Mental health plays key role in battling pandemic and its accompanying effects

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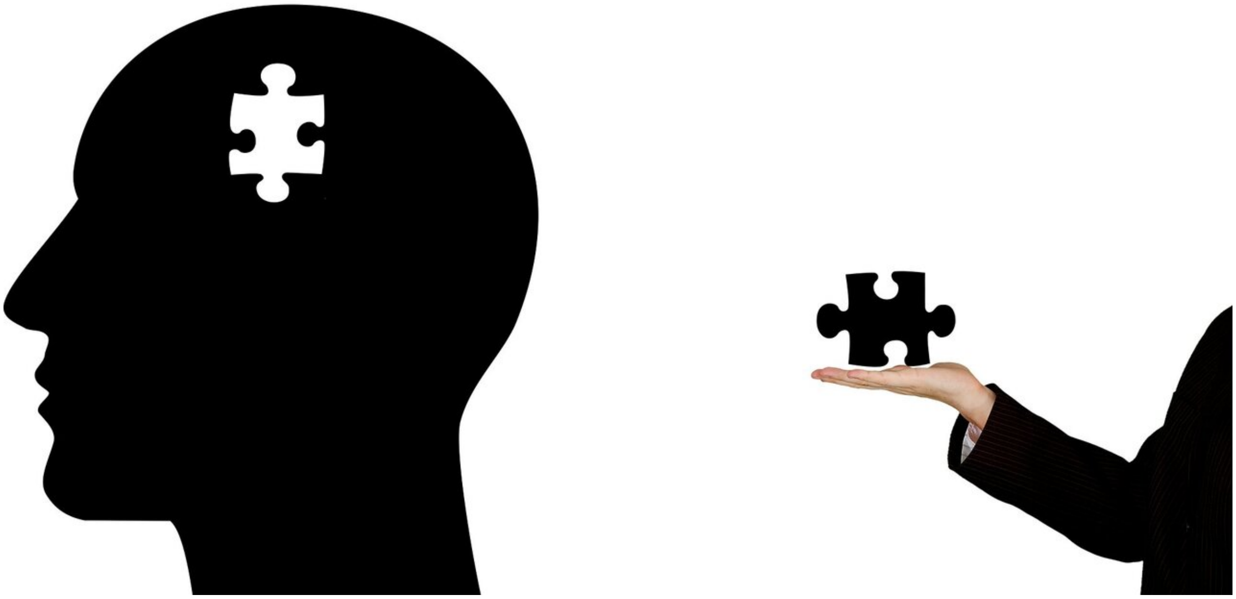

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By now we all should know the physical guidance that's been given related to ways to dodge or slow down the novel coronavirus: practice good hygiene, wash your hands and avoid close contact with others. But as Penn Staters across Pennsylvania and beyond complete their first week of remote learning, telecommuting and social distancing, some may be feeling overwhelmed, disconnected or even fearful.

That's all to be expected and completely normal, said Benjamin Locke, senior director with Penn State's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Acknowledging those feelings and the reality of what is occurring around the world is critical to adjusting well under the current circumstances.

"What we are living through is unprecedented, it's disruptive, and it has the potential to be very upsetting to almost everyone—but for very different reasons," Locke said. "It's important to acknowledge the grieving process. We are grieving the loss of our social connections, missing out on opportunities we were anticipating, whether that's an internship, social event, graduation, athletic competition. It is healthy to acknowledge these losses, to grieve, and to allow yourself to go through that process."

Jeff Hayes, associate department head for Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education at Penn State, explained that part of people's anxieties also results from our difficulty as humans to handle uncertainties.

