

A wooden rowing boat is shown from a high angle, floating on a body of water. The water is a deep teal color and reflects the sky above. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The boat is made of light-colored wood and has two oars visible. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

Mental Resiliency in Challenging Times

Session 2, day 1: COVID shutdown mental health struggles and strategies

MARK RAGINS, MD

CAMPUS PSYCHIATRIST CSULB

MARKRAGINS@GMAIL.COM

Why is this so hard mentally?

Complex, prolonged stressors:

- Initial medical fears came from our scientists and government, not our personal experiences, and was based on data, not emotions – and we've been largely isolated from the deaths since
- There has been enormous uncertainty throughout
- Acute fear turns into chronic stress – different reactions
- There have been acute economic losses – but lots of hope that they're reversible
- For most people the most impactful stressors have been the changes in daily life that impact our overall emotional health and well being – largely things we were taking for granted.

Without focus to sustain ourselves, this is likely to lead to deteriorating mental health as time goes on

1) Time feels like its flowing strangely

- Our subjective states effect how we perceive time to be flowing
- The flow of time effects our mood
- Our mindfulness effects time flow

(can be good like when we travel or are in love, or bad like when we procrastinate or get lost in video games and social media)

As a society, we've largely replaced natural rhythms with schedules to maintain reliable time flow

Scheduling strategies

- Create rhythms – daily, weekly, seasonally
- Include daily tasks (like hygiene and housecleaning)
- Include regular eating – meals (including preparation) not snacks
- Rigidly separate work/ school and play (even use different areas or furniture to create separate mind spaces)
- Give kids schedules too

2) Sleep shifting later and later

- Without external cues or schedules, most people's sleep will drift later and later
- For many people this decreases "productivity", sleeping through most of the day, which impacts self-efficacy
- It's much easier to force ourselves to wake up than to force ourselves to fall asleep

Anchor sleep with a morning alarm – and get up!

3) Physical inactivity

- Most people are less physically active sheltering at home than we were, especially people who were very active - exercising, dancing, sports
- Low physical movement leads to sluggishness and lethargy
- Modest daily exercise is an impressively effective antidepressant (with good side effects like weight loss and a healthier body)

Put ½ - 1 hour enjoyable exercise into our daily schedules

4) *Financial practicalities*

Many people have significant financial, survival needs caused by the shutdown and don't have the resources to handle it on their own.

1. It may take a great deal of effort to find help and resources and/or to consolidate losses to set yourself up to rebuild (harder with so many uncertainties)
2. Mentally, unemployment is very damaging to many people (even with some benefits) primarily due to loss of schedule and purpose.

Too many unemployed people aren't aggressive enough about preserving schedule and purpose (even if not getting paid) and end up depressed, using substances, or even suicidal.

5) Medical risks of corona virus

- Our evolution created an emotional “warning system” ill-suited to modern life or a corona virus pandemic. We’ve largely compensated by trying to think our way to avoiding risks, creating massive amounts of anxiety as a result.
- For some people, this pandemic may be the first time their warning system has been on prolonged alert, undermining their sense of security and wearing them out.
- Statistical risk analysis don’t feed into our emotional reactions; direct experiences and emotional context do.
- We vary a lot individually in how we respond to our perceptions of risk and what risks we’re willing to take
- What medical “information” and “emotions” are you consuming and how good or bad is it for you? Are you proactive about what you’re taking in, and from whom? Are you “snacking” or even “binging” all day and feel overstuffed?

Most of us perceive anxiety as a problem to be eliminated not as a useful warning system to keep us well. “Before you turn off the fire alarm make sure your house isn’t on fire.”

Health risk management strategies

- Manners and etiquette
- Preventative health interventions – vaccines, health and cancer screening, medications
- Health promoting behaviors – exercise, diet, hygiene, “safe sex”, avoiding unhealthy substances, meditation / stress management

Most of us have very poor health risk management because we're in denial about most risks - and develop lots of preventable conditions as a result. We're likely to do just as poorly with corona virus too. The goal is to attain a sense of security while being aware of and protecting ourselves from the very real risks.

6) *Decreased personal contact and connections*

Our relationships are crucial to our mental health (especially if we're extroverted, but even if we're introverted):

- Harvard Study of Adult Development, begun in 1939 and ongoing, reported in 2018 that our relationships and our happiness with them are the most important health and mental health predictors
- “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” by Robert Putnam in 2000 analyzes the decrease in “social capital” and its impact in our society
- “iGen” by Jean Twenge in 2018 promotes the thesis that high usages of social media instead of personal relationships leads to depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Brene Brown's 2010 TED talk “The power of vulnerability” and numerous books talks about how vulnerability is a key element to relationships and intimacy.

Virtual relationships strategies

We're seeing an amazing diversity and creativity of uses of media and virtual connections to respond to our profound awareness of relationship deprivation.

- Is there mutuality, caring, trust, vulnerability?
- Does it build connectedness and social capital?
- Is it enjoyable and satisfying?
- Is it engaging and mindful?

Lots of social media is like fast food – it looks like it's a relationship but it's actually toxic, addictive, and not nurturing, leaving our connectedness "overweight and undernourished".

7) Depleted pleasure centers

We have pleasure centers in the most primitive layers of our brains that tell us if we're OK or not in a very primal way. If it thinks we're "not OK" it feeds into emotions like hungry, bored, anxious, restless, irritable, empty, unloved, insecure, and depressed.

- Normal life has a lot of stimulation naturally, especially when we're having fun, but we have to be "in the moment" to take them in. Distraction and "killing time" usually don't recharge us, instead leaving us drained and unsatisfied.
- People have discovered and regularly use lots of "artificial" pleasure center stimulators to artificially maintain our moods (including alcohol, marijuana, other drugs, caffeine, nicotine, dark chocolate, sugar, carbs, sex, love, exercise, risk taking, meditation, prayer, gratitude, creativity, and nature.)

We're likely to be getting less natural and artificial stimulation during the shutdown and feel poorly as a result

Pleasure center stimulation strategies

- Every artificial stimulator has side effects, and the quality of our health and mental health depend a lot on which ones we're using regularly and how many side effects we're experiencing.
- This may be a good time to re-evaluate what you're using, how much you're using, and how dependent you are on it.
- Even the less dangerous choices can become our entire focus edging out normal life (whether its craving and addiction, or a soldier who can't stay home bored, or someone who spends their lives celibate meditating in a cave).