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Uncertainty calls for life-giving activities, empathy, and grace

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by Julie A. Downey

***Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19** is a series of interviews with therapists, counselors, and other mind-body professionals who share CORE's holistic approach to wellness. We gather their insights about the various struggles people face during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as methods that can promote healing. We also capture their observations of sparks of light, as well as visions for ways of living that we may adopt moving forward to improve our collective wellbeing.*

Jennifer Stenzel, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) talked with me about her current work with women and families, although she has worked with the general population for 22 years. She is the owner of [Jennifer Stenzel Clinical Associates, Ltd.](#), located in the western suburbs of Chicago. Spanish speaking adolescents and their parents also receive counseling at the clinic, thanks to her bilingual associate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has rattled our lives in ways that have caused a great deal of stress for most people. How has this universal feeling of unrest affected your clients?

I have seen two trends. First, everyone on my caseload is experiencing elevated anxiety, regardless of what initially prompted them to seek counseling. This is true for even those not previously diagnosed with anxiety, due to the uncertainty of these times.

The second trend is that clients who met all their treatment goals months or years ago are reaching out. They tell me they recognize it would be healthy to have check-in sessions as a result of how they're feeling. They may notice aspects of these wild times, such as sheltering in place with people they love making them feel stressed out. Fortunately, they are self-aware enough to realize they would benefit from the added support.

I believe in helping people operate on higher levels, which means not ending treatment when they're out of crisis mode. This mindset lets clients know there's no shame in returning for a check-up.

Yes, mental health requires maintenance! Regarding the first trend that you mentioned, what are the sources of anxiety for most people right now?

Most of the anxiety stems from uncertainty. Some of the common questions: When is the virus going away? When are we going to be able to function the way we did before? When is the economy going to rebound? Am I going to lose my job? When will I get to go back to my job?

You mentioned that some people ask for support as a result of spending more time with loved ones than usual. How is this playing out for your clients?

I see a lot of moms who report feeling two opposite things. One, they want to cherish this time with their kids, especially if they have teens or college students who are usually off and about. They are excited about what feels like bonus time.

At the same time, these very grateful parents are going crazy. And then they feel guilty about going crazy! And I say, "Are you kidding? We're all sheltering here! And then it snowed last week and you can't even get outside much!"

And a month ago there were mosquitos! My worst enemy. I was so mad. Like, give us a break, universe! What do you tell moms experiencing these mixed feelings?

I remind them that #1, they're human. And because of that, their emotions are normal. They're not right or wrong. What's healthy or unhealthy is the way we handle them. I often use the phrase, "Give yourself grace." When you do this, you cut yourself a break. Then you can make a plan to respond to the discomfort.

I think this is an act of self-care. And it's more important to make self-care a priority now more than ever. We can adapt the ways we reduce stress. Even if you can't go to the gym, you can go for a walk.

"Give yourself grace. When you do this, you cut yourself a break. Then you can make a plan to respond to the discomfort."

– Jennifer Stenzel

What about social connections right now?

Some people are getting their social fix via Zoom coffee time or cocktail hours. I think that's great. However, for women who are juggling family and working virtually, these gatherings are not relaxing. After eight hours of working on a computer, including video conferences, they can't look at a screen any longer and skip the virtual hangouts. I am one of those people!

And I agree with clients who say they miss catching up with friends, but they don't have the energy. You can only do so much online stuff in a day.

Also, essential workers or those who are onscreen all day with coworkers or helping their kids with e-learning don't feel as isolated as those who have little contact with others. This virtual social time may be the only way for them to feel connected to people.

How has switching to video chat and telephone appointments affected your engagement with clients?

I've been pleasantly surprised about how grateful I've been to have the platform to do tele-med. Without this resource, everyone would be without support. And a bonus is that I get a window into my clients' world. Like with my adolescents—they'll show me their collections or where they study. It's building a stronger therapeutic alliance in a way you just don't get when you're at the office.

The dichotomy is this—yes, accessing services has never been easier, but when someone is really hurting, it's much more comforting to have the physical presence of someone live, next to you. In one case, an adolescent was at a serious level of crisis and it was time to tell their mom and go to the ER. It is not ideal to handle a situation with this degree of severity through a screen. However, maybe some clients who were too depressed to get to the office are now able to receive care virtually.

