

COVID-19 isolation contributes to mental health issues for men and boys

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COVID-19 isolation contributes to mental health issues for men and boys

By Robin Mather
For Men's Health Network

COVID-19's isolation may be necessary for physical health, but it's causing a torrent of mental health problems for boys and young men that are worsening as the pandemic drags on. Family members, friends and work colleagues can play an important part in monitoring the mental health of the men and boys they care about.

The Centers for Disease Control conducted a survey in June 2020 that showed more than 40 percent of respondents reporting at least once adverse mental or behavioral health affect, including anxiety, depression, and increased substance abuse to cope with stress or emotions related to COVID-19. You can read the results in full by going to <https://bit.ly/2P4XxaP>

More than a quarter of young adult respondents aged 18 to 24 years old reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the preceding month. Thoughts of committing suicide was also high for Hispanic respondents (18.6 percent) and Black respondents (15.1 percent). Thoughts of suicide were higher among males than among females, the CDC said.

Young adults also reported the highest rates of anxiety and depression – nearly 63 percent reported one or both. Nearly a quarter said they had started or increased substance abuse to cope with pandemic-related stress and emotion.

“Community-level intervention and prevention efforts, including health communication strategies, designed to reach these groups could help address various mental health conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic,” the CDC said when it released the report.

Dr. Betty Lai is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Boston College. She studies mental health in the aftermath of disasters, whether they’re a weather event like Hurricane Katrina or a man-made event such as the Boston Marathon bombing.

The current pandemic, she said in an interview published in the New York Times, is “a breeding ground for mental health disaster,” with unprecedented levels of risk factors. “This exposure period is prolonged, longer than anything we’ve seen before,” she said. Social isolation for young people who would otherwise be in school or college amplifies their mental health risk, she said.

Moreover, members of young men’s usual support systems – which may include adults – are often overwhelmed themselves. The pandemic is something that none of us have faced before.

Men’s Health Network (MHN) is a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit that advocates for men and boys on a variety of issues. In 2019, MHN worked with the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) to stage a conference called “Behavioral Aspects of Anxiety and Depression in the American Male.” You can read the full report on the conference at <https://tinyurl.com/3ra8kt59>.

The conference gathered community leaders, policymakers, thought leaders, men’s health activists, academic researchers, clinicians, and other stakeholders.

“Unlike most physical health disorders, mental health disorders are frequently stigmatized. People may be labeled crazy, leading to persons being ostracized, ashamed, and reluctant to seek help,” said Jean Bonhomme, M.D., who served as the project’s principal. Bonhomme is also the founder of the National Black Men’s Health Network. “For men and boys, these problems can be amplified by cultural expectations that men be stoic,” Bonhomme said. “Men are told they are not supposed to cry or show their emotions outwardly, that they are supposed to be self-reliant, to not ask for help, and that any illness, mental or physical, is a sign of weakness and a source of personal shame.”

The panel discussed next steps to address mental and behavioral health for men and boys. These included:

- Systematic and extensive review of appropriateness of screening tools
- Reevaluation of guidelines for screening men and boys across their lifetimes

- Development and adoption of professional degree programs and postgraduate programs to address men's mental and behavioral health
- Better define the role of telemedicine and telehealth technologies' ability to provide screening, ongoing care, and patient and community support in addressing behavioral health issues
- Explore the link between signs and symptoms of behavioral health in boys and men and interactions with the criminal justice system

While these steps are important, more immediate action is necessary also.

Parents — or friends or family members or coworkers — who are worried about young adults or adolescents should check in on them and ask how they're doing. They should not worry that asking about depression, mental health or suicide will create or exacerbate the problem. Among the signs that isolation is affecting mental health are feelings of depression and anxiety, aggressive behavior, passivity, poor sleep, and poor self-care or self-neglect. The behavioral symptoms may be easier to recognize than the emotional symptoms.

People aged 18–49 years old may struggle to focus, or they may eat more frequently. Children and young adolescents may experience more cognitive, behavioral, and emotional difficulties. If you know someone at immediate risk of self-harm, suicide, or hurting another person:

- Ask the tough question: "Are you considering suicide?"
- Listen to the person without judgment.
- Call 911 or the local emergency number, or text TALK to 741741 to communicate with a trained crisis counselor.
- Stay with the person until professional help arrives.
- Try to remove any weapons, medications, or other potentially harmful objects.

If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, a prevention hotline can help. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours per day at 800-273-8255. During a crisis, people who are hard of hearing can call 800-799-4889.

Men's Health Network

Men's Health Network (MHN) is an international non-profit organization whose mission is to reach men, boys, and their families where they live, work, play, and pray with health awareness messages and tools, screening programs, educational materials, advocacy opportunities, and patient navigation. Learn more about MHN at www.menshealthnetwork.org and follow them on Twitter @MensHlthNetwork and Facebook at www.facebook.com/menshealthnetwork. Consider donating to MHN at www.menshealthnetwork.org/donate.

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