

May: National Mental Health Month

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety disorders already affected an estimated 40 million adults in the United States (Anxiety and Depression Association of America).

According to the Mayo Clinic, common symptoms of anxiety include sleep issues, challenges in thinking of topics other than what is triggering the worrying; sweating, trembling, restlessness, tension, nervousness, hyperventilation, challenges controlling worrying, avoiding anxiety triggers, increased heart rate, gastrointestinal issues, sense of impending doom, danger or panic.

Here are some additional statistics from The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

- 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year.
- 1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year.
- 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year.
- 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-34.

Last year in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic we noted a 55% increase in alcohol sales during the first quarter of 2020 compared to 2019. In addition there was an increase (34%) in prescriptions written for anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) drugs year over year.

A Kaiser Family Foundation report revealed nearly half of all Americans reported that the COVID-19 crisis was harming their mental health. Forbes Magazine confirmed those findings indicating 53% of women and 37% of men said their mental health had been affected and 19% of those added that the impact was major.

On May 13, 2021, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) announced that vaccinated individuals do not have to wear masks outdoors or in most indoor settings. As we finally begin to see a legitimate glimmer of hope we must remain mindful if not vigilant about the lingering effects of the pandemic on the well-being of Americans.

The University of Utah recently reported that more than half of COVID-19 healthcare workers remain at risk for mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mental Health professionals largely anticipate an escalation of mental health issues that will continue to emerge in the coming months.

For those who are interested or concerned about someone you know here are some Mental Health First Aid tips from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing:

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm. Identify if they're experiencing a crisis such as a panic attack or suicidal thoughts, and address that first. It's OK to do the assessment over the phone, text or social media. If there is **immediate danger, call 911.**
- Listen nonjudgmentally. If the person isn't in a crisis, ask how they're feeling and how long they've been feeling that way. Pay attention and show you care.

- Give reassurance and information. Your support can have a huge impact on the person. Reassure them that it is appropriate to experience fear, sadness or anxiety during situations like this. Remind them that help is available, and you'll be there for them along the way.
- Encourage appropriate professional help. Offer to help them find a professional for support, such as a primary care physician, mental health professional, psychiatrist or certified peer specialist. Behavioral health care providers can provide services by phone and/or secure videoconferencing, so they will be able to maintain physical distancing.
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies. Self-help strategies and reaching out for support from family, friends, faith communities and others who have experienced depression or anxiety (peer supporters) can make a difference.

Anxiety disorders are treatable. Depending on the anxiety disorder, treatment may include medications (e.g. Anti-anxiety, antidepressants, and beta-blockers), managing the symptoms, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychotherapy. To manage normal anxiety, there are many steps that people can take such as getting adequate sleep, proper nutrition, and regular exercise. Make time for fun and relaxation, including hobbies, yoga, meditation, or listening to music to redirect the mind and calm the body. It is important to identify what is triggering the feelings of apprehension and create a plan. Remember your breathing is a powerful tool as well. Take long slow deep breaths, pause for several second and then release the breath with an extended exhale.

Need help now?

Confidential NYS COVID-19 emotional support line remains operational today: **1-844-863-9314**

NAMI Crisis Text Line (text "**HELLO**" to **741741**)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (call **1-800-273-TALK**) or text **MHFA** to **741741** to talk to a Crisis Text Line counselor.

To speak to an EAP clinician call LECSA EAP/MAP: **631-851-1295**