

## Post COVID-19 Mental Health

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Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization, is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

This past year has certainly redefined "normal stresses of life" for many of us. Working from home once seemed like a dream come true. But little did we imagine our homes would be revamped into simultaneous offices and classrooms, or that we would worship via Zoom and host virtual celebrations. Our shopping lists included more hand sanitizer than we thought we would ever use in a lifetime, and masks hung on wall hooks next to house and car keys.

As we learned more about the coronavirus, we were allowed to venture out with safety measures in place. Wary at first, but soon we were in stores still donning our masks, still staying as far as we could from our neighbors and still fearful of contracting COVID-19 and bringing it home to loved ones. We listened to somber reports, hoped and prayed.

Finally, there was good news. Vaccines were approved and little by little the reports about the coronavirus improved and there was an audible sigh of relief in many of our communities. But the virus had taken its toll in more ways than the number of lives lost. It shook our psyche to the point where we recoiled if someone extended a hand; became fearful to help take a grocery cart back to the store; and hesitant to eat in a restaurant. We were anxious and cautious.

There was also the reality of financial loss for many people. Businesses were closed, staff members were laid off and unemployment insurance was often not enough. In the midst of all the COVID-related trauma, there was the death of George Floyd, killed by a Minneapolis police officer, and the historic protests and riots that followed.

The accumulated stress from all of these circumstances cannot be underestimated as we examine our collective consciousness. We need to heal.

As we move into a post-COVID phase, we are both relieved and happy, but still stressed. Many organizations are trying to find a balance for their operations and their workforce. Some are phasing out telework either fully or partially..

While we are excited about getting back to the state of living that we enjoyed before the coronavirus, moving to this new sort of normalcy can bring heightened levels of anxiety and even fear. There is the stress of commuting to and from work and school with so many additional cars on the road. There is the anxiety of wondering if we will remain safe, and the uncertainty of sustainable financial securities.

This can bring mental health issues to the surface, including depression and post-traumatic stress.

We know that everyone reacts differently to traumatic situations. The emotional impact of a national state of emergency and a worldwide pandemic on a person's psyche depends on a person's experiences, their social and economic circumstances.

Change can be difficult, and it's going to take time to adapt to the next phase of post-COVID. The good news really is that "WE MADE IT!" So, worn out or not, there really are some basic tenets to overall wellness. They include a few simple ideas:

1. Recognize the things you can control and do not focus on those you cannot.
2. Stay connected to people – family and friends – and maintain healthy relationships.
3. Find time for 'self-care' – relax, exercise and eat healthier.
4. Be kind to yourself and others – remember what's important.
5. Be grateful for your health.
6. Get professional help when needed; if you are in treatment for a mental health condition or substance misuse, stay in treatment.

Like any other trauma, time will help us restore our mental wellness long after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed. The Anne Arundel County Mental Health Agency is one community resource that remains available to help individuals and families connect to needed supports and services. The Crisis Response Warmline number is 410-768-5522 and is available 24/7/365 to help.

Our community has been through a lot together, and together we will heal.

*Adrienne Mickler is a member of the Archdiocesan Mental Wellness Workgroup and a parishioner at St. Mary's in Annapolis.*

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