

As pandemic takes toll on our psyche, mental health providers offer ways to cope

The Press of Atlantic City, November 28, 2020

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As the COVID-19 pandemic takes a toll on America's mental health, local providers are urging their patients to take long walks in open spaces, reach out to friends, breathe deeply — and, in some cases, check themselves into a hospital.

In October, for instance, 182 adults and 24 children visited emergency screening centers of the Cumberland County Guidance Center, a primary mental health nonprofit based in Millville, Clinical Director Josephine White said.

Of those seeking help, 54 adults and 10 children were experiencing acute symptoms, such as nonstop crying or incapacitating anxiety, and were referred for in-patient treatment, said White. The number for the same month in 2019: 116 adults screened, 33 hospitalized; 87 children screened, 17 hospitalized. The decrease in children screened and hospitalized was attributed to “lack of school behavioral referral during virtual learning.”

Those numbers have “not quite doubled” from previous months but have “gone up quite a bit,” White said.

With greater frequency, people are turning to methamphetamines, fentanyl (considered more addictive and lethal than heroin), and alcohol, said Kathryn Gibson, director of recovery services at Cape Assist in Wildwood.

The increase in demand for mental health services reported by White, Gibson and other providers at area non-profits appears consistent with national trends.

“The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders,” researchers for the Kaiser Family Foundation wrote in August. A Kaiser poll in mid-July found 53% of U.S. adults reported being worried and stressed over the coronavirus, significantly higher than the 32% reporting anxiety in March, when the question was first posed.

“I can imagine now that we're in November, the percentage is much higher,” said Victoria Phillips, executive director of the Mental Health

Association in Galloway Township. “Over time, even the most resilient person is broken down.”

Phillips said the loneliness engendered by social distancing can lead to mental illness, especially among the elderly. But sometimes the problem is not enough isolation, as in the case of families required to shelter in place.

“Any group of people who are together night and day and don’t have a break can get tired of each other,” she said.

The Guidance Center’s White described the unique challenges of home life during COVID-19.

“We have family members who are trying to wear multiple hats,” she said. “They’re trying to educate their children. They’re trying to work from home. And, of course, we have families who have been providing support for the elderly and for others who require additional support.”

The pandemic has been especially rough on those with conditions such as Down syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy, said Leslie Long, CEO of The Arc of Cape May County.

“They’re frustrated they can’t go the restaurant, they can’t visit families and friends as they used to,” said Long. “It’s a lonely time for them.”

The Arc provides services to 200 people, about half of whom live in the agency’s 17 group homes throughout Cape May County. Some clients, tired of COVID-19 protocols and social distancing, have moved from group homes into apartments and other more independent situations. But “the majority are just saying how frustrated they are,” said Long. In response, staffers endeavor to arrange diverting events for clients, such as indoor bowling tournaments or Special Olympics-style competitions.

Nationally, some specially challenged people have been experiencing more than just frustration. Developmental disorders and intellectual disabilities and related conditions, along with lung cancer, are the top three risk factors for COVID-19 mortality, according to a study published this month by FAIR Health, a nonprofit based in New York City that collects data on health insurance claims.

Struggles during the pandemic are sometimes different for men and women. The latter, said Stockton University associate professor of writing Emily Van Duyne, are often burdened with increased domestic responsibilities at a time when nearly everyone is home.

“I have observed many people, myself included, where everyone works, the husbands work and the wives work, but the wives do the second shift,” Van Duyne said.

Men, on the other hand, may suffer because of an inveterate tendency to avoid seeking help, suggests a recent study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Only 41% of men who reported feelings of depression and anxiety sought help from mental health professionals, the study found. In a separate study of men in New Jersey, the Tampa, Florida-based River Oaks treatment center found 24% admit they would not reach out for mental health assistance, compared with a national average of 22%.

“(T)he stigma still attached to mental health ... silences many men,” wrote Fran Myers-Routt of River Oaks.

With the holiday season approaching, and infection rates swelling, The Arc’s Long said she was “terrified” of potential mental health consequences.

Despite their new challenges, mental health professionals expressed general approval of the measures taken by governments to minimize the virus’ spread. Long said her opinion reflected personal involvement with COVID-19: Her mother and stepfather are currently hospitalized with the virus, and her best friend’s husband, at 55, died early in the pandemic.

“You keep it away at all costs” is the best response to the coronavirus, she said. “Some of my board members feel you can’t lock down businesses and restrict people’s rights. It’s a balancing act. It’s very difficult.”