SUPPORTING SBISD

TAKING CARE OF YOUR MIND DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

MENTAL HEALTH OR MENTAL ILLNESS?

INCREASING AWARENESS & ELIMINATING THE STIGMA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

There are countless factors affecting individuals during a pandemic that can cause added stress. Some common concerns include:

- **Loss of personal freedom, due to social distancing, quarantine, or isolation**
- **Loss of income, leading to increased debt and threat to securing basic needs**
- **Fear of illness or loss, due to the threat of catching COVID-9**
- **Scarcity of resources**
- **Lack of access to health care or loved ones in health care institutions**
- **Changes in your daily routine and normal way of life**

Regardless of the reason, all of these factors can cause unwanted stress and anxiety, leading to increased mental health concerns. Yet, many people will suffer unnecessarily because they are not cognizant of the impact that these issues can have on their mental health or they ignore the signs and symptoms they are experiencing. However, if they begin to affect the individuals daily functioning, and if they desire to overcome these indicators, they must be open to seeking professional help.

For many people, the recommendation to seek mental health assistance evokes negative judgement, because they perceive the suggestion as a declaration of their mental instability, when in fact, it is not. Mental health is feelings, thoughts and emotions, which affect different areas of our lives, such as:

- **Our social interactions**
- **Our ability to make effective decisions**
- **Our ability to problem-solve**
- **Our ability to interface with the world around us**

Good mental health is not about being happy all of the time, because we all encounter problems and challenges in life that can cause us to feel down, such as the challenges caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. As well, it is not about ignoring your negative circumstances, but instead, it is about living with life's challenges and coping well. The biggest factor is recognizing when you are not coping well and doing something about it. For some, the initial step towards normal or enhanced functioning is overcoming our negative perceptions regarding the need for mental health support; and retrospectively, the first step in eliminating the stigma associated with seeking mental health support is to realize that you do not have to have a mental illness to have your mental health challenged.

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MENTAL HEALTH SIGNS & SYMPTOMS DURING COVID-19 OUTBREAK

We all respond differently to stress and anxiety. Our response is often based on our family upbringing, background, past experiences, or current life circumstances. The more that a person encounters challenges in life and manages it effectively, the greater their resilience in managing future encounters. However, an alternate outcome can occur and the individual can begin to experience mental health concerns.

Common mental health signs and symptoms:

- Feeling sad or down
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people
- Problems with alcohol or drug use
- Major changes in eating habits
- Suicidal thoughts

Reducing triggers:

- **Keep your regular routine.**
  Maintaining a regular schedule is important to your mental health. In addition to sticking to a regular bedtime routine, keep consistent times for meals, bathing and getting dressed, work or study schedules, and exercise. Also set aside time for activities you enjoy. Predictability can feel more in control.

- **Limit exposure to news media.**
  Constant news about COVID-19 from all types of media can heighten fears about the disease. Limit social media that may expose you to rumors and false information. Also limit reading, hearing or watching other news, but keep up to date on national and local recommendations. Look for reliable sources (CDC and WHO).

- **Stay busy.**
  A distraction can get you away from the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety and depression. Enjoy hobbies that you can do at home, identify a new project or clean out that closet you promised to clean. Doing something positive to manage anxiety is a healthy coping strategy.

- **Focus on positive thoughts.**
  Choose to focus on the positive things in your life, instead of dwelling on how bad you feel. Consider starting each day by listing things for which you are thankful. Maintain a sense of hope, work to accept changes as they occur and try to keep problems in perspective.

- **Use your moral compass for support.**
  If you draw strength from a belief system, it can bring you comfort during difficult times.

- **Set priorities.**
  Do not create a life-changing list of things to achieve while you're home. It can be overwhelming. Set reasonable goals each day and outline steps you can take to reach those goals. Give yourself credit for every step in the right direction, no matter how small, and recognize some days will be better than others.

Typical and Atypical Responses to Stress

Although stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life, everyone reacts differently to difficult situations, and it's normal to feel stress and worry during a crisis. Nevertheless, multiple challenges daily, such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, can push you beyond your ability to cope.

Many people may have mental health concerns, such as symptoms of anxiety and depression during this time and feelings may change over time.

Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling helpless, sad, angry, irritable, hopeless, anxious or afraid. You may have trouble concentrating on typical tasks, changes in appetite, body aches and pains, or difficulty sleeping or you may struggle to face routine chores.

When these signs and symptoms last for several days in a row, make you miserable and cause problems in your daily life so that you find it hard to carry out normal responsibilities, it's time to ask for help.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR MIND

In the last newsletter on behavioral health, we focused on things that can decrease stress and improve your behavioral health. Some suggestions that influenced both components of behavioral health, i.e., mental and physical health, centered on diet, exercise and sleep. Taking care of your mental health, or mind, is equally as crucial. It is essential that you decrease the "stress triggers" that the mind is encountering due to the COVID-19 pandemic, if you want to experience an overall improvement in mental health.

Continue your self-care strategies

You can expect your current strong feelings to fade when the pandemic is over, but stress won't disappear from your life when the health crisis of COVID-19 ends. Continue these self-care practices to take care of your mental health and increase your ability to cope with life's ongoing challenges.

Recognizing the Need for Help and Getting It

Hoping mental health problems such as anxiety or depression will go away on their own can lead to worsening symptoms. If you have concerns or if you experience worsening of mental health symptoms, ask for help when you need it, and be upfront about how you are doing. To get help you may want to:

- **Call or use social media to contact a close friend or loved one — even though it may be hard to talk about your feelings.**
- **Contact a minister, spiritual leader or someone in your faith community.**
- **Contact your employee assistance program, if your employer has one, and get counseling or ask for a referral to a mental health professional.**
- **Call your primary care provider or mental health professional to ask about appointment options to talk about your anxiety or depression and get advice and guidance. Some may provide the option of phone, video or online appointments.**
- **Contact organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) for help and guidance.**

Contact your primary care provider or a mental health professional, or call a suicide hotline.

In the U.S., call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or webchat at: **suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat**

If you are feeling suicidal or thinking of hurting yourself, seek help.