

NEWS & NOTES Q&A

Mental health matters

How to cope with pandemic stress

Dr. Cynthia Whitaker, chief of services at the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center, talks about the impact the coronavirus pandemic can have on a person's mental health, plus healthy ways for people to cope with stress and anxiety.



Dr. Cynthia Whitaker. Courtesy photo.

Q: *What is the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center doing in response to the coronavirus pandemic?*

We are part of a network of 10 community mental health centers across the state whose mission is to provide services to vulnerable individuals with severe and persistent mental illness. Many of these folks struggle day to day, even without the anxiety of the coronavirus. Add coronavirus, and they need us even more. We have transitioned as many services as we can to telehealth, both through phone and through video, in order to keep everyone safe and promote as much distancing as possible while still providing support, but many services we have to provide face to face. For example, we have clients who are on long-acting injectable medication, so they still have to come into the office, and we have some clients who are unable to manage their oral medication on their own, so we send staff to their homes to make sure they're taking their medication appropriately. We want to keep folks as stable as possible so that we can keep them from going to the emergency room or hospital.

How has the coronavirus affected people's mental health? What are some of your biggest concerns, as a doctor?

I think there's a lot of anxiety, because so many things are unknown about the virus. When it first started we weren't getting a lot of information, and people were wondering, 'What's going to happen? Am I going to get it? Who's going to get sick? Who's going to die? Will there be enough medication?' Those questions are anxiety-provoking for a lot of people. As this goes on, we are also seeing the negative impacts of isolation. We know that isolation impacts mental health, and we need connection with other people to be healthy. Without that connection, we are certainly seeing more depression. Then, you think about the folks who have to grieve the loss of something that they were expecting. Maybe they were supposed to get married, or go on the trip of a lifetime, or go to a funeral for a loved one. Maybe they used to get together for weekly dinners with their extended family. Now they can't do those things. All of these [factors] coming together can really affect a person's mental health.

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, has there been an increase in the number of people seeking treatment for mental health issues? Have people who were already receiving treatment for preexisting mental

health conditions required more medical attention?

We have been offering more services than we did before. For example, if we saw someone [for an appointment] every other week prior to the coronavirus, we are now seeing them every week. The way things are constantly changing due to Covid ... means people's symptoms are constantly changing. There may be someone who is doing well, but a major news story breaks, and now they are symptomatic and struggling. We are constantly reassessing how our clients are doing. Many people who used to have extended family members or a community that they went to for support are reaching out to us now or needing more assistance from us now because they are alone due to social distancing. Because a lot of our mental health workers collaborated with schools and primary care doctors who aren't able to see their patients right now, we have been receiving many more phone calls to our emergency line.

What kind of support does the health center offer through its emergency line?

It depends on the crisis that the caller is in. If someone is calling because they are really anxious, we can talk them through that and [invite them] to become a patient and get an evaluation. Many people are experiencing panic attacks for the first time in their life, and that can be very scary, because it can feel like a heart attack, and people don't know what to do, so we can talk people through that and explain to them that they aren't in immediate danger and provide some anxiety management coaching.

How is the coronavirus affecting children, mentally?

It seems to depend on what they are being exposed to, the adults they have in their life and the support they have around them. One of the good things for kids is that they are more used to [technology], so switching to these telehealth video appointments is not

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a big deal to them, and in fact some kids prefer it. As far as doing their schooling at home, the ways that affects them run the gamut. For kids who were receiving a lot of [in-person] support from school, it's stressful. Other kids are thriving because they were experiencing some anxiety at school.

What are some things people can do to benefit their mental health during this difficult time?

Think about how you are eating, if you're getting any exercise, if you're getting enough sleep. ... These are basic things, but we tend to forget about them when we're under stress. ... Keep a routine. Even though

you're staying at home, get up and get dressed every day. ... Take time to breathe deeply, be mindful, and be grateful. Even if you've lost things, ask yourself, 'What do I still have that I can be grateful for?' Focus on positivity. ... Think about another time that you experienced a crisis and managed to get through it, then tell yourself that you can get through this, too. ... We know that isolation is not good for mental health, so be creative in finding ways to connect with other people. Have dinner with people over video chat or have a virtual dance party. If you used to call your parents or friends once a week, call them more often. The important thing is to stay connected.

— Angie Sykeny 🗨️