

Your Mental Health and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic affects each person differently, but a common theme has been its impact on mental health. The pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty, isolation and change. These effects can lead to heightened anxiety, feelings of depression, frustration, anger and more.

“Many people are longing for how life used to be,” said CJ Bathgate, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist at National Jewish Health. “Others are comparing effects of this pandemic to the effects seen after 9/11, because that is the last major event in the U.S. to cause widespread change to daily life.”



Depression and COVID-19

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Dr. Bathgate has seen more patients with symptoms of depression. “People are losing their jobs or how they do their job is changing. Yet, there is still pressure to provide for themselves or their families, and to keep paying bills. It’s scary when you can’t do that,” Dr. Bathgate said. Work is often part of an individual’s identity. Being told they are not allowed to work or work like they normally would can have a profound impact.

Depression can be triggered when we have to isolate from others. “It’s the feeling you get when people cross the street so they aren’t near you on the sidewalk. It leaves people feeling isolated because we are used to those small social interactions,” Dr. Bathgate explained. “Body language and nonverbal cues are blocked by masks. People are unable to see smiles or facial expressions under other peoples’ masks. This can leave people feeling lonely even when surrounded by others because of the lack of communication.”

To counter depressive feelings, engage in enjoyable activities. This could be baking, crafting, listening to music, exercising, or spending time with friends and family over video chat or other socially distanced activities. Make a list of activities that are enjoyable or are of interest to have when needed. It is healthy to acknowledge the feeling of depression. Choosing to counter balance the feeling with enjoyable activities may help ease the emotion. There are also websites and applications for connecting with a therapist or psychologist to help work through the feelings of depression such as [Headspace](#), [Calm](#), [Talkspace](#) and BetterHelp.

Anxiety: Panic Attacks, OCD, Eating Disorders and More

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, patients reported an increase in panic attacks. Now, anxiety in patients is moving from panic to feeling anxious about the future. “This is a time of uncertainty, since things are changing daily. Fear of the unknown is powerful,” said Dr. Bathgate.

For those who suffer from social anxiety, the pandemic may be especially challenging. One of the best ways to overcome anxiety is by exposing yourself to the activity or thing that causes anxiety. “People have lost the opportunity to practice their skills, because we are being asked to not leave the house,” Dr. Bathgate explained. Practicing skills can still happen in other ways, such as calling in a take-out order instead of using an online form or application, or video chatting with friends and family instead of texting or voice calling.

This also can be an extremely triggering time for people who suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). “For those with a fear of germs, this pandemic may make OCD responses worse because the threat of germs is actually there, instead of being an unsubstantiated fear,” said Dr. Bathgate. This is a time when OCD patients should practice behavior management skills and coping strategies.

Increased anxiety caused by COVID-19 has been a factor in eating disorder behaviors rising, too. Some people feel the need to have control over something in their daily life, and they choose food. This can lead to restricting food or caloric intake, purging, and other dietary controlling behaviors. On the other hand, some people may feel little to no control over their daily life and choose to binge eat in an uncontrolled manner. “Both are equally important and can be treated with the help of mental health professionals,” said Dr. Bathgate.

Pandemic Relationships: Families, Couples, Dating and More

As couples and families quarantine in close quarters and spend more time together, the chances of marital and family conflicts increase, according to Dr. Bathgate. In many cases, parents who have been forced to work from home, now also have had to take on new roles including teaching their children. Increased parent-child interactions can lead to tension or conflicts. For children, it may be hard to understand social distancing and wearing masks. [Talk with your children](#) about these measures, in an age appropriate way, to help them feel more comfortable.

For those who are victims of domestic violence, quarantine during the pandemic is potentially dangerous. “Victims are forced to be in isolation with their abuser, with very limited ways out,” Dr. Bathgate said. There are [resources for domestic violence](#) victims who need to leave a situation safely during COVID-19 and beyond. For immediate help in a domestic violence situation contact:

- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
 - Call: 1.800.799.7233
 - Text: LOVEIS to 1.866.331.9474
- [Crisis Center Domestic Violence Crisis Line](#)
 - Call: 303.688.8484
 - Toll Free: 1.888.247.7472
- [SafeHouse \(Denver, CO\)](#)
 - Call: 303.318.9989
- [Gateway Domestic Violence Services \(Aurora, CO\)](#)
 - Crisis Line: 303.343.1851
 - Rape Crisis Hotline: 303.322.7273

Being single during the pandemic may be mentally taxing, too. Dr. Bathgate says common concerns are, “What is the dating scene like now and how will it look moving forward? Are people going to have to ask potential suitors if they’ve had COVID before going on a date? The inability to just go out to meet people in social settings can increase stress, loneliness and depression.”

Dating isn’t completely stalled, though. While not for everyone, dating applications and websites are one way to virtually meet new people. Instead of meeting up at a restaurant or other public setting, set up a virtual date using video chat.

Cycle of Emotions

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may bring up a variety of emotions, explains Dr. Bathgate. People may cycle through those emotions more than once: “Grief and sadness has been a common response to the pandemic. From there, some people may cycle through feelings of optimism, anger, depression and acceptance, and then cycle back through.”

Experiencing these emotions repeatedly is expected. Major events such as graduations, weddings and birthdays are being missed and that has an impact on people. For others, travel is important and the current restrictions may leave people wondering when they can go further than a few minute drive.

Dr. Bathgate says, "People may be wondering, 'Am I going to be able to see my family during the holidays if they're more than a short drive away? Are they going to want to have me over?'"

Handling this cycle of emotions may seem difficult, but a great place to start is journaling. Writing about emotions and thoughts may help identify topics or areas that cause the most emotional distress. There are also online resources and applications to connect to counselors and therapists, or to practice mindfulness and relaxation, such as [Headspace](#), [Calm](#), [Talkspace](#) and Betterhelp.

The Silver Lining

Many of the mental health experiences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will have a long term impact. However, there may be silver linings to the situation

Reduced Stigma

The widespread impact on mental health may reduce the stigma surrounding the broad topic of mental health. This is a good time to meet with a therapist to build skills that help repair or maintain mental health. "It's ok not to be ok. Take this time to really take care of your mental health," Dr. Bathgate emphasized.

Students

Students should use this time to plan. "Students who would otherwise be going straight from high school into college may take a gap year. This time might allow them to try and find what they truly like to do through pursuing passions or opportunities they wouldn't otherwise be able to explore," said Dr. Bathgate. "Despite potentially entering the job market later, these students may be worldlier or sure of their career choice because of the extra time spent researching before entering college."

Improved Outlook

Overall, COVID has highlighted some of the shared and individual mental health challenges people experience. "We now have the ability to figure out what a well-balanced and managed lifestyle looks like to support our mental health," said Dr. Bathgate.

If you are experiencing any of these challenges, and need help managing them, contact your therapist or health care provider, or visit an online therapy resource such as Talkspace and Betterhelp. You can also text HOME to 741741 to reach a Crisis Counselor.

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