

MENTAL HEALTH DURING THESE TURBULENT TIMES

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The Covid-19 pandemic, increasing violence and polarization in the US, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have had and continue to have a significant negative impact on our mental health. Adults and children alike are reporting increased trauma, anxiety and depression.

- In October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics stated that its members were “caring for young people with soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness and suicidality that will have lasting impacts on them, their families and their communities.” <https://www.aap.org>
- On February 1, 2022, Dr. Mitch Prinstein of the American Psychological Association testified to a U.S. Senate Committee that “during the pandemic, about four in 10 adults have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, an increase from the one in 10 adults who reported these symptoms from January – June 2019.”
- On March 2, 2022, the World Health Organization released a scientific brief reporting that, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety and depression increased globally by 25%. “Loneliness, fear of infection, suffering and death for oneself and for loved ones, grief after bereavement and financial worries have also been cited as stressors leading to anxiety and depression.” <https://www.who.int>
- On March 31, 2022, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a report stating that, in 2021, 44% of high school students “reported that they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year.” In 2019, the percentage was 37%, up from 26% in 2009. <https://www.cdc.gov>
- Mental Health America has reported in its “[Mind the Workplace 2022 Report: An Employer’s Responsibility to Employee Mental Health](#)” that, “in 2021 ... 71% of respondents found it difficult to concentrate at work, compared to 65% in 2020 and 46% in 2018.” The report also showed “... that positive workplace mental health requires investment ... from all levels of an organization...” <https://mhanational.org>

Being aware of the increase in depression, anxiety, stress and trauma is the first step in dealing with mental health crisis. The next step is to identify and access resources that can help those struggling with mental health problems.

WHAT ARE SIGNS THAT SOMEONE IS EXPERIENCING A CHALLENGE TO MENTAL HEALTH?

Prevention and early intervention are critical to mental wellness. Knowing some of the more common signs and symptoms of a mental health problem can help to prevent a crisis and indicate when intervention is needed.

Mental Health America (MHA) <https://mhanational.org>

The following symptoms, especially if they last longer than a few weeks and start to affect school, work, relationships, or everyday activities are warning signs of mental health issues in both adults and youth:

- Problems with concentration, memory, or ability to think clearly.
- Changes in energy level, sleep patterns, or eating habits.
- Feeling overly worried, sad, empty, hopeless, or worthless.
- Loss of interest in activities that are normally enjoyable.
- Withdrawal from others, or disconnection.
- Irritability or moodiness.

Signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis that **require immediate action** include:

- Thoughts or plans of killing or hurting one's self or another person.
- Hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see.
- Unexplainable changes in thinking, speech, or writing.
- Sudden personality changes that are bizarre or out of character.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), go to your local Emergency Room, or call 911. – MHA

American Psychological Association (APA) <https://www.apa.org>

In addition to adult symptoms of mental health issues, other signs for youth include:

- Complaining more than usual about school.
- Crying, displaying surprising fearful reactions, clinging to a parent or teacher.
- Excessive hostility toward family members.

“Youth of all ages, but especially younger children, may find it difficult to recognize and verbalize when they are experiencing stress.” APA advises adults “...to pay attention to these behaviors and determine an appropriate response or intervention.”

RESOURCES FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING A MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE

Practical Self-Care Strategies

The Mayo Clinic identifies these self-care strategies:

Take care of your body:

- Get enough sleep.
- Participate in regular physical activity.
- Eat healthy.
- Avoid tobacco, alcohol and drugs.
- Limit screen time.
- Relax and recharge.

Take care of your mind:

- Keep your regular routine.
- Limit exposure to news media.
- Stay busy.
- Focus on positive thoughts.

Connect with others:

- Build support and strengthen relationships. <https://www.mayoclinic.org>

Connecting with others is important for youth as well as for adults. According to US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, recent research shows that “the most important thing a child needs to be resilient is a stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.” Ed Source- 2-29-22
<https://edsource.org>

Many people benefit from practices such as deep breathing, yoga, and meditation. Free meditation apps include Calm <https://www.calm.com/> and Headspace <https://www.headspace.com>. Free videos of guided meditation, tai chi and yoga practice sessions are available on YouTube.
[https://www.youtube.com.](https://www.youtube.com)

Community Programs

Your community may offer programs to raise awareness of, and identify resources for, mental health and wellness. May is National Mental Health Month; July is National BIPOC Mental Health Month; and October is National Depression Awareness Month. During these months, communities tend to advertise mental health and wellness programs.

