Protecting your Mental Health during COVID-19

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Approximately one in five American adults live with a mental illness.[1] This number does not include the many people who are stressed or lonely, but who do not have an official mental illness diagnosis. Social distancing and stay-at-home orders made necessary by COVID-19 are exacerbating mental health issues among those both with and without diagnosed mental illnesses. This brief describes the relationship between loneliness, mental health, and physical health, discusses the impacts that COVID-19 is having on mental health, and suggests strategies we can try to protect our mental health during this uncertain time.

Mental Health and Loneliness

It is well established that mental health and physical health are mutually reinforcing and reciprocal.[2] For example, both loneliness and stress negatively affect physical health through such conditions as increased cortisol levels, blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, impaired immunity, anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment.[3] Loneliness can increase stress and anxiety in our bodies, a natural part of our evolutionary response. Loneliness tells our brain that we have been separated from our people, and can induce or worsen signs of depression, anxiety, and memory loss. Loneliness has been found to be even more dangerous for our mortality risk than obesity and has the same impact on mortality risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[4] Social relationships have a similar protective effect on health as reducing alcohol consumption or quitting smoking.[5]

Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 has presented an onslaught of change and uncertainty, leaving many of us unsure of what the future holds for our health, employment, financial status, and ability to care for ourselves and those who need us. According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the most common concerns relating to COVID-19 include protecting oneself from the virus, access to medical care, social isolation, fear and/or guilt related to asking for assistance, and socioeconomic distress.

Social distancing has left many people feeling isolated and disconnected.[6] In some cases, stay-at-home orders have meant that some people are stuck in unhealthy living situations, ranging from domestic abuse and violence to poor housing conditions. The lack of control over one's situation, unpredictable future, threat to employment, physical health, and unhealthy living situations may exacerbate existing mental health diagnoses, such as anxiety, substance use disorder, and depression.[7]

There is already preliminary evidence that shows the negative impacts of COVID-19 on population level mental health. In a recent study of 2,032 adults conducted in April-May 2020, Twenge found that U.S. adults were 8 times more likely to screen positive for serious mental illness during the pandemic compared to in 2018.[8] The isolation brought by COVID-19 to many adults across the U.S. exacerbates feelings of loneliness, frustration, and stress, leaving many unprepared and unsure of how to best care for their mental health.

Currently, the healthcare system is overwhelmed by COIVD-19, leaving individuals experiencing isolation and loneliness with fewer options for treatment and counseling. Many experts and policy makers have begun advocating for community organizations and providers such as social workers and mental health professionals to fill gaps in care by identifying those at high risk of loneliness and social isolation and providing connections and support to these individuals.[5]

Caring for Mental Health during COVID-19

Across the U.S., COVID-19 is affecting lives in different ways. There is so much that is out of our personal control right now; it is easy to fall into feelings of hopelessness and despair. However, there is much we can do to try to cope with uncertainty and quarantine fatigue.

1. Self-care and compassion are important. This includes validating your own emotions and feelings and recognizing that you are allowed to feel stressed, anxious, and worried, even if your own personal situation may not be as "bad" as others.
2. Limit screen and social media time. Social media can make us feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and angry, leading to higher stress and anxiety. Too much screen time is also bad for our eyes and brain function,[9,10]
3. Engage in regular physical activity. Moderate to vigorous physical activity can improve short term anxiety in adults, and regular activity can reduce feelings of depression and anxiety and improve sleep quality.[11] Physical activity also releases endorphins (feel-good hormones) and boosts our immune system response.[10]
4. Consume healthy foods. Eating breakfast and small meals throughout the day and avoiding sweets, sugary drinks, and alcohol can help stabilize blood sugar levels and boost mood. Excessive consumption of trans fats, caffeine, fried food, and sugars makes us feel bloated, tired, and jittery. Reducing their presence in diet can help boost mood.[12] Drinking 6-8 glasses of water a day, eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, and yogurt can help improve your concentration, positive gut activity, and brain health.
5. Establishing a daily routine can help ease your anxiety about day-to-day tasks that are within your control. Make a list of what you need to do, and incorporate small tasks, such as folding laundry or doing dishes. Schedule time to exercise, sleep, eat, and decompress during the day.[7]
6. Connect with others. Just because we are physically distancing doesn't mean we need to pause our social relationships. If you know a friend or family member who is by themselves during this time, reach out with a text, phone call, or even a hand-written note! If you need help or feel lonely or isolated, reach out to trusted friends or family members or resources in the community. Some therapists and social workers have decreased their fees and co-pays for services during the COVID-19 pandemic.[6,7]

COVID-19 has created a situation where uncertainty and despair risk running rampant in society while human connection and care seem scarce. These feelings have only been exacerbated with the recent police killing of George Floyd and subsequent protests and riots taking place across the country. Taking steps to protect one's own mental health and deal with feelings of loneliness and stress can help improve overall well-being and help us make meaning and build resilience during coronavirus.

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Acknowledgments

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