sadly, social exclusion is actually an extremely harmful form of *bullying*. It's clear to anyone with an understanding of psychology that these restrictions will cause relational fracturing and personal suffering that will last well beyond the holiday season.

Not only is there strong scientific evidence that social exclusion leads to increased morbidity and mortality, but research consistently demonstrates that social exclusion, loneliness, and isolation are predictors of self-harm and suicide. The latest data have also shown a huge escalation [in drug toxicity deaths since social restrictions began](#) and this is the tip of the iceberg ([see BC Coroner's Service Illicit](#)

[Drug Toxicity Death Report January 1, 2021 - October 31, 2021](#)). One can only assume that the provincial health authorities' relationship-splitting social engineering interventions will increase loneliness and isolation and associated risks for depression, anxiety, PTSD, self-harm, suicide, and drug toxicity for all. This is psychology 101. We also know however that the harms of these socially-isolating interventions will not be distributed equally across society, as research demonstrates that already marginalized populations are the ones hit the hardest by isolation. A 2019 study in the American Journal of Epidemiology stated that, "Compared with the least isolated, the most socially isolated black men and women had a more than 2-fold higher risk of death from any cause, and white men and women had 60% and 84% greater risk of death, respectively." The province-wide mandates that marginalize and divide have been and will continue to be devastating to the lives of British Columbians. If the health authorities or the public understood the severity of these impacts, it would be my hope that neither would want this blood on their hands. *So I ask: where is the accountability of the provincial health authorities for such risks and consequences? Where does this end? Who will stand up and say enough is enough?*

While most physicians, epidemiologists, and health leaders may not appreciate the disastrous mental and physical health implications of the ongoing and latest public health restrictions, most educated mental health professionals including psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and counsellors should be well aware. Within the health professions, these mental health professionals have unique and specialized expertise related to human attachment and belonging needs and the health consequences of thwarting these needs.

How is it then that psychologists with PhDs and years of expertise related to the psychological and relational risks for deleterious mental and physical health outcomes related to social isolation and exclusion can sit by and swallow a one-sided narrative about pandemic risks and harms, while passively accepting ongoing public health restrictions that marginalize and psychologically harm British Columbians? Unfortunately, psychology has played a key role in the fear-based messaging that has led us to this point. Shouldn't psychology also play a role in preventing the harms of discrimination, social isolation and exclusion, and marginalization? Do we as psychologists not have a responsibility in educating the health authorities and the public about these impacts that fall squarely within our area of expertise? Our ethical codes state that we do and I absolutely agree. I would argue that *all* mental health professionals in BC have a responsibility to reflect on their training and expertise in attachment and belonging, put aside complacency and fear, and call for an end to the marginalization of our unvaccinated family and friends.

And what about the mental health professions' Associations and Colleges? Their responsibilities are to advocate for their respective professions and protect the public. Do the British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA) and the College of Psychologists of British Columbia (CPBC) for example, not have a professional responsibility to protect the public from the psychological and physical harms caused by these harmful public health interventions? I would argue that they do, given that all health-related Colleges in BC have a core mandate to protect all members of the public, whether vaccinated or not.

The provincial health authorities' recent actions run dangerously counter to psychological and epidemiological research demonstrating the negative impacts of social exclusion and isolation on physical and mental health. It is therefore clear that we cannot rely on these authorities to protect the mental health needs of British Columbians at this time. Dr. Henry's December 17, 2021 statement that the current situation will cause, "a lot of anxiety [and] depression" and that relief from this will come with the arrival

of the Solstice is case in point. The harms to British Columbians' health and wellbeing, relationships, and livelihoods incurred as a result of the current restrictions and those of the last two years will not be alleviated by the light of the Solstice. To suggest that they will be indicates a lack of understanding of the significance of the harms of social exclusion and isolation and/or a very poor understanding of the vital role that secure familial and community attachments play in supporting mental and physical health.

Lastly, Dr. Steven Pelech, Professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of British Columbia and Chair of the Scientific and Medical Advisory Committee of the Canadian Covid Care Alliance has stated that it's now common knowledge that the COVID-19 vaccines have waning efficacy and that those who are double-vaccinated can get infected with SARS-CoV-2 and transmit it. He also shared that we now know that the viral loads in double-vaccinated people with COVID-19 are just as high as those in people who are unvaccinated with COVID-19. Further, it's now known that most British Columbians, double-vaccinated and unvaccinated alike, have highly protective natural immunity (S. Pelech, personal communication, December 19, 2021). So why are unvaccinated people specifically being excluded?

I will end this letter with four calls to action:

First, I respectfully request that the provincial health authorities reconsider and retract their most recent public health restrictions that effectively divide, isolate, and exclude unvaccinated individuals from the rest of society. Such restrictions are functionally a form of exclusion bullying and social shunning that poses a risk of irreversible and serious harm to those individuals who are directly impacted and all who care about and depend on them.

Second, I respectfully request that my professional association and College, the BCPA and CPBC, fulfill their responsibilities to my profession and to the public by standing up and speaking out about the critical importance of attachment and belonging and the harmful impact of restrictions that thwart these fundamental needs through discrimination, social exclusion, and marginalization.

Third, I encourage all mental health professionals in BC to reflect on their training and expertise and pressure their Associations and Colleges to fulfill their responsibilities to their professions and the public by calling for an immediate stop to public health restrictions that discriminate, marginalize, and segregate unvaccinated British Columbians.

Fourth, I encourage all British Columbians to request that the College of Psychologists of BC, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC, and the BC College of Social Workers stand up for you, your family, and friends by protecting you from the ongoing harms caused by the dehumanizing and demoralizing public health interventions that marginalize and exclude individuals and damage relationships.

Lastly, the ostracism and marginalization of unvaccinated individuals is rampant across Canada with no end in sight, as evidenced by policies and practices requiring proof of vaccination to participate in day-to-day life, maintain relationships and employment, and move freely in and out of Canada. The harmful impacts of these policies and practices will continue unless we put a stop to them now. Please take a stand for the health and wellbeing of all Canadians by refusing to comply with these discriminatory policies and practices that betray our fundamental sovereign rights, needs, and freedoms and choose inclusion, compassion, and kindness instead.

You will notice that I have shared this letter anonymously. Though I would like to share my name, I won't because like many others, I fear for my well-being and safety if I share my name. Unfortunately the health authorities in BC have told all regulated health professionals that raising questions about the public health narrative is forbidden with threat of punishment. This is antithetical to the training we have received as health professionals in the sciences and public health and it is in direct violation of the ethical codes we have sworn to abide by when we care for the public. This is the sad and terrifying state of affairs in this province and in this country.

In the classic story of the Grinch who stole Christmas the residents of Whoville woke up to find they had no gifts to share nor food to eat: All had been taken. In their loss, they came together, singing and holding hands, distilling from their loss the most important gift of all, the gift of love and one another. The Grinch could not steal their love. But that is not the end of the story. In the end, Cindy Lou Who wins the Grinch over, with her love and compassion. The power of her love helped melt his heart and the Grinch's heart grew three times bigger that day.

My hope in sharing this letter anonymously is that truth, justice, inclusion, equality, compassion, love, and health in all its forms can prevail in British Columbia and in Canada for ALL Canadians.

Sincerely,

A Concerned Canadian Psychologist in British Columbia  
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