Crisis and Support Lines

- ***Suicide and Crisis Lifeline*** sponsored by the US Dept. of Health and Human Services became available on July 16, 2022. This **988** Lifeline, formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, offers 24/7 **call, text** and chat access to trained crisis counselors who can help people experiencing a suicidal, substance use, or mental health crisis, or other emotional distress. You can also dial/text **988** if you are concerned about someone who may need crisis support. Services are offered in English and Spanish, and Language Line Solutions are used to provide translation services in over 250 additional languages.
- ***Crisis Text Line*** www.crisistextline.org
Text 741741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor at NAMI to receive free, 24/7 crisis support via text message.
- ***Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*** (SAMHSA) National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or TTY: 1-800-487-4889 is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. SAMHSA provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.
- ***Trevor Project Crisis Line- LGBTQ Youth.*** www.thetrevorproject.org or 866-488-7386
- ***National Domestic Violence Hotline*** – Call 800-799-SAFE (7233)
Trained expert advocates are available 24/7 to provide confidential support seeking resources and information. Help is available in Spanish and other languages.

National Mental Health Organizations

National mental health organizations, such as the following provide a multitude of resources and services, including community-based programs.

Mental Health of America (MHA) <https://mhanational.org>

MHA provides a vast array of services, such as:

- [Mental Health America's 2022 Mental Health Month Toolkit.](#)
- “Tools for Mental Wellness.”
- “Find Help.”

- Podcasts, public education campaigns, research, and online free mental health screening tools.
- Free on-line mental health screening tools for youth and adults.

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) <https://www.nami.org>

NAMI provides a wide range of information and resources, including support and education programs for family members, youth, young adults, veterans; a resource video library; online discussion groups; and research.

NAMI also publishes **resource guides** to support individuals, family and friends affected by mental illness to help navigate new or challenging experiences.

Government Agencies

Federal agencies, such as CDC, US Health & Human Resources, National Institute of Mental Health, and SAMHSA, offer mental health resources, as do state health agencies, county Departments of Health (some have specific Behavioral/ Mental health divisions), and city Departments of Health.

One example of a state agency that offers mental health resources is the CA Surgeon General's Office. <https://osg.ca.gov/additional-information-and-links-for-support> Of note is its "Playbook for Stress Relief for Kids and Caregivers" which includes a Self- Care Template for Kids.

School Districts

School districts typically provide mental health resources. A district in California, for example, which provides a variety of mental health resources on its website, just began to offer a service for students, families and staff that helps them connect with mental health care providers and with substance use treatment centers. Support is available in over 200+ languages.

Youth ardently have been voicing their support for peer-to-peer counseling programs in schools, and such programs are being provided in more districts. Government and foundation funding often is available for these programs. Training of the student peers is frequently conducted in collaboration with local community-based organizations.

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Many communities have a variety of CBOs, including ones that are based in, or provide services for, underserved communities. Staff may have lived experience with mental health issues. Some CBOs focus on serving specific ethnic, racial, and religious communities. An increasing number of CBOs have staff that are multi-lingual.

Mental Health Providers

There are many different mental health providers including social workers, substance abuse counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, school social workers, school psychologists and psychiatrists. Primary care physicians may be the first point of contact for people seeking mental health treatment.

Some of the organizations cited in this article offer information about finding a mental health provider in your community.

Accessibility and affordability to mental health providers, however, can be extremely challenging for many people. In January, 2022, The National Council for Mental Wellbeing reported that "77

percent of counties across the country have severe shortages of behavioral health professions. Many who desperately need support are being left out in the cold.” <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org>

RESOURCES RELATED TO THE WORKPLACE

As more people now are working in hybrid situations or remotely, there is increased discussion about how to address the new challenges of workplace-related stress.

- A McKinsey study in 2021, reported that “... one-third of those who had just returned to the office said going back had negatively affected their mental health (*New York Times*, March 31, 2022.)
- APA provides several mental health resources on this specific topic, including a [Striving for mental health excellence in the workplace](#).
- MHA offers “5 Ways to Encourage Mental Health in the Workplace.
<https://mhanational.org/blog/5-ways-encourage-mental-health-workplace>
- An October 2021 Harvard Business Review article advises that “Employers must move from seeing mental health as an individual challenge to a collective priority. Companies are finally investing more in mental health support out of necessity, but they still haven’t achieved true culture change.” The article includes a section titled, “What Employers Need to Provide.”
<https://hbr.org/2021/10/its-a-new-era-for-mental-health-at-work>

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

As caring adults and youth, employers, and community leaders, we are responsible for increasing our own and our communities’ awareness of mental health problems and engaging in preventative resources such as ones included in this article. Furthermore, we need to help address the increased need for mental health services and the many challenges of providing effective, timely, affordable, and accessible resources for everyone.

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Lauren consults with nonprofit organizations and corporations to improve the effectiveness of their community programs. Her work includes developing and/or realigning grantmaking and program initiatives, using a collaborative approach that incorporates the advice and insight of the community, especially of the people being served. Lauren’s recent projects include collaborating with school districts, local government agencies and nonprofit organizations to advocate for mental health services for youth and families. She is an associate member of the National Network of Consultants for Grantmakers. You can contact Lauren at wolkovadvisors@gmail.com.

NOTE: Mental health is a complex issue, and although I have a Master of Social Work degree, I am not a licensed clinician, so please consult a professional medical or mental health provider for help with specific mental health concerns.