

Will the COVID-19 pandemic leave a mental health crisis in its wake?

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(HealthDay)—Stressed from home-schooling your kids? Lonely from

lockdown? Worried about a sick loved one isolated in a nursing home?
Worried you might lose your job?

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is affecting everyone's mental [health](#) in ways small and large, and experts are concerned that for many, today's anxiety will become a tidal wave of mental health problems in the years ahead.

The pandemic is adding to what already was an underrecognized mental health crisis in the United States, according to Dr. Don Mordecai, national mental health and wellness lead at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, Calif.

Rates of anxiety and depression have steadily risen for years, as have deaths of despair related to suicide and drug overdose, he said during a HD Live! interview.

"All those things have been going up for decades, really, and now you bring the pandemic in," Mordecai said. "It's not like we were in good shape in terms of our mental health and now it's getting worse. It's more like we were not in good shape, and then you bring in another big stressor."

Clinical psychologist Jelena Kecmanovic also is concerned about the toll of the anxiety-provoking changes to everyday life that people are enduring.

"Anxiety is exhausting and terrifying," said Kecmanovic, director of the Arlington/DC Behavior Therapy Institute in Arlington, Va. "If it is happening long enough, you're going to get depressed about it. You're going to get hopeless and maybe even suicidal."

She expects some long-lasting emotional scars.

"This is going to go on long enough and it's going to be traumatic enough for enough people that it's not realistic to expect we'll spring back to normal," Kecmanovic said.

America's pandemic-related [mental health crisis](#) hasn't rolled out as you might think, she said. There wasn't much of an initial uptick in people seeking help even as the lockdown altered everyday life in profound ways.

"After these couple of first months, when reopening started, that's when we started really seeing people's mental health worsen quite a bit," she said.

What changed?

"What's dawning on us is the realization that we're in this for the long haul," Kecmanovic said. "The uncertainty is really hitting people, that this is going to be a year or a year and a half living with this ever-changing normal. The new normal is changing every day, every week."

Surveys have shown that people are concerned about the pandemic's effect on their mental health, and symptoms of anxiety and depression are on the rise, Mordecai said.

But "that's different from a full-blown mental health disorder," he noted. "I think it remains to be seen how it translates long term."

The folks most at risk for long-term problems are those most directly impacted by COVID-19, Mordecai and Kecmanovic said. These include front-line health care workers, people who have been infected, and people who have lost loved ones.

"There's going to be a ... tremendous amount of grief that's not being

processed," Kecmanovic said, adding that it's impossible to paper over it. "It's going to catch up with you eventually."

All this sounds dire, but both experts predict most people will bounce back.

"I am hoping that essential human resilience will prevail—people might not be able to snap their fingers and be back to normal, but they will generally be fine," Kecmanovic said.

Mordecai said past experience offers reason for hope.

"When we look at studies of past natural disasters and pandemics, most people do OK, which I think gives me some reason for optimism," he said. "But there will be some people who have long-term effects. It's people who've been profoundly affected by the pandemic."

People worried about their own mental state should double down on efforts to stay healthy and happy, Mordecai said.

"The greatest risk is that when people get socially isolated, they drop their routines around maintaining their mental health and their physical health—that's really a set up," he said.

A daily workout can do much to lower your stress. People should also consider meditation or yoga as a means of reducing stress, as well as limiting their news intake, Mordecai added.

Don't dwell on the news, he advised.

"It's important to stay up to date, but that doesn't require hours and hours a day," Mordecai said. "If the TV's on in the background, maybe turn it off, because it's a constant message that's anxiety-provoking."

It's also important to acknowledge how you're feeling, and that your feelings are valid, Kecmanovic said. "These are crazy times. These are unprecedented times. No wonder I'm feeling anxious, and it's OK," she said.

Some potential bright spots could come out of the pandemic, too. Some people might emerge with a sense of pride in enduring the crisis, she said.

"It can be realizing ... I'm stronger than I thought I would be," Kecmanovic said. "I never thought of myself as a strong and hearty person, but what I've lived through for the last year and a half, it's amazing I was able to go through this."

The experts also hope that what people have endured will help them empathize with those who struggle with their mental health.

"One of the silver linings here may be that so many of us have had to deal with symptoms of anxiety and concerns about isolation," Mordecai said. "Those are things that people with [mental health](#) conditions have known for a long time. If the rest of us essentially get a taste of it, does that allow us all to talk more openly about it? I hope so."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [coping with stress during COVID-19](#).

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