"Because we make plans and assume we know what will happen, we have a pretense of control. In uncertain times one thing that can help with anxiety is to recognize how much uncertainty we live with all the time," Hayes said. "For example, ordinarily I might plan to be home by 5:30, stop at the store and experience no traffic, but the truth is, I don't really know if that's exactly what will occur. Typically, I'm able to adjust when reality does not line up with my plans. Although this pandemic is heightening our conscious awareness of how little control we have over some aspects of life, it can be helpful for us to recognize what we can control, like our attitudes, and to recognize that we have a lot of experience living with uncertainty, although we don't realize it."

Hayes said part of the problem in situations of this type are that if we are anxious and irritable, others will sense those emotions and are likely to also become anxious and irritable.

"Emotional contagion is a term that is useful to keep in mind. Kids and other adults are going to pick up on what we're feeling. So, if I'm grounded and calm, then people pick up on that as well, which is a much better option," Hayes said. "It's really important that people engage in specific activities that help them to feel centered and grounded and then stick to them."

Healthy activities, such as getting enough sleep, cutting back on caffeine or sugar, eating well or exercising, according to Hayes, are significant factors in a person's well-being.

"The more grounded and centered I am personally, the more grounded and centered family members are likely to be," Hayes said. "So now, more than ever, it's critical to practice activities that positively impact your emotional, physical and mental well-being."

For Locke, connecting with people who are going through the same experience also can help people feel more centered and in control during this pandemic that has upended the daily lives and routines of so many.

"This shared experience provides a sense of validation for feelings of grief and loss of shared activities, and also a sense of belonging," Locke said. "People with a shared experience can then begin transitioning these feelings into 'what can I do to be part of the solution?' What can we do to create a new sense of community?"

In a recent article on maintaining physical and mental health during coronavirus, Nita Bharti, assistant professor of biology in the Center for Infectious Disease and Dynamics at Penn State, wrote that despite the physical distance being created in community due to recommendations by experts, people should make deliberate efforts to be in touch with family, friends, colleagues or classmates.

"Social distancing is actually physical distancing; it does not mean social isolation. During this outbreak, your mental health is critical and vulnerable right now. Social support helps and is also linked to physical health. It's all connected," Bharti wrote. "Now, more than ever, don't face your anxiety alone."

Bharti suggested making deliberate efforts to be in touch with family, friends, colleagues or classmates who are now remotely learning or telecommuting.

"Any kind of direct communication will be supportive: email, texts, video chats, even voice calls, if that's your thing," Bharti wrote. "It's likely that someone you know will be in quarantine or isolation and it will be psychologically challenging."

All of the experts in this article agreed that communicating with others and remaining mindful that the disruption is occurring on a broad scale—not just to you and your family—should alleviate some emotional tension.

Locke, Bharti and Hayes also emphasized that being able to recognize the endless stream of news, with rapidly changing information, as a possible source of your frustration, insecurity or anxiety is also important when evaluating your mental well-being.

"For people who are feeling anxious or depressed about the coronavirus, one of the most important things they can do is to limit the amount of exposure to news and social media," Locke said. "Set an intentional time limit to watch the news and then turn it off. Don't leave it on all day in the background."

Hayes agreed and said that while we can't shield ourselves from basic information about the coronavirus, we can take a break, go for a walk, or "do whatever you find enjoyable."

"Our lives have to go on," Hayes said. "Know what your priorities are—family, parenting, reading a book—and stick to them."

In addition to what Locke, Bharti and Hayes have already said, they offer the following quick tips:

Well-being tips to reduce anxiety/fear

- Be aware of how you are spending time and energy. You will feel in more control.
- Keep structure. Routine is what makes people feel healthy and productive. Set regular sleep and wake up times, maintain regular hygiene routines, set times for homework and social interactions online or by phone.
- Limit unstructured screen time and social media time. Build in free time like reading or watching a movie.
- Doing your part, even if you are not sick, can help reduce feelings of fear and anxiety.
- Continue getting regular exercise.
- Stick to your values. During times when it matters most, under duress and facing uncertainty, it is important to stick to our values, so that when the crisis passes, we don't look back with regret.
- Find a news source that provides scientifically accurate information, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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