



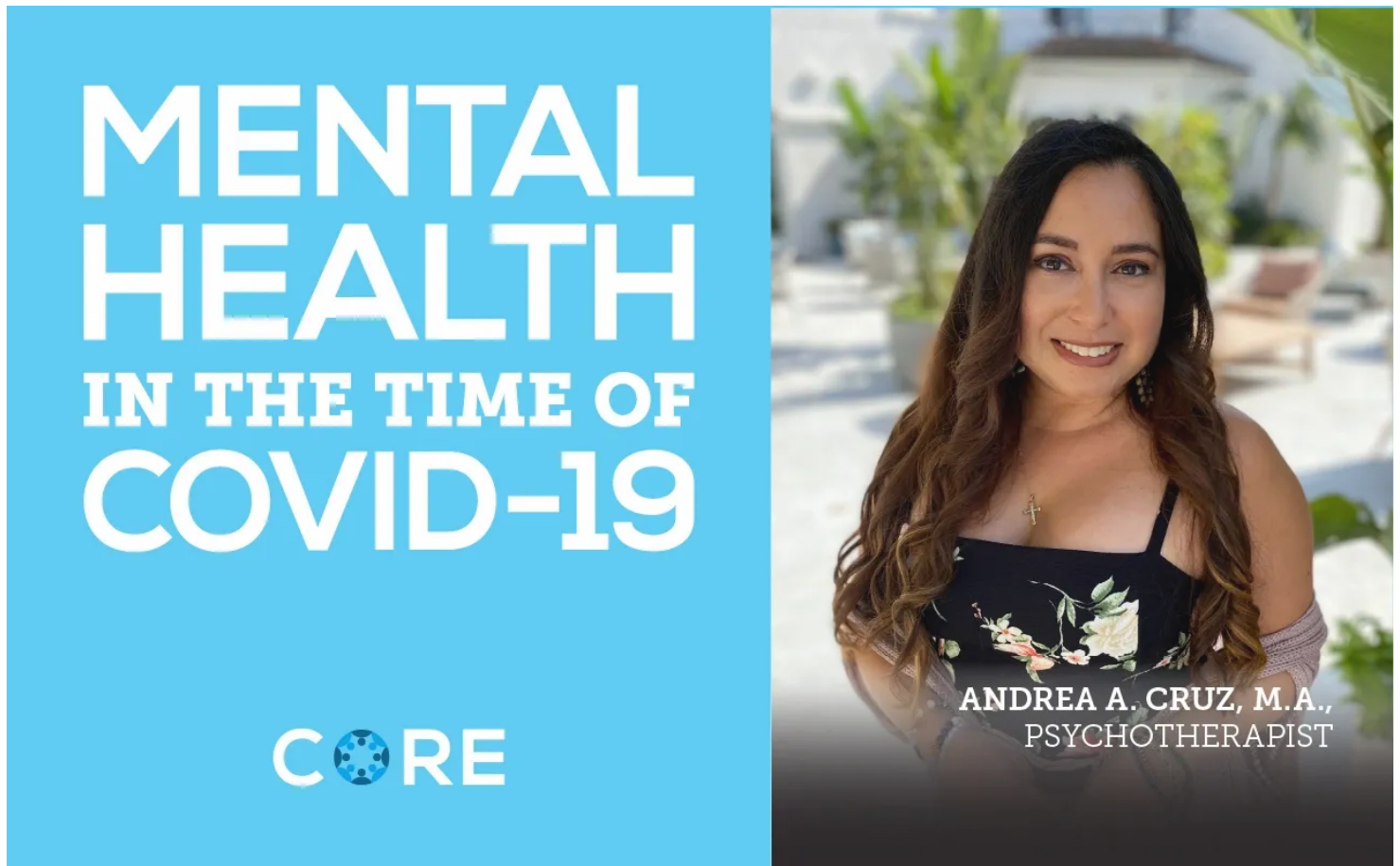
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Heart-centered grounding can bring change to self and culture.

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by Julie A. Downey

Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19 is a CORE blog series featuring interviews with therapists, counselors, and other mind-body professionals. We are gathering insights to find out how people are responding to the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, and to learn methods to promote healing. We are also capturing observations of sparks of light, as well as visions for ways of living to adopt moving forward to improve our collective wellbeing.

Andrea A. Cruz, MA, is a licensed psychotherapist based in Long Beach, California. She treats individuals, families, and couples using humanistic-existential, holistic, and cognitive-behavioral modalities along with psycho-social-spiritual techniques. She founded a [private therapy practice](#), and [Mind Body Heart Soul](#), through which she hosts retreats to realign emotional, psychological, and spiritual energies. Andrea is also a trauma therapist at a residential addictions treatment facility for women and men.

It has been quite a year for mental health. Let's start by talking about the pandemic. How have your clients responded to the lifestyle changes required of social distancing?

Many people feel isolated. This is understandable. I tell them to remember how connected we are as humans. Even if we are not seeing each other in person, we are lucky that today it's easy to make a phone call or jump on a video chat. I encourage my clients to connect with their "quarenteam" in order to re-build community and a sense of belonging throughout this isolation.

In addition to being accustomed to regular social interaction, we are used to being free to leave the house and go wherever we want. Since safety measures have challenged the way we move about, though, many people feel trapped. Others struggle with the restrictions because not being busy as usual gives them discomfort.

"Mother Earth is urging us to spend time taking deep breaths, meditating more, and connecting with her. Society may stop spinning in its usual way, but as long as we arise with the sun every morning and wind down with the moon beaming its light on us, rest assured, it's not the end of the world yet."

