'Why am I having such a hard time when I'm not sick with the virus?'

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Social isolation and loneliness. Drastic changes to lifestyles. Uncertainty for the future. Financial pressures. Complicated relationships. How can parents help their kids?

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed all of these concerns. In many cases, people have felt as though they've been left to deal with the consequences entirely on their own.

Except…

"We have to remember that we're not alone," says Alisa Lincoln, a professor of sociology and health sciences in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences. "There are many ways to stay socially connected."

Lincoln has been applying her training within her own household, while continuing to serve (remotely) as associate dean of research at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, and director of the Institute for Health Equity and Social Justice Research. She also contributed mental-health guidance to the hour-long online course on COVID-19 that was made available to the public last week by Northeastern's Global Resilience Institute.

"My two adult kids are both back home from college and work, so we've got a packed house," Lincoln says. "But so far we all seem to be healthy and doing OK."

Lincoln offers two tiers of advice: She wants to help people across all demographics who are coping with the stress of the pandemic, and she especially hopes to raise awareness for those people who are managing mental health issues during this anxious and unpredictable time.

"Twenty percent of Americans live with a mental health condition in any given year, and those rates can be higher among college students, whether it's anxiety, depression, PTSD, psychotic disorders, substance use disorders, and other issues," Lincoln says. "They are a group that has their own unique risk profile during a pandemic, and for those folks a lot of the 'social isolation' measures have been particularly challenging to

the maintenance of mental health.

"And there's been very little attention to that."

How can people—as well as their families and other support groups—begin to manage their mental health issues during these anxious times?

They need to make sure they're able to get access to adequate medication, while realizing that going to pharmacies has become a more stressful process that could put them at risk for COVID-19. One idea is to talk to their doctors about the option of getting 90-day doses of medications through their insurance. They can also explore virtual therapy sessions; research shows that these can be very effective, and a lot of peer support groups are now offering virtual options. People can try to draw upon the skills they regularly use to take care of their mental health, like exercise, mindfulness, and staying socially connected, but they may have to find new ways to do this.

For instance, many treatment models for depression include making efforts to go outside, be socially connected, and engage in activities with others that give you pleasure and enjoyment. But a lot of those paths have been cut off now. Try to think innovatively about things that can help you to stay well that allow for physical distancing or can be done virtually.

How can people mitigate the negative consequences of being alone?

There are so many ways of staying connected. My colleagues and I are making coffee dates online. There are happy hours online. Many community groups—including religious organizations and different

types of clubs—have gone to virtual modalities.

One of the things that I've tried to do to take care of myself has been to take note of all of the amazing things that people are doing to stay connected. People are joining for virtual prayer services, poetry and play readings, or making music together over Zoom. For some [young people](#), there are new creative opportunities for online dating.

And then it's still possible to go outside as long as we stay six feet apart; I've seen people passing a soccer ball around. It's particularly hard because you have to remember to not run over and get too close or give somebody a high-five. But I myself have been taking walks with friends and staying on opposite sides of a wide sidewalk. Finding ways to stay safe from the virus and continue to be in nature can be very protective for our mental health.

So much of this pandemic is beyond our control. How can people focus on being proactive and trying to be constructive and positive?

In a time of tremendous uncertainty, all of us crave feelings of safety and control. Many people respond by finding ways to help and contribute and give back. A lot of young people that I know have connected to help those in their neighborhoods who maybe shouldn't be going to grocery stores and pharmacies—they're signing up to do those errands.

Think about all of the things that you usually do to take care of yourself, and find innovative ways to continue to do them. I've talked to a lot of students who are really stressed because the gyms are closed, and exercise is part of what helps them feel good and mentally healthy. So it's about finding new ways to exercise, whether it's through live video classes online, or taped classes, or working out in your yard.

Can learning about COVID-19 be empowering for people?

Another way to feel more control is to consume accurate information. I've been struck by the constant flood of information of varying quality that comes at all of us. The class that the Global Resilience Institute did on COVID-19 is a source of appropriate scientific facts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has some excellent information, as does the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Students can go to the Northeastern [dedicated COVID-19] website.

Consume accurate information, but also be careful to not consume too much information. Turn off the news. Stop reading the updates on your phone. We need to consume enough information so that we feel that we know what's going on and we feel as safe as we possibly can. But too much of that onslaught will definitely create additional stress and anxiety. Finding times to watch funny movies or listen to wonderful music is equally important.

Can meditation help?

Lots of things can be mindful, in addition to what we think of as traditional meditation. For me, my pursuit of mindfulness has come from swimming. And that has been a real challenge. Not only was the pool where I got my exercise, but it was a very mindful form of exercise. And so I've had to be very proactive about how to replace both the exercise and the mindfulness component of that. There are all kinds of solutions—I have friends who find knitting very mindful.

What advice do you have for parents of college students?

The disruption that the students have experienced is large and it is traumatic. Their sense of safety and security have been impacted. They've been pulled away from their friends and sports teams and clubs and social supports and teachers in a pretty abrupt way—some without saying goodbye.

It's really important to acknowledge those disruptions can feel devastating. I've had some students say to me, "Why am I having such a hard time when I'm not sick with the virus?"

And so while it's a time that we could turn inward and connect with ourselves, we do need to balance that—particularly for young people who were for the most part in a very socially-connected world. We need to seek out those social connections, to find some balance, to help people figure out what they need in this moment, and to understand that what they need now might be very different from what they might need at a later time.

People need to be generous and compassionate with themselves. I know that sounds a little bit trite. But these are challenging days. And we need to validate that, whether they have the virus or not, people are experiencing a lot of disruption.

Along with all of the other concerns, there are the very real financial pressures that people are feeling as the economy shuts down. How should they be factored in?

I've been thinking about a couple of things that are going to outlast the virus itself. One is that I do think the mental health consequences of the pandemic are going to be felt for a long time, and so the more that we can do to promote mental health now, the better.

But then also there are the social, economic, and ethical challenges that this pandemic and its response have brought to the surface. We know that people are experiencing a great deal of economic insecurity. Our society does not have a lot of the tools in place to buffer those economic impacts.

A lot of the conversations that I'm having with students are about learning from this pandemic: How different nations have their own policies around job security, or childcare, or eviction, and that the pandemic is really highlighting all of those different ways that societies can choose to do things.

People are seeing the real challenges created by some of the choices we have made as a society, as we start to hear people talking about things like passing emergency legislation that will not allow for evictions. During economically challenging times, we know that rates of mental health problems go up. So it really is a perfect storm to increase anxiety and depression.

Where do you go for solace and strength?

I've been staying connected with friends, family and colleagues. Instead of using the term "social distancing," I wish we would talk about "physical distancing while staying socially connected." Seeing the faces of my colleagues and students during our many virtual meetings has really helped me to smile.

I'm someone who always appreciates the arts. In moments of challenge and difficulty, I notice myself appreciating them even more. I have friends who are musicians, and it's been amazing to be able to log on and see them playing music when they can't be in a room together. Music and other expressions of the arts are an incredibly important way to stay connected and promote healing in lots of different ways.

What is your hope going forward?

Well, clearly I hope that we continue to heed public health guidance and take precautionary measures to slow down the spread of the virus, and that efforts to develop vaccinations and treatments are quickly successful. My hope is also that people continue to find small and large opportunities to support and care for each other. It has become harder to do that as physical distancing has become more stringent. But I hope that we continue to find ways to look out for each other.

We all react to stress in different ways. Stay healthy.

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