



MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

Whether you're sick of hearing about COVID or it's all you talk about – or both – the fact is, this experience we have all witnessed has changed our perspective on mental health—hopefully, forever.

The last 18 months – the worldwide pandemic – is perhaps the best example of collective trauma in our lifetimes. We all experienced the isolation, the confusion, and the subsequent exhaustion that comes with our daily tasks when our brains are consumed with navigating survival.

Many of us experienced mental health challenges, some for the terrifyingly first time. We traversed sickness, recovery, vaccines, and ever-changing, ever-confusing public guidance. We experienced traumas large and small – loss of normalcy, loss of homes or jobs, loss of relationships, and loss of life. Many of us watched friends and loved ones suffer severe illness and even die, and some of us said our goodbyes without a funeral. While many of those deaths were indeed from the virus, many others were suicide.

We all saw these things. We all are charting a course toward whatever the future looks like, and we are all grappling with renewed uncertainty. Many of us are now also grappling with long-term health complications, or the mind-numbing trauma of grief.

So what do we do now? How to we “go back” to “normal”?

Well, as anyone who has experienced grief will tell you...there is no going back. There is no more normal.

We cannot return to the consciousness we had in February of 2020, just as you cannot retract a bullet shot from a gun. This perspective may read as negative, but it offers an opportunity – a chance to shift our perspective toward a future where we embrace radical authenticity.

Mental health challenges, and suicide, were present in society long before the pandemic—but now many, many more people understand the realities of issues like depression and anxiety than in 2019. We can say that “during these trying times” (to quote every corporate email), we've realized that many of the ways we used to do things...just weren't working.

We did not all survive these last 18 months just to return to a society where we pretend that from 9-5 we aren't people with feelings. We didn't watch the disparities borne more by poor people and people of color just to go back to being oblivious to the amplified struggles that marginalized people face. We didn't see the bone-chilling realities of mental illness, desperation, loneliness and suicide just to retreat to a numb consciousness.

So how do we move into the future with radical authenticity?

In part, by remembering this collective experience – as tough as that might be, and as badly as some may want to minimize and move on. We cannot forget the lessons learned, the harsh truth about where transactional life has brought us. In other ways, it's about being more honest – to resist the reflexive urge to respond with “I'm fine” and “Good, and how are you?” if that's not really true.

Leaning into the vulnerability, of letting our colleagues know there's a person behind this armor of professionalism, can foster meaningful connection and validate the heavy burdens that most of us are carrying every single day. Being able to have a genuine conversation when someone is not okay is a crucial step in connecting someone with help—and keeps our minds on what is really important (for example, I would rather be late for a meeting than ignore someone crying on a sidewalk bench).

There are many reasons for the disparities faced by those with mental illness, and very few of them will we be able to address in our lifetimes, as individuals. But when we are open, honest and authentic to those around us, we see very clearly the connections where we can help one another – be it mental health services, a grocery run or just a friend to lean on. As we hurtle forward “in these uncertain times,” one way we can build strength is with each other. And when we work together, it's just a little bit easier.

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