

# Researcher discusses mental health in the Hispanic and Latino communities amid COVID

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Elizabeth M. Martinez. Credit: University of Minnesota

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges and barriers in the United States. According to the Kaiser Family

Foundation, Hispanic adults, children and adolescents have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Also, people may have nervous feelings as pandemic restrictions have been lifted.

Elizabeth M. Martinez, a postdoctoral associate at the University of Minnesota Medical School, talks about mental [health](#) in the Hispanic and Latino communities.

## **Q: How can the pandemic affect a person's health every day?**

Martinez: The COVID-19 [pandemic](#) has had a huge effect on our lives. From one day to the other, our lives were drastically changed with public health measures to reduce the risk of contracting the virus throughout the past year. Faced with the fear of COVID-19's effects, a new virus that we knew little about, it is normal that many of us have felt fear, stress and anxiety. The worry that oneself or that our [family](#) and friends will get sick is common, as well as the worry and sadness caused by the restrictions we had to face. With public health measures and social distancing, many people felt isolated and stressed.

Mental health can be affected by [chronic stress](#) and uncertainty. The Latino community was disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Many of our families contracted COVID-19 and had more drastic effects from the virus, likely due to various health inequities. Likewise, Latino families were affected economically with restrictions on various businesses and industries and educationally with the closure of schools and online education. The combination of several of these factors is very stressful and has had effects on the mental and physical health of several people.

## **Q: How and why do people respond differently to**

## **pandemic stress?**

Martinez: Stress, anxiety and sadness are natural emotions in the face of the pandemic that we are going through. We all react differently to stress—our age, generational status, the situation we are in and our history and past experiences all affect how we respond to and handle stress. Signs of stress can be physical, emotional and/or changes in our behavior from day to day. Stress and emotions can manifest physically with stomach pain, headache or muscle tension. We may also experience feelings of anxiety, confusion, sadness or frustration. It can affect our concentration and the level of worries we have. It can also manifest itself with changes in appetite or difficulty sleeping. It is important to know that children, lacking the words or skills to express themselves verbally and tell us how they feel, show stress in other ways. Be aware of changes in behavior—for example, that they are quieter, with more tantrums or more isolated—their emotional expressions or complaints and physical pain.

## **Q: What kind of stressful events during the pandemic trigger stress or anxiety?**

Martinez: During the pandemic, there are several events that can cause anxiety. At first, the uncertainty about the virus and the fear of getting infected caused a lot of anxiety and tension. Restrictions and [social distancing](#) have led to bouts of depression and anxiety for people of all ages. We have seen these mental health effects even more so in teens and young adults. Mental health was also impacted by not having our natural measures to manage stress (e.g., support from family and friends, access to religious and community services, attending the gym or school, etc.). It is also natural to feel distressed, worried and sad when family and friends become ill or for those who died from a COVID-19 infection. Sadly, many families are grieving losses from COVID-19 or

other reasons and may have complex feelings about the pandemic and restriction changes. Finally, misinformation and alarming news shared by social media and untrustworthy sites were a common source of anxiety for many people.

Now that vaccines are available to adolescents over the age of 12, it is common to feel nervous and want to do more research on vaccine side effects and their effectiveness. With restrictions being lifted, many people have felt stressed with the change in [public health measures](#). It is advisable to speak with a trusted medical professional who knows about your medical history if you have questions about the vaccine. It is also important to talk as a family and make decisions together about what activities everyone feels comfortable doing and what preventive measures family members will follow.

## **Q: What can individuals do to navigate stress and anxiety during the pandemic or with the lifting of restrictions?**

Martinez: There are several ways that we can take care of our well-being and mental health. Our physical health and mental health are intertwined. By taking care of our body—whether with nutritious food, [physical activity](#), sleeping well or avoiding substances, such as alcohol and other drugs—we are helping our body to be healthy and to handle stress in a better way. Learning and practicing deep breathing and meditation can also help us cope with stress and anxiety. It is also important to have activities in our day that relax us and which we enjoy to reduce our worry. Those can be reading a book or magazine, watching a television program, drawing or writing, going for a walk or spending time outside. It is important to find a mix of individual, as well as family and group, activities to relax and have fun. Finally, it is important to stay in contact with our family, social and community or religious support

organizations.

Taking breaks from reading or listening to the news and watching social media can also be very healthy. One can be well-informed without being overwhelmed with very distressing information. Think about how to put limits on news and [social media](#) for yourself and younger family members. Seek information from trusted and reliable sources.

## **Q: What does your work in mental health show?**

Martinez: In my work as a psychologist, I have supported several people to cope with the pandemic in a healthier way. It is normal to feel overwhelmed and stressed when various factors and situations are beyond our control. It is important to focus on the values and activities that are most important to us and consider what elements we have under our control. For example, we can focus on our family, work or studies, or projects that we are passionate about. Although there are situations that we cannot control, what we can control is how we respond to this situation.

Our social connection is also extremely important. Various psychological studies have taught that loneliness and isolation is harmful to our mental and physical health. As social beings, it is very important to stay connected with friends and family. The good news is that today we have many ways to stay connected with email, phone and video calls. It is also possible to use these means to speak with spiritual leaders, mentors or professionals with whom we want to consult or ask for advice. If you are having difficulty managing [stress](#), you can consult with a medical or [mental health](#) professional. Professional help is confidential and can help you or your loved ones through difficult times.

Provided by University of Minnesota

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