

Psychology professors share tools to improve mental health amid COVID-19

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As the world plunged into the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Sona Dimidjian knew a parallel and more silent crisis was brewing in mental health.

Dimidjian, a CU Boulder psychology professor, immediately saw a trifecta of trouble: COVID-19 disrupted our basic daily routines, upended socializing and delivered a flood of uncertainty.

"People were challenged to navigate each of those issues right from the get-go, and we know they've led to more depression, anxiety, substance abuse, domestic violence ... a whole host of problems," said Dimidjian, also the director of the Renée Crown Wellness Institute, which focuses on research and programs to develop healthy young adults.

The statistics back her up. A September 2020 survey from the Colorado Health Foundation found 77% of Coloradans reported anxiety, loneliness or stress related to COVID-19.

Dimidjian and her CU colleagues say there are simple, research-based strategies that can offer relief.

"Good science is our guide, and my team has been doing research on how to treat and prevent these issues for the last 20 years," Dimidjian said. "The good news is that the lessons learned are very relevant to the challenges we face today."

Behavioral Activation

The first coping strategy, called behavioral activation (BA), is based on the idea that you can change how you feel by changing what you do. Studies have shown it can sometimes quell depression just as well as medication. That's why Dimidjian also calls BA "behavioral antidepressants."

"We know that being involved in activities that give us a sense of accomplishment, enjoyment and control is critical to a positive mood," she said.

BA invites people to research the connection between their daily habits and moods: Which activities are draining? Which ones add pleasure, enjoyment or a sense of mastery? BA participants then add at least one pleasurable and one mastery activity to their schedule every day to make them a normal part of their lives.

Dimidjian is seeing BA work—even without the aid of [mental health](#) professionals—in research at the Crown Institute, where new and expectant women suffering from perinatal depression help each other apply BA skills.

Erin Wood, research participant and mother of two from Franktown, Colorado, said she found BA helpful not only during and after pregnancy, but also as the pandemic unfolded.

"Even though I didn't have to take a shower or get dressed, it was important to feel like I was accomplishing something," Wood said.

Acknowledgement

The second coping tool is to acknowledge how the pandemic is disrupting your life.

"It's normal to grieve for lost experiences, to feel uncertain about the future and to be angry about the state of the world," said Roselinde Kaiser, assistant professor in CU's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience. "These emotions don't make us weak, flawed or powerless. Understand that stress—even coronavirus-related stress—can be an opportunity for new growth."

June Gruber, director of CU's Positive Emotion and Psychopathology Lab, said [negative emotions](#)—fear, anger or sadness—are normal.

"Instead of suppressing or criticizing yourself for those emotions, accepting them as being valid may stave off spiraling into more clinically significant symptoms of depression or anxiety," Gruber said.

Kaiser suggests that after acknowledging your emotions, you can reflect on and list the issues affecting your emotions and thoughts.

Then, inventory your best coping strategies and responses to stress: "Think about what's worked well for you in the past and why it was successful," Kaiser said.

Next, brainstorm how you might adjust your coping strategies to the pandemic. If exercise helps but your gym is closed, see if you can find a workout online.

Finally, approach it like an experiment. "You're testing new ways of building wellness," Kaiser said. "Some will work better than others."

Mindfulness

Dimidjian said a third tool, mindfulness, is a way to stay grounded in the present moment. "Mindfulness helps us become aware of our thinking patterns and reorients us toward the present," she said. "And that frees us from that sense of dread about the future."

To become more mindful, Dimidjian suggests taking a few minutes each day to notice your breath, sensations in your body and any anxious or upsetting thoughts. Learning to pay attention to what you're doing—whether it's eating, walking or listening to music—and noticing when your attention wanes is what makes a mindful life, she said.

Kaiser added that even though the pandemic has led to "a profound disruption" to daily life and routines, humans can learn to cope.

"You may find that you discover new resilience-boosting skills that serve you not only during the pandemic but for years to come," she said.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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