Even as businesses and public spaces are opening up, we will need to be selective about the places we go and the ways we interact. How can we stay connected to one another in the many months ahead?

While it is not safe to freely socialize with whomever and wherever, it is a good time to deepen relationships with those on your quarantine team. If you're not sure who this should include, select people who are in your corner—who will be there for you in some emotional or spiritual way. Focus energy on the people you love.

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Do you find that people are open to this shift in mindset?

Because people are staying home, without access to regular escapes like going to work and other distractions, they have been forced to stand still and sit in their truths. Many people are leaning into this and really facing themselves.

As a result of this reflection, they are accessing root issues and trauma. Challenges that they had previously put aside have become a lot louder. Patterns with significant others can arise more, too.

In the pre-COVID times, many folks would have been too busy to do this work. The forced slow-down can be a beautiful thing!

Absolutely. I'm getting a lot more interest lately in deeper, metaphysical work, too. In addition to traditional therapy, I offer [synchronicity sessions](#). This is based on phenomenology, which explores how connected we are to unexplained occurrences. Lately, I have seen a rise in the desire to seek and read signs. This divination tool can be used to find messages from angels and ancestors.

In combination with the therapy, it's like having a compass to guide clients through their unconscious waters. It can be enlightening.

The effects of the pandemic on mental health are now entwined with the emotions surrounding the uprisings calling to reform the racist systems in the United States. The cruel murder of George Floyd was the catalyst to reignite the Black Lives Matter movement, although one of far too many deaths at the hands of law enforcement. During this heated time in which social justice issues permeate our culture, how do you respond to clients?

"Healing requires us to *let people have a voice.*"

Healing requires us to let people have a voice. And Black people have a long history of suffering. Again and again and again. In this case, a man was unjustly killed. And the documentation of his death was horrible to witness—for anyone, but in particular, for Black folks. This imagery and the narrative surrounding it reopens trauma wounds.

In my role as a therapist, it is important to hold space. I have to recognize that people have cultural biases. Some people fall in the spectrum of anti-compassionate, and anti-sympathetic. A good therapist responds with compassion and discernment of these highly stressful situations and a clients perspective in order to explore cultural bias. It is important to be heard without judgement. It's my job to allow them to present and process their reality.

As a humanist-existentialist, I am always on the client's side. Empathy is important. We must have compassion for each other. If the client is racist, it is my job to find out where that came from. I cannot condemn, only help them unpack trauma or cultural biases.

And when working with an individual who has experienced trauma, it's not uncommon for defense mechanisms to occur. This is a natural way to protect their psyche from any further pain. This separates the heart's ability to stay open, and we then disconnect from our natural state of being and sense of peace. For those willing to go through the uncomfortable process and work through those layers of the fragmented psyche, people find they truly reconnect to their hearts.

What can you tell people who are interested in growth and learning how to be better allies?

*"We should strive to be **rays of humanity embracing each other with cultural humility**. If you're not familiar with the construct, in practice, it means taking a genuine interest in learning more about other cultures and **doing so with consideration and respect**. It also requires **stepping back** and not imposing one's own ideas or assuming superiority."*

First, really think about what is it like to be considered a minority or different—and stay heart centered during this personal change. And pay attention to your own judgements of others and yourself. This is crucial in order to truly move forward.

One way to develop an appreciation for others is to make new friends from different backgrounds. We should strive to be rays of humanity embracing each other with cultural humility. If you're not familiar with this construct, in practice, it means taking a genuine interest in learning more about

other cultures and doing so with consideration and respect. It also requires stepping back and not imposing one's own ideas or assuming superiority.

How can we interact with people from different cultures while maintaining a social distance?

Think of people you already know who have different cultural backgrounds than you. Check in on them. Ask how they are feeling about the current social climate. It's important to truly listen and validate their emotional experience. Remember a key aspect of cultural humility is letting go of self-importance, and not expecting them to listen to your perspective.

How can people thrive amidst chaos?

"We need to focus on **balance**, honor our own **pace**, and take advantage of the downtime as an opportunity to **grow**."

We need to get grounded. Right now, there are so many things that can throw us off our center. The media, coronavirus, politics, job loss, racial power struggles, physical separation, and everyday struggles—it is very important that we feel safe in our own skin. We need to focus on balance, honor our own pace, and take advantage of the downtime as an opportunity to grow. To feel at peace with the world around us, it is important to incorporate relaxation and nature into our lives.

Can you tell us about a lesson you discovered through nature?

Blue heron teaches us to learn patience and observation and to be ready for the right moment to strike in our current ever-changing world. His very cautious glare is a reminder to stay calm, cool, and collected until it is time to act.

Surfers are in tune with the spirit of blue heron. They watch the waves and can either let one pass them by or build up the courage to paddle hard enough and with enough strength to grab that wave and take it all the way in to the shore.

You can connect with blue heron by tapping into your awareness, trusting your intuition, and honoring the self. In situations in which you have to evaluate life choices, pay attention to what spirit has in store for you. You'll then be able to make a discerning judgment call, based on what best suits you and your needs right now.

Can you share any strategies for handling the feeling that it is all out of our control?

We are responsible for our life path, whether or not our environment is chaotic. We are responsible for circumstances that arise. We're also responsible for what we're going to do next. Some of the things that we face may be unpredictable, and others are out of our control. Our perceptions and how we choose to deal with the challenges influence our direction and movement.

The ability to recognize that we have the power to create a lifestyle that we choose takes artistry. If we use our imagination, we can propel ourselves to move ahead into a different, desirable light. Tapping into that sense of creativity is the work. We can do this by sitting still, removing blame, allowing the self to journey, and changing the world around us. This is self-actualization. If you have the ability to do that, you can move mountains.

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