



COMMUNIQUE

WHEN QUARANTINING Affects Your Mental Health

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Almost everyone relishes a day at home doing nothing. But when one day turns into two, and two into a week, and one week becomes a month, well, that's when most people need a mental health check.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected more than physical health; it has taken a toll on the mental well-being of millions of Americans practicing self isolation and social distancing. In fact, recent studies have found social isolation is associated with increased risk in physical health conditions including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, elevated stress hormones, and weakened immune systems.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), both the anxiety of contracting the illness and the increase in loneliness and isolation can worsen and trigger a whole host of previously unknown mental symptoms. Acknowledging, recognizing, and acting on mental distress in these uncertain times is key to lessening the impact.

"Social distancing has turned into social isolation and that is taking a toll on not only our members and our retirees, but Americans everywhere," said Suzanne Beatty, Director of Local 1180's Retiree Division and a licensed master social worker. "As humans, we are used to interacting, being in touch with others, seeing people, and getting out. Spending weeks on end cooped up in your home can be emotionally difficult for just about anyone."

In addition, most daily routines have been disrupted, which can be another contributing factor to mental duress. Circulating as common social media memes are people asking each other what day of the week it is, and there's a lot of truth to these.

"While they can be funny, they are still serious as one day just blends into the next during times of quarantine," Beatty said. "People actually do not have any idea what day of the week it is. A weekday seems the same as a weekend. The best advice is to try and stick to some sort of regular schedule, whatever that might be, especially if you have children."

People are grappling with how much their lives have changed in such a short time. Nearly half of Americans feel the coronavirus crisis is harming their mental health, according to a poll conducted in March by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) that demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated into a nationwide psychological trauma. The survey found

that 45percent of adults say the pandemic has affected their mental health, and 19 percent say it has had a "major impact." The rates are slightly higher among women, Hispanic adults and black adults, the survey found.

Most people had some form of stress in their lives prior to the pandemic, so developing a quarantine routine will help minimize the stress level. Now is also a time to tune in to how you would have responded to stressors prior to the pandemic and try to implement those solutions into current life because no one can predict how much longer the quarantine will continue.

Of course, the coronavirus has brought about a whole new level of stress. The KFF poll found that the key worries related to the coronavirus pandemic are:

- You or someone in your family will get sick;
- Your investments, such as retirement or college savings, will be negatively impacted;
- You will lose income due to a workplace closure or reduced hours;
- You will not be able to afford testing or treatment if you need it; and
- You will put yourself at risk of exposure to the virus because you can't afford to stay home and miss work.

NAMI says that having a working knowledge of different mental health implications can help address the mental health risks of this global pandemic. The potential symptoms to watch out for are anxiety, obsessions, loneliness, and traumatic stress. But identifying them is one thing; dealing with them is another.

Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton said the union has seen an increase in the number of members reaching out inquiring about the mental health benefit. "Our members are worried, they are scared. Many just need someone to talk to, and who can blame them," she said. "We have been referring our members to one of several mental health options we have available and are strongly encouraging everyone to reach out if they are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or distraught."

NAMI has reported that in New York City, call volume to its own helpline skyrocketed since the onset of the coronavirus. Some federal and state health authorities are rushing to maintain psychological support. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has expanded access to teletherapy, including for Medicare, and some states are waiving telemedicine restrictions for Medicaid. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration is now allowing DEA-registered practitioners to prescribe medications virtually in some instances without having to first meet a patient face-to-face.

While NAMI offers the following coping strategies to help get through uncertain times, **Local 1180 is not recommending members use these in place of seeking professional help.**

- **Be Mindful of Your News Consumption:** The news can be helpful but obsessively reading and watching about the outbreak can be detrimental to mental health. Rely on only one or two reliable sources of news as misinformation and bad reporting are rampant.
- **Make a Health Plan:** Education can be critical to alleviating stress and anxiety. Speak to your health care advisor about coronavirus precautions specific to your health needs. Learn about coronavirus preventative and precautionary measures from reliable sources. Make a plan for your household needs — a shopping list, a pharmacy list. It may also help to develop an emergency plan, especially for elderly members of the family.
- **Stay Connected:** Stay connected with friends and family by videoconferencing, email, messenger, and text, especially those who may be isolated. Be ready to listen to their concerns and share yours. Talking to another person about worries and fears can help, and just knowing that others share them can validate your own fears and worries.
- **Take Care of Yourself:** It's essential to make your health a priority during this time. The critical self-care activities are sleep, physical exercise and a healthy diet. Find ways to address forms of stress, such as journaling, going for walks, or calling a loved one.
- **Practice Mindfulness:** Try not think of the future or worst-case scenarios. There are many online references and books, YouTube guided meditation and yoga videos, and apps such as Headspace.
- **Help Others:** The helper principle shows that helping others is also a benefit to the helper. This doesn't mean going outside your house. It could mean calling an elderly neighbor, helping someone pay a bill online, or teaching a technology-challenged friend how to Facetime. ■