

COVID-19 Impacts on Mental Health

Whole health = physical & mental health

It is called mental illness, but it can also be felt in the body

Pervasive stigma against mental health continues to exist, now there is added stigma against COVID-19

- You are not alone in your experience. This is a once-in-a-century pandemic. These thoughts and emotions are normal and warranted. It's important to acknowledge them and developing coping strategies to build resiliency. It is not pathology – it is an expected, normal reaction to the challenges of our time.

Stress

- Affects physical health, ability to fight infection, and can initiate an inflammatory response
- Chronic stress can affect everyday health and cause irritability, anxiety, insomnia, burnout, hopelessness, depression, and other challenging emotions
- Some of the emotional challenges during COVID-19 include lack of control over personal safety, family safety, lack of clarity of when & how our lives can return to predictably; losing places that connect us to our communities or losing friends or family members, worried about seeking care and dying alone
- In times of stress, it is easy to associate fear with “the other” – such as against members of the Asian community

Vulnerable Populations

- Underserved and limited-income communities: maybe not be able to work from home, may not have health care coverage or sick days or have access to childcare
- Loneliness & isolation particularly difficult for older adults and not being able to utilize community resources
- Nursing homes and being confined to their room is very isolating and traumatic

Loneliness

- Chronic loneliness was identified as a major health risk in the U.S. prior to COVID 19, social isolation is exacerbating the impact of loneliness in many people's lives.
- In 1980, 20% of adults felt feeling lonely at any given time; up to 40% in 2019
- Chronic loneliness has a significant impacts & physical & emotional health, increases stress & decreases sleep

Resiliency

- Human beings are capable of developing resiliency in the face of adversity
- Resiliency is described as the ability to overcome particularly difficult circumstances
- Is a way of coping & being present – it is available to everyone, it is typically done with support from others.
- Our collective human experience, adversity is part of life – but we can learn and grow from adversity – that quality of being able to learn & grow

Connection

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” (African proverb)

- Reach out to your community for cultural supports
- Maintaining a strong sense of connection, keeping a feeling of belonging it is top predictor of health – increases a long & healthy life
- Connection is important, but we have to physical distance, must seek out activities to deepen & develop connections
- Cultivate emotional closeness with a few people – you just need two people to build an emotional village
 - A good friend can save lives, help you feel less anxious & hopeful – getting together even just once per month can make a big difference
 - Even with challenges of social distancing, find ways to stay connected – through Zoom, writing letters, making phone calls – we get used to being away from each other, we think we will have time to catch up later, we tend to neglect being present with others, but COVID has shown us differently. Personal connection is not to be neglected; it is what best helps us to cope with many challenges we are facing.
- Create everyday connections by saying hello to your mail carrier, your neighbors walking down the street
 - Checking in with a “how you are doing, good to see you,” has a positive impact on emotions & physical health
- Connect to cause greater than yourself – being part of an organization, volunteering, helping out, whatever speaks to your heart and your passion

Coping Mechanisms

- Routine: set a routine, even if you are mostly at home, it is important
 - Sleep is restorative: set a regular time to wake & sleep
 - Marking time is very important, make a schedule/list of activities – helps with productivity & focus; not having any plan of what to do can make staying in bed a better option, and you *must* get out of bed
 - After you get up, get dressed and make your bed
- Structure
 - If you are working from home, set up a workspace and maintain that space
 - If you are retired, still identify activities for specific time frames and linked to specific locations in or out of your house/apartment

- Self-Care
 - Maintain good hygiene
 - Eat healthy, maintain healthy weight
 - Limit the amount of alcohol, drugs, tobacco
 - Exercise: anything that physically engages – cleaning, moving, gardening, walking
 - [Here's a short & simple Yoga sequence](#)
 - Take time to solely focus on your wellbeing
 - Seek diversions ([this NY Times article](#) has some great ideas)
- Relaxation Techniques
 - Deep breathing – move your belly in and out/diaphragmic breaths, really fill your lungs. When we breathe through our chest, it heightens us – but deep breathing that moves your belly calms you down.
 - Meditate ([here's a 5-minute meditation](#) by Dr Katherine Emerick)
 - Aromatherapy – lavender, chamomile, and rosewood are calming scents
- Develop a practice of gratitude
 - Be specific – you can find gratitude in the little things
 - Reflect on something to be grateful for on a daily basis
- Limit media – but pick a trusted news sources & pick a time of day to access that information
- Worrying
 - Differentiate between what you have control over and what you don't – worrying about what might happen, we automatically lean toward the negative
 - Set aside some time to worry, make a list of worrying thoughts throughout the day, and once you write them down, distract yourself with other activities. Then, when you take out your list, you may realize some things don't really matter as much than you initially thought
 - Limit worrying about things not under your control
- Stay Mentally Active
 - Read new books, do a puzzle, learn new skills, journaling

If it all become too overwhelming, seek help. These are normal human emotions, but the feelings shouldn't take away your ability to cope with your daily life. Individual or group therapy, a range of medications, 1-800 support lines, variety of apps for self-help resources. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength, to know when you need help.

Resources

[Mental Health & Coping During COVID-19](#)

UArizona Department of Psychiatry Includes 20+ links to resources & support groups