

Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19

With ongoing concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, more people are seeking mental, emotional and behavioral health resources. The virus outbreak and halt in normal activities has resulted in increased financial stressors and lack of social interaction, which can lead to isolation and loneliness.

Care providers at Peninsula, a division of Parkwest Medical Center, encourage people to be mindful that mental health issues may arise in the form of depression and anxiety, and can lead to problems such as increased alcohol and drug use. Many people may also experience interrupted sleep patterns and may exercise less frequently. Contact your doctor if you notice these feelings or patterns in your life.

“Peninsula is integral to the community because it is one of the few psychiatric hospitals in the Knoxville area, and one of only three hospitals that provides inpatient services to the uninsured,” says Liz Clary, BSN, RN, MHA, vice president of behavioral health. In addition to inpatient services, Peninsula also has four outpatient clinics serving children, teens and adults.



While each of us faces challenges and hard times, it's rare for the entire nation to experience negative stress all at once. Times like these can induce stress, anger, depression and anxiety at home.

Virtual Visits

Mark Potts, director of outpatient clinical services for Peninsula, reports that remote access is an important and growing

way to access behavioral services. “Peninsula outpatient centers transitioned 90 percent of our services to remote access via electronic media al-

most overnight,” he reports. “The rapid change followed the ‘Safer at Home’ mandates by local and state agencies, and our own desire to keep our

patients and staff safe.”

Peninsula serves more than 10,000 patients, so remote access is the only way for counselors and staff members to meet

social distancing guidelines. Potts says that after working through initial transition processes, care providers have adapted to providing remote services in an impressive manner.

“Understanding the need to strive for excellence in this new way of reaching patients, the team has achieved very positive results. Our patients have been very appreciative of our efforts to continue their care in a manner that is safe and often more convenient for them,” he says. “Many lessons about the importance of reaching out to patients are helping us create a ‘new normal’ that will help us improve our services even after the pandemic passes.”

A Phone Call Away

Anyone needing mental health services can reach out by phone for help. In case of imminent danger of harm or a life-threatening emergency, 911 is the best option. If an individual is facing a mental health crisis, the Mobile Crisis Response Team can be reached by calling (865) 539-2409. For accessing other types of mental health services in a timely manner, Peninsula has one number for all services: (865) 970-9800.

Effects of Stress

When life concerns become overwhelming and things are “out of balance,” emotional stress can lead to:

- High blood pressure
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Physical illness
- Anxiety
- Drug or alcohol abuse

Take note of any unhealthy habits or thought patterns that have begun to take root in your family. Make a decision to address them before they get out of hand.

Managing Stress in a Pandemic

Patrick Jensen, MD, board-certified psychiatrist with Peninsula, offers some insight and advice to help keep emotions and mental health intact.

“The importance of focusing on mental health cannot be overstated,” says Dr. Jensen. “If families begin to fracture in the midst of this pandemic, society also will experience the rippling effects.”

According to Dr. Jensen, we are made for community. “Mental health necessitates healthy relationships. These relationships can include one’s relationship with one’s own self-image, with others, and with God.”

“If mental health begins to deteriorate, do not hesitate to consult with a mental health provider for possible treatment.” Dr. Jensen emphasizes. “Good sleep, hygiene, and nutrition are also helpful deterrents to debilitating anxiety. Connect with those you love, as isolation has the possibility of exacerbating mental illness.”

Helping Children Cope

To help children cope



Patrick Jensen, MD

with stress, Dr. Jensen says, “Listen, listen, listen. The more you listen to your child, the more they trust that you will not shut down their honest expressions. Try to maintain routines as much as possible. Children may seem to resist boundaries and routines, but at the same time, they thrive with them.”

One boundary to set for youths is limiting screen time. Dr. Jensen suggests, “Exercise and play outside. If there are multiple children in the home, have them engage in cooperative play like four-square, basketball, or other team sports.” He



suggests also limiting the temptation to indulge in too many sweets.

“Children are watching how their parents react to stress and will likely model their parents’ behavior,” notes Dr. Jensen.

Reducing Anxiety

“Signs of anxiety can appear in various ways,” he says. “Signals can include internal tension such as nervousness, increased heart rate, sweating, headaches, nausea and neck tension. Worry can cause

us to ruminate [constantly think deeply or worry about a topic], disrupting sleep and leaving us fatigued.” Dr. Jensen encourages adults to monitor these feelings and signals so they can be addressed.

To reduce stress in your family, “work from the outside in.” Focus on the basics of physical health. These tips are proven mood boosters:

- Healthy diet
- Exercise
- A regular schedule
- Adequate sleep, going to bed and waking up at the same time each day
- Taking prescribed medications for mental and physical health

When you’re ready to go deeper:

- Talk about stressful situations with someone you trust.
- Use relaxation techniques. Meditate, pray or go for a walk.
- Remind yourself that your current situation is temporary.
- If anxiety and depression become overwhelming, talk to your doctor about a referral to someone who can help.

Most of all, remember that you are not alone. For more information and resources, visit peninsulabehavioralhealth.org or call (865) 970-9800.

Peninsula offers both inpatient and outpatient mental health services for children, adolescents and adults. The hospital is located in Blount County, with outpatient centers in Knox, Blount, Loudon and Sevier Counties. Additionally, Peninsula offers care specifically designed for seniors with co-existing psychiatric and medical conditions at the Senior Behavioral Center located at Parkwest Medical Center. Peninsula is truly committed to improving the health of the people and communities it serves.

Inpatient Services

Peninsula Hospital, a 155-bed treatment center, provides acute care inpatient mental health services for people of all ages. A team approach using psychiatrists, nurses, counselors and discharge planners ensures individualized treatment plans and interventions for people in crisis.

Outpatient Services

Peninsula’s outpatient services provides a range of mental health services for children (ages 4 and

older), adolescents and adults including:

- Care Coordination
- Individual, family and group therapy
- Outpatient pharmacy for patients
- Peer support services and support groups
- Psychiatric evaluation & medication management
- Recovery Education Center (Psychosocial Rehabilitation Programs)
- Substance abuse services

Typical or Troubled?

Peninsula Outpatient Services can help your child or teenager deal with difficult issues so that family and school life are smoother. Peninsula Outpatient Centers are conveniently located in Blount, Knox, Loudon and Sevier counties. Call (865) 970-9800 or visit peninsulabehavioralhealth.org to learn more.

