

Covid-19 and Mental Health

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America seems to be in the midst of a perfect storm when it comes to mental health. Coronavirus, job loss and financial hardship, racial injustice and unrest are all in the headlines. With suicide rates up 33% over the last 2-3 years in the United States, experts predict those rates will skyrocket with coronavirus and other stressors. One suicide hotline reported an 800% rise in calls this year. Addictions, whether food, alcohol or drugs have skyrocketed. 22% of Americans report drinking more; 1 in 7 marijuana users report more usage; many report unhealthy overeating. One in three people of all ages report loneliness in isolation. Pregnant women have 70% more anxiety and paranoia. Children miss their friends. Parents trying to work from home without childcare are struggling. Symptoms of fear, paranoia, irritability, helplessness, guilt, worthlessness, anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsiveness and eating disorders are all heightened. The results can include child abuse, domestic abuse, police violence, suicides and public unrest.

Because mental illness is increasing, the FCC will open a 988 number to call when in need, starting July 16, 2020. Similar to 911, 988 will address mental health crises and suicide. This line will feed into the current National Suicide Hotlines: 1-800-TALK (8255). Statistics show that contact and conversation with just one person can prevent many suicides.

What can we as pastors and parishioners do to help? A few suggestions include reaching out to others by phone or other social media platforms, sending cards and notes of encouragement to others and encouraging others to reach out to family and friends by social media and phone. We need to pay attention to others' behaviors and encourage persons to seek help if they are severely anxious, depressed or not sleeping.

Self care becomes even more important, especially for caregivers. Suicide rates are increasing among caregivers. It is important to eat healthily, get adequate sleep and to exercise daily. Deep breathing exercises, stretching, praying or meditating daily are important. Research shows even 10 minutes of walking or other large muscle movement improves mood and helps alleviate anxiety. Eating refined carbohydrates and sugar, over drinking alcohol and increased drug usage elevate depression.

Continuous, prolonged deep breathing while grounding make it impossible to sustain an anxiety attack. If one is depressed, highly anxious or has insomnia for more than two weeks, it is important to consult your family physician, psychiatrist or therapist. There are many safe medications which can treat depression, anxiety and insomnia. When one is stressed, often the receptors in the limbic system (responsible for mood and anxiety) malfunction, and the neurotransmitters such as serotonin are greatly diminished. The best treatment for all mental health disorders is a combination of therapy and medication. Remember that most mental health disorders are really physical, biochemical disorders of the brain.

Resources include:

- ◆ **The new 988, mental health emergency and suicide hotline after July 16th.**
- ◆ **Crisis Text Line, text STRENGTH to 741741.**
- ◆ **National suicide hotline 1-800-273- TALK (8255) (the new 988 will feed into the National Suicide Hotline)**