

Q&A: Surgeon General on omicron, masks and mental health

February 11 2022, by Hilary Powell



Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy testifies before the Senate Finance Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Feb. 8, 2022, on youth mental health care. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Walsh

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy says he can imagine a future where

Americans don't have to contend with mask requirements. But pulling back safeguards too quickly, Murthy warns, risks more avoidable suffering, especially for people with weakened immune systems or other vulnerabilities.

In an interview this week with The Associated Press, Murthy also shared his concerns about the pandemic's impact on the mental wellbeing of youth. He's the father of two young children. Growing up, he witnessed the toll of unresolved mental [health](#) problems.

Some of Murthy's comments:

A FUTURE WITHOUT MASKS

"I can imagine that future. I can't tell you if it's coming in a couple of months or in six months or in 12 months.

"What I can tell you is that to live that future, we are going to need the tools that we've been building over the last year. We're going to need readily available vaccines and therapeutics ... we're going to need those freely available high-quality masks and tests, and we're going to also need the right mindset recognizing that COVID is not going to disappear overnight.

"We may see waves of old or new variants, but if we have these tools, if we're using them well, particularly our vaccines and boosters, we can protect the vast majority of people from hospitalizations and deaths."

EBB AND FLOW OF THE PANDEMIC

"The pandemic is not over today. We are still seeing record numbers of hospitalizations, deaths, and cases in this country.

"I think that as the pandemic gets better, we should be pulling back on restrictions. The conversation now is about what should determine when that happens.

"It's likely going to be some combination of the hospitalization rate or hospital capacity itself, which is about health care staffing, about the death rate, and also just about where we're going in terms of cases."

"We also have to have a clear plan for protecting those who are more vulnerable. And we know that there are people in our community, particularly those who are immunocompromised, who may continue to be at higher risk."

AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

"I come at this issue of [youth mental health](#), not just as a surgeon general or as a doctor, but first and foremost as a parent.

"How do I make sure that my kids have a foundation for good physical and mental health going forward?

"You can't necessarily legislate your way out of stigma ... but where Congress can make a big difference is in focusing on expanding access to treatment, making sure that we are integrating [primary care](#) with [mental health services](#), and we're expanding our pipeline for ... [mental health professionals](#)."

MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES

"Right now, only 2% of the 41,000 psychiatrists in our country are Black ... which is just a reflection of the lack of diversity we have in our mental health workforce and that has direct implications for providing

care."

"We do not have adequate representation in the workforce when it comes to communities of color."

"We may come in different flavors and maybe different words are used to describe [mental illness](#), but there's this stigma that makes people feel ashamed.

"When I was in high school, we had an uncle who lived close by to us, who was struggling with depression and we didn't know it. We found that he had taken his life and I still remember just how that shook me.

"People who are struggling with mental illness who are people of color are often less likely to go and seek out help."

A SENSE OF HOPE

"What gives me hope is actually our experience with the COVID-19 vaccination effort in equity.

"There was a gap in the very beginning. We saw that Latino and Black communities and Native American communities were less likely to be vaccinated.

"But then we worked as hard as we could to close that gap with the help of trusted messengers, increasing access points and doing everything we could.

"We've got to bring that same focus, that same accountability to closing the equity gap when it comes to [mental health](#)."

© 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not

be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Q&A: Surgeon General on omicron, masks and mental health (2022, February 11)
retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-qa-surgeon-omicron-masks-mental.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.