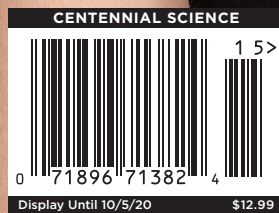


THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO **MENTAL HEALTH**

BE KIND TO YOUR MIND
Simple Ways to Boost Your Mood

RELIEVE STRESS
Solutions to Ease Anxiety

FIGHT DEPRESSION
New Scientific Discoveries



Living With a New Reality

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS HAD AS BIG AN IMPACT ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH AS ON OUR PHYSICAL WELL-BEING.

» BY DIANE KELLY LEVEY

Since the first tentacles of coronavirus began reaching across the planet at the end of 2019, it hasn't just been the infection that's created a crisis—there's also the intense and long-lasting psychological impact that has followed. Feelings of fear and anxiety about the invisible, deadly disease have permeated throughout society. Add the threat of income lost due to businesses closing, quarantining for an undetermined amount of time, fear of family members getting sick and/or dying, as well as *all* of your social plans canceled, and you have the perfect storm for mental health disorders. And that was before the recent waves of protests and civil unrest surrounding racial injustice throughout the country.

And even if you think you've managed to not let fear and stress

get to you, watch a few hours of cable news channels or scroll through social media. Chances are, your pulse will quicken, you might tense up your shoulders and clench your jaw, and you may even have trouble sleeping that night.

"This is ongoing, this is global, this is a health crisis, this is a financial crisis, and this is involving basically even people who are not directly affected," says Margaret Seide, MS, MD, a psychiatrist based in New York. "They're affected by changing their lifestyle, their ability to interact with friends and family."

Although experts are trying to guesstimate what the future of our country's mental health may look like based on what we already know about how people handle a crisis, Seide believes this time things will probably be a bit different. "This will have to be



MORE THAN
4 in 10

Number of Americans who say stress from the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health.

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation



WOMEN VS. MEN

WOMEN 22.3%

MEN 15.1%

Percentage of those with a mental illness, by gender

Source: National Institute of Mental Health

1 in 5

Number of U.S. adults living with mental illness

Source: National Institute of Mental Health



Mental health experts worry the pandemic and its aftermath will create higher levels of addiction.

a wait-and-see approach to determine how the outcomes of this pandemic manifest down the line,” she says. “I definitely think that we can expect a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) picture where, when things become a little bit more regulated and there’s more stability, more predictability, the anxiety is going to continue.”

Being isolated, without social contact, dealing with job insecurity or loss, uncertainty about the future, fear of contagion...these are all stressors, adds psychologist Ron Frederick, PhD. “Prolonged exposure to such challenging experiences is stressful and depletes our inner resources,” he says. “Chronic stress can eat away at the neurotransmitters in our brains that keep us balanced and make us—especially those who are susceptible to mental illness—at risk [for a mental health disorder].”

● Signs of Trouble

There are a number of ways we handle stress as individuals. Some of us crunch through bags of chips, others turn to alcohol, some will pick up a bad habit again—like smoking or recreational drugs—while others will notice that they can’t concentrate and are unmotivated to work.

“We have access to news at our fingertips every single moment of every single day,” says Rachel O’Neill, PhD, LPCC-S, a practicing therapist and director of clinical effectiveness for the therapy website Talkspace.

18.9%

Percent of U.S. adults
18 and older with a mental
illness—about 46.6 million people

Source: National Institute of Mental Health

Most Common Mental Health Conditions

Anxiety Disorders 42 MILLION

Eating Disorders 30 MILLION

Addiction/Substance Abuse 20.2 MILLION

Depression 16 MILLION

Bipolar Disorder 6.1 MILLION

“There’s no ‘off’ switch.” And even social media, which can often serve as a mindless distraction from everyday stressors (cue the funny cat memes), is filled with anxiety-provoking updates. “The constant news cycle can serve as another form of stress and trauma, and can exacerbate mental health symptoms.”

And at a time when many of us could use a hug or the company of friends and loved ones to alleviate some stress, social distancing guidelines can keep us at arm’s length. “We’re social creatures and we crave human interaction,” says O’Neill. “Going through a crisis like COVID-19, with the added stress of isolation, means that many of our previous coping skills—spending time with friends, working out at a gym—may no longer be available. In times of crisis, we tend to crave connection even more, and so the loss of social connection is extremely pronounced at this moment in time.”

● Alone Together

The harmful physical and mental effects of loneliness are not new to the scientific community. A 2015 meta-analysis review published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* found that loneliness and social isolation can put us at risk for a number of health problems as well as an increased risk of early mortality. The authors concluded that a lack of social connection could heighten one’s health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol-use disorder.

In a study published in the *Lancet* after the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, people in the United Kingdom reported feelings of concerns, anxiety and depression due to social isolation that outweighed their worries about the coronavirus itself.

“There is a second pandemic of mental health that has started and we expect to last for several years to come,” says psychiatrist Nina Vasan, MD, founder of Brainstorm:

The Stanford Lab for Mental Health Innovation. “After basic needs and safety, good mental health—which includes belonging and relationships—is critical for survival.” Moreover, she adds, research shows that being connected to others not only makes you feel calmer but also gives you a sense of self-worth and belonging. “We were in the middle of a loneliness epidemic before COVID-19 and further distancing yourself from the world ultimately can be detrimental, in particular to seniors’ overall health.”

● At-Risk Populations

While all of us are at risk of becoming infected with the coronavirus, this disease has disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations, including people of color, the elderly and those in prisons. Besides being more susceptible to physical health complications from COVID-19, these populations—as well as children and teens, addicts and former addicts, and people who already have mental health disorders—may be at a higher risk of mental health problems.

The risk of trauma reactions is elevated, especially as it relates to front-line medical workers, says

older parents are among the hardest hit, especially those who have parents in nursing homes. “They are living in constant fear not only for their own health but also for the health of their parents,” adds Vasan.

But seniors aren’t the only ones coping with special challenges. While parents are juggling multiple roles trying to manage kids while often still working full-time jobs from home, children and teens are experiencing their own levels of uncertainty, anxiety and mood changes.

● Looking at the Bright Side

Despite all of the difficulties, there have been some positives to coping with the pandemic, including spending more time with immediate family and less time running around to activities, and a new consideration of how we approach our mental health.

“If there is a silver lining to the situation, perhaps it’s that individuals are more willing to talk about their mental health and discuss their own experiences with treatment,” says O’Neill.

And a rise in popularity of online therapy suggests a willingness to

In April, an emergency hotline for people in emotional distress logged a 1,000 percent uptick in calls.

O’Neill. “The experience of providing medical treatment during this moment in time is likely different than anything medical professionals have been asked to deal with in the past; it’s entirely possible that we’ll see an increase in those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“My patients who are seniors are sharing that it feels like their forms of social connectedness have been taken away, along with concerns over financial stability,” says Vasan. Seniors who are also caregivers to

continue getting help even when things return to “normal.” “Online therapy has become accessible to more people, and when you’re doing trauma work, I think there’s a real benefit to having people be in their own homes,” says Miller. “Sometimes driving to the office, looking for parking, rushing to get out the door—it adds an element of stress. Some people feel settled by the personal, one on one, face-to-face, sessions but...once others get used to virtual sessions, they find they prefer them.” ●



**One key consequence
of the pandemic is a
renewed emphasis on
emotional well-being.**