

Mental Health in 2020: Here's How to Handle the COVID-19 Pandemic and, Well, Everything Else

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The COVID-19 pandemic has taken lives. It's affected jobs. It's permanently closed businesses. It's [affected how we grieve](#). It's canceled vacations and weddings. It's [caused burnout](#). It even managed to stop sports there for a while.

And it's not like the rest of 2020 has been much better. Kobe passed away. The senseless loss of George Floyd's life and ongoing racial injustice. The California wildfires. Political division brought on by the election. Hurricane season along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. As you know, this list only scratches the surface. It's...a lot. In fact, the pandemic and other events of 2020 have basically become a recipe for a community-wide traumatic event.

"We're experiencing a mental health crisis right now," warns Dr. Corinna Keenmon, medical director of psychiatry at Houston Methodist Hospital. "As communities, we've been through crises before — hurricanes, school shootings, influential celebrities dying. These large-scale events can certainly impact a community. But our current crisis is so much more layered than many of us are used to, and so many of us are experiencing a number of stressful events all at the same time."

The cherry on top? We're having to work through these stressors and deal with these emotional events without our normal coping mechanisms — each other.

So, in a year like 2020, here's what you need to know about mental health (your own, as well as that of others) and what can you do to stay on top of your mental health during this pandemic.

Why we're experiencing a mental health crisis

"Anytime a person goes through two major stressful events in a one-year period, he or she becomes more vulnerable to excess emotional stress and at risk for developing a diagnosable mental health condition," says Dr. Keenmon.

According to Dr. Keenmon, we're all facing the stress of dealing with the uncertainty of the pandemic. And, your personal second, third or fourth stressor could be anything from the restrictive social measures we're taking to another natural disaster to the political and social unrest.

And with so many people experiencing increased levels of stress and stressful events, it takes a toll on the entire community. So much so that mental health professionals are seeing some very concerning trends when it comes to our collective mental health this year.

"Most alarmingly, we're seeing a large increase in suicide attempts, and these attempts are more serious and involve more young people and minorities than usual," warns Dr. Keenmon. "We're seeing people already struggling from mental health issues or lack of financial or social support, and these vulnerable people are now shifting down the spectrum of mental health issues toward actual mental illness — with symptoms that are severe and concerning enough to require treatment."

It's not just previous mental health issues, it's new ones, too

While telehealth has broadened the reach for people to get mental health support, it's not the same level of treatment many people have come to rely on — particularly for those who are less resilient to stress in general.

"For people who were struggling before the pandemic but had their mental health under good control, distancing from mental health professionals is definitely contributing to a relapse of some symptoms," Dr. Keenmon explains. "People are losing that in-person connection with their mental health care provider, and losing this connection can destabilize them to the point where weathering a crisis like this becomes very challenging."

But this is only half of the story. People suffering from mental illness right now aren't just people who've struggled with their mental health in the past.

"We're also seeing an increase in people who've never struggled with their mental health before. These are people who were previously seemingly happy, but they're not able to compensate for the significant levels of stress they're facing right now, falling into depression and psychosis," Dr. Keenmon says. "A lot of times these are people who don't even see themselves as those who could struggle with their mental health. In fact, they come into the ER thinking they're having a heart attack — but it's actually a panic attack."

The reality is that "mental health issues" and "mental illness" can feel like formal terms — to the point that many people don't think they apply to them. But anyone can struggle with his or her mental health, especially in a time as stressful as right now.

When stress becomes a state of distress — and what to do about it

When does, "It'll pass" turn into, "This is a problem?" And when does, "I'm fine" turn into, "I'm not okay?" "The thing about stress is that it can be positive or negative," Dr. Keenmon explains. "But distress is when stress crosses the line into becoming extreme — and this is when a person's mental health starts deteriorating."

Signs of distress include:

- Large shifts in sleeping patterns (sleeping too much or too little)
- Dramatic changes in eating habits (eating too much or barely at all)
- Sudden shifts in your activity level (extreme fatigue or hyperactivity and restlessness)
- Routinely relying on a substance, such as alcohol or drugs, to cope with stress
- Extreme negative thoughts
- A feeling of being in "survival mode"
- Concerning feedback from people who know you well, such as comments that you don't seem like yourself

If you notice signs of distress, you can get help by scheduling a visit with a primary care doctor, talking to a mental health professional or even reaching out to a trusted family member or friend.

"If you're feeling overwhelmed more days than not, it's best to reach out to a psychologist or psychiatrist. These professionals can determine the intensity of your distress and help you identify the best plan for treatment," recommends Dr. Keenmon.

Most importantly, Dr. Keenmon says that if you're feeling hopeless, questioning your faith, having thoughts about whether your life is worth living or feel physically out of touch with reality, it's become an emergency.

In the case of a mental health emergency:

- Seek immediate help at the nearest emergency room
- Text HOME to 741741 to reach a Crisis Counselor
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.8255

Tips for improving your mental health

With everything that's happened, and is still happening, this year, it's understandable if you're "feeling it" a lot more than usual. Take action now to prevent your stress from boiling over to the point of a state of distress.

Dr. Keenmon recommends improving your mental health through the following:

1. Ask yourself what you're doing too much or too little of

Handling stress becomes easier with balance and routine. If you're noticing that you're on the couch more than usual, get up for a walk, make time for an [at-home workout](#) or find some other way to get active. If you're restless and can't sit still, do something that's mentally calming, such as yoga, deep breathing exercises or meditating.

2. Check in on your thoughts

Dr. Keenmon recommends documenting your thoughts in a journal and reflecting on whether any seem extreme, overly negative or rooted in anxiety.

"When you're anxious or stressed, your mind will tell you things that are both untrue and unhelpful," warns Dr. Keenmon. "And this is a problem, since seeing the world realistically is what helps you ease any anxiety or depression."

Replace an overly negative thought with one that's more realistic by "balancing the scales." Do this by balancing your most negative thought with the most positive alternative — eventually allowing yourself to settle in the middle on the scenario that's actually most realistic.

3. Refocus your perspective

You lose perspective when in a state of distress, but there are several ways to get back to a healthy place. For instance, you can take time to focus on three things you're genuinely grateful for — whether it's a sunset, a loved one or the simple pleasure of life. In addition, talking and connecting with others is a good way to get perspective.

"As the saying goes, 'Pain shared is half the pain, and joy shared is double the joy.' There are plenty of people in the same boat as you right now, suffering through the same challenges," says Dr. Keenmon. "While we can't always be with someone in person right now, even just a phone call or video chat can help us connect." Lastly, helping others and finding a way to contribute to the greater good is a great way to regain perspective. There's good research that helping someone else in distress can help alleviate your own distress. Plus, if we're all doing this, it means we're all benefiting.

Concerned about your mental health?

If you want to speak with a mental health professional, we recommend the following resource:

- [Virtual Behavioral Health](#): An app that allows you to connect with counselors and psychologists.

Having thought about harming yourself or others?

- Text HOME to 741741 to reach a Crisis Counselor
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.8255