

The mental health side effects of COVID-19

April 14, 2020 By Kristena Schutt-Moore

The world is going through a unique time right now and it presents a unique set of challenges and concerns. One major one is the mental health impact COVID-19 and the social and self isolation has on the general population. The Bancroft Times contacted Addictions and Mental Health Services Hastings Prince Edward's director of mental health and housing Janet Evans about the issues and how people can take care of their mental health during this difficult time. Q: What is it about social or self-isolation that can cause mental health issues and what kind?A: It isn't just about the social or self isolation, it is also about why it is necessary right now. We are experiencing something that, for most of us, is really unprecedented. This can lead to feelings of fear and a vulnerability that we haven't felt before. Social and/or self isolation is different for everyone and can depend on the composition of the household. A family of four may hunker down together and may adopt different structure and activities but may not feel the loneliness that say a single person may feel, isolating by themselves. So much of what we do involves other people, friends, family, colleagues and neighbours and social and self isolation involves that too. It is about what each of us can do to keep ourselves and everyone else safe and healthy. It is a pretty significant responsibility that we all have. Social distancing and self-isolation may have an impact on both physical and mental health. The two most common mental health issues it could contribute to are depression and anxiety. Loneliness, fear, lack of sleep, worry for self and others, etc. under normal circumstances can contribute to depression and anxiety and these are not normal circumstances.Q: What are some of the signs people should watch for and notice if someone is having mental health issues from the events happening today or isolation?A: A few things (but not an exhaustive list) to watch out for are withdrawal, an exacerbation of pre-existing symptoms and a preoccupation with worst case scenarios. Social and self-isolation does not and should not mean withdrawal. It is a different way of engaging and staying involved and active. Withdrawing and not participating in regular activities, not working from home if that is an option, opting not to work, not maintaining regular contacts and relationships are all signs to watch out for. Some individuals who have pre-existing depression and anxiety may experience a worsening of symptoms, low energy, less interest in regular activities, poor sleep and appetite, fears and feelings of dread and panic. Some fear and anxiety is okay, it can propel us to act and to take precautions, if an individual speaks of nothing but COVID-19 or believes, for example, that the worst case scenario is going to come to pass, those too may be signs that they are experiencing some mental health issues.Q: What are some things that people can do to help reduce the stress, depression or other mental health issues caused by isolation and COVID-19?A: There are lots of things that people can do including: breathe, access good, reliable information, practice self care, maintain structure to the extent possible, re-connect with people via phone, email, Facetime etc, eat properly, exercise, get restful sleep, practice relaxation, avoid substance use, seek support.Q:What about seniors and children, what can be done for them?A: All ages need support right now, even if it is provided remotely. Seniors in particular should be encouraged and supported to stay home, maybe that means a neighbour or a family member gets their groceries for them. Phone check-ins, Facetiming and messaging is a good and safe way to stay connected with seniors. These acts of kindness make the isolation slightly more bearable and effective. In terms of isolation, there are lots of tips available online about talking to your children, planning activities and coming up with creative ways to manage boredom. I would encourage parents to look at those resources. How and what you do may depend on the age of the children.Q: What about making appointments or the concerns for those known to have mental health issues?A: Addictions and Mental Health Services-Hastings Prince Edward's physical offices are closed, but we are open. Clients of the agency are being supported remotely and have regular contact with their counsellor/case manager. Individuals who aren't clients and are looking for service for mental health or substance use can call Central Intake at 310-OPEN and arrange to speak to an intake and referral coordinator.Q: Is COVID-19 a mental health threat?A: It is a factor for sure. We anticipate that COVID-19 will have some longer term effects on the mental and substance use health in our communities. I would encourage individuals to stay informed by accessing credible and reliable information only, but also to take breaks from the news, don't have it on all the time, we don't need negative background noise. I would also suggest avoiding the 'what if's.' Reach out and get support. Talk to your primary care provider. AMHS-HPE is offering a Pandemic Helpline that anyone can call if they are concerned about their mental health or substance use, pre-existing or just right now. The Pandemic Helpline Number is 613-967-4737. Currently it is open Monday to Friday 9 a.m to 6 p.m. Individuals who find themselves in crisis are encouraged to contact Crisis Intervention Centre at 613-969-7400 extension 2753.