

The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

In addition to the personal adjustments we have all had to make due to COVID-19, professionals have had to pay special attention to the directives mandated by their professional governing agencies. In New York, mental health guidelines have been outlined by the New York State Psychological Association (NYSPA). In general, they have lifted restrictions to care and are allowing us more and easier ways to connect with patients, especially the elderly. These timely decisions by NYSPA made us realize how essential mental health services are during this crisis.

With the onset of COVID-19 our office is incorporating COVID-19 into existing treatment plans AND preparing for the mental health fallout due to the restrictions on daily life. At the beginning of each session we are asking patients how they are doing with Activities of Daily Living (ADL's). Whereas ADL's are a topic to address with only the severely mentally ill, they are now an important topic to ask ALL of our patients. Do you have enough food and supplies? How are your finances? Are you refilling your medications? How are you sleeping? Does anyone in your home have flu like symptoms or a fever? Have you relapsed on substances (or are you suicidal) due to the stress?

Staying current on the scientific data on transmission of the illness is important to help patients not over or under-react to the guidelines. Typically people with anxiety and OCD will make the already restrictive guidelines harder and worse on themselves. Others are not taking the guidelines seriously enough and are ignoring social distancing guidelines which needs to be addressed in treatment. Reminding people that this is a temporary situation is important. Staying off of questionable social media sites and keeping your children from watching movies or YouTube videos depicting apocalyptic themes can lower anxiety.

Helping patients adhere to a schedule and develop some type of structure to their day is important to coping, especially for children. Designating times of day for schoolwork, physical activity and family time can help children not spend excessive time playing video games. Having family meetings to discuss how to make things better and less boring in the home are sometimes helpful. Family discussions on how to manage anxiety can help children develop their own list of distractor and relaxation techniques that work for *them*. Arts and crafts, music, reading, meditation, deep breathing, playing cards, and watching historical documentaries can teach children that anxiety can be temporarily blocked out to relieve stress.

Engaging children in domestic projects can help reduce boredom. It's a great time to declutter rooms, sell unwanted belongings online, calling friends/family on the phone (especially the elderly) and playing board games can help families reconnect in (may be) a better and healthier way.

Parental roles are more multifaceted and demanding than ever and require them to take on roles as parent, therapist, teacher, coach and rule enforcer. Parents need to realize they too are going to buckle and that it is OK to lower their own bar during this crisis. Children are not going to be harmed by a lengthy spring break and valuable life skills are being taught during this crisis. Model coping and relaxation skills for your children and use your own anxiety and feeling overwhelmed as “teaching moments” for your children. Try not to exaggerate the crisis or make your children feel they are in danger. Tell them that the restrictions are to help others who are not so healthy, rather than instill fear that they could get sick. Stay off social media that makes this more difficult.

Only a few weeks into this crisis we can see the early signs of mental stress. Suicidal thinking has spiked and drug relapse is more likely. Recovering addicts who have worked on recovery for months or years are now delayed in seeing their children. Already paranoid patients are too afraid to leave the house to get their medications. Patients that are in need of an inpatient stay are reluctant to go voluntarily due to fear of transmission. Financial crisis for some families is inevitable which we know raises the suicide rate dramatically. Children without adequate adult supervision can start unwanted health habits.

If you need support or have questions, our agency has 24-7 telephonic and texting availability by calling 518.744.7978 or 518.791-5904 after work hours and weekends. Monday thru Friday 9 to 5 pm please call 518-745-0079.

On the positive side, time off from work can enable some families to re-connect and maybe seek mental health services that they never had time for. Professionals are supporting professionals and we are asking peers if they are “OK”. Dormant habits have been reignited so we can see they are much needed day-today as well as during this crisis. As a community these restrictions could save lives and months from now we will be more united and stronger than ever.

Written by the Providers at Osika and Scarano Psychological Services, PC
3-22-20