

Blue Zones

“The ingredients of health and long life, and great temperance, open air, easy labor, and little care.” Philip Sidney



Now is more important than ever to take stock of how we are doing emotionally and address the feelings of fear, anxiety, and never-ending stress that we might be experiencing. GETTY IMAGES

COVID-19 is not just a physical illness

Sebastien Saitta
Blue Zones Project-Southwest Florida

Keep 6 feet away. Wash your hands. Wear a mask. These and other protective messages have been ingrained in our minds throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

While they are instrumental in keeping us physically healthy and helping to slow the spread of the virus, the messages we hear and need are missing one important aspect of our well-being during this time: our mental health.

Now is more important than ever to take stock of how we are doing emotionally and address the feelings of fear, anxiety, and never-ending stress that we might be experiencing. In fact, a recent report from San Diego State and Florida State University indicated that 70% of Americans experienced moderate to severe mental distress last month. That is triple the rate reported the same month in 2018.

“Levels of anxiety and depression are increasing as Americans are socially isolated, remain worried about their family and their health associated with COVID, fear the unknown, and experience great economic challenges associated with job loss,” says Scott Burgess, president & CEO of David Lawrence Centers for Behavioral Health.

“Most experts believe mental health needs are the “second wave” and stand as our next greatest challenge to address in America.”

While vaccines and treatments for COVID-19 remain at the forefront in battling the virus, Scott Burgess fears the consequences of mental health taking a back seat for too long. He cautions that nationally, and in many states, this vital care has been dramatically under invested in, and that we are seeing the negative impacts of that in suicide rates that are double the

homicide rates in America.

“Now is the time for us to stand up for additional resources and investments in mental health care to ensure the health, well-being and safety for all those in need in our communities,” says Scott.

David Lawrence Centers (DLC) for Behavioral Health, a Blue Zones Project partner and certified worksite has created numerous opportunities to address the ever-rising need for mental health services in our community. They have also adapted to support those needs during this time with their 24/7 Virtual Care Center.

“We have created a virtual care platform to provide counseling, psychiatry and support services on-line, to aid with access, convenience and social distancing safety,” says Scott. He expects that this resource will be utilized more frequently as people are looking for a safe, more physically-distanced and convenient online method to deal with their stress and anxiety.

Identifying and implementing mental health protection strategies during this time is a powerful tool in fending off the psychological effects created by the pandemic. This can include incorporating Blue Zones Power 9 principles like Downshifting and Moving Naturally.

Suzanne Hiltz, a recent graduate from the University of Dayton, reviewed research on the impact physical activity can have on mental health, specifically depressive symptoms in seniors. She found that an hour of exercise twice a week is optimal, and benefits occur from both aerobic exercise and strength training. Also, group exercise further helps improve mental health status.

Scott notes that offering mental health strategies and resources is just one part in rising up to the challenge.

“We must also continue to increase

awareness and break down the stigma associated with seeking and attaining mental health care,” he says. “Sadly, research demonstrates that the majority of people who suffer with a mental health challenge do not seek treatment.

“There should be no shame, embarrassment or guilt in reaching out for support, just as we do not feel these feelings when seeking out treatment for any other medical challenge.”

He adds that when treated, recovery is the expectation not the exception. “This care is literally life-changing and life-saving.”

Online Power Nine activity of the week

Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida wants to know how you are living the Power 9, a set of shared principles followed by the longest-lived people.

Each week, we will have a specific Power 9 activity for you to try and share with us.

This week’s Power 9 activity is Family First.

With social distancing, keeping close to your family and friends has become more difficult. We all know how important it is for our well-being to continue connecting with them.

Share how you have continued to connect with your family whether it be through video conferencing, social media, or some other creative way. How has it made you feel? You can share with us on Facebook and tag us at @BlueZonesProjectSouthwestFlorida, or email directly to bluezones-projectsfwfl@sharecare.com.

Share your story by Sunday, May 24, to be entered into a prize drawing for Dan Buettner’s book, “The Blue Zones of Happiness