We are all making it work right now to deliver the best care that we can. Fortunately, in this life-or-death situation, technology made it possible to coordinate care between counselor, doctor, parent, client, and hospital, using phone, text, and live video.

Can you talk a little more about self-care?

Even if it's not the sunniest day, I'm all about getting significant time outside, in any capacity. We need the fresh air, and when the natural sunlight rays enter through our iris, it balances serotonin.

Also, I have my clients who work from home do a ritual at the end of the workday to separate the components of their lives. It can be as simple as this: Shut down computer. Wash hands. Light a candle. If you do something significant each day, the mind and body do a shift to indicate that the workday is over, and the rest of the day—personal time with friends and family—is beginning. It's so healthy.

And I encourage clients to allow themselves to indulge in healthy pleasures that make them feel comforted, like a warm bath or watching a movie with their favorite blanket around them. We may do some of these things instinctively in the winter, but even as the weather warms up, they're still very important ways to relax.

And there's also something important about doing self-care for your body each week—getting dressed in normal clothes, washing your hair—something so we feel in touch with our old routine and break the monotony. Of course, it's okay to have those baseball hat head, comfy sweatshirt days, too!

The key to self-care is embracing the things that make us feel calm and comforted. We each need to find what brings us back the balance of normalcy. Find activities that are life-giving. Never cave to pressure to attend an online concert, dye your hair, or embark on a rigorous fitness challenge if it doesn't personally give you life.

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Those are beautiful guidelines for self-care. What ways do you see people living now that are healthier than before? What can we learn?

I do think since people have more time, they are eating better, and are more conscious of balancing comfort food and healthy eating. No one wants to put on that COVID 15 or 20 pounds! And people are walking more. They're exercising more purposefully. Since the rat race has shut down, they're being more mindful.

People are also much more hesitant to do more grocery runs. We are learning to make do with we have—and not consuming in that materialistic, consumerist kind of way that we were so used to before.

I am seeing gratefulness among my clientele. While there's so much fear in the uncertainty, they still have a job, a roof over their head, and food in their pantry. With this recession, the economy hasn't been this bad since the Great Depression, so people aren't taking meeting their basic needs for granted anymore.

And at the end of each session, I ask my clients to think of some of the benefits of this new way of life. I ask them to think about how it has affected them personally, their family life, and community. And I ask them to think about the bigger picture—how has staying home been beneficial to the planet, and to humankind?

To be clear, I meet my clients where they are in a given moment. That means recognizing that some people are going through a really rough time. However, no matter how hard the day—and we all have our really low times dealing with COVID—before our session is over, I always bring it around to end on a positive note.

After this discussion, I see that people go from so stressed and bummed out to thinking, okay, I have this back in perspective. They see that good things are happening.

I have the luxury of telling my clients to look at the positive perspective, though. It would be very insensitive of me to say that to people who don't have food or a home.

My clients are typically financially secure, so they are not worried about their next meal. If my practice were in an impoverished area, we would be talking about survival skills. There are people who are starving, losing jobs, without childcare, and without adequate healthcare. I read a great article that challenged the idea that we're all in this together. It pointed out how the pandemic is different for everyone. Some people are drowning. Others of us are just splashing. It is important that we acknowledge our privilege.

What can we do to support each other right now?

We can follow some principles to be good citizens. Check on neighbors and friends via text or phone. Ask if there is something specific that they need.

[Think of opportunities to help out.](#) Donate to a food pantry. Put together bags with items like cash, a snack, and soap. Keep them in your car in case you cross paths with a homeless person in need.

And give everyone grace—including yourself. We all have bad days, good days, and resilient days. If someone feels negative or a child is acting out, choose empathy.

Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

I'd just like to plug the fact that there's no shame in reaching out for help.

[Jennifer Stenzel Clinical Associates, Ltd.](#)

jennifer@jenniferstenzelclinical.com

630.347.7737

Per the National Institute of Mental Health, "If you, or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression, or anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or others, the following resources are available."

[Disaster Stress Helpline](#)

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)

[Crisis Text Line](#)

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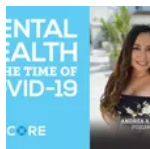
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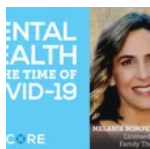
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