

BLUE ZONES

“To ensure good health: eat lightly, breathe deeply, live moderately, cultivate cheerfulness, and maintain an interest in life.” – William Londen

It's OK not to be OK: Where to find mental health support in the New Year



While looking after our physical health can be beneficial in bouncing back after an imperfect year, it is important to also take stock of our mental health and seek help when needed. GETTY IMAGES

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As we bid farewell to a challenging 2020, many will vow to get more exercise, eat healthier, and lose weight.

While looking after our physical health can be beneficial in bouncing back after an imperfect year, it is important to also take stock of our mental health and seek help when needed.

According to new findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than two in five U.S. residents report struggling with mental or behavioral health issues associated with the coronavirus disease pandemic, including anxiety, depression, increased substance use, and suicidal thoughts. Experiencing the holidays away from family and friends due to social distancing measures has only amplified this for so many.

“Each of us needs to understand, and convey, that it is ‘okay to not be OK,’” says Scott Burgess, chief executive officer of David Lawrence Centers for Behavioral Health (DLC).

“These challenges and struggles are real and these psychological tolls are, naturally, going to impact individuals, families and communities if not addressed.”

Organizations like Collier Coalition for Healthy Minds and DLC continue to answer the need for mental health support services in a time when it is needed more than ever.

“Some may have concerns about seeking care during COVID, due to worries about increased exposure risk,” says Burgess. “That is why DLC has opened its Virtual Care Center where individuals can obtain all the services virtually.”

With the Virtual Care Center, everything from registering as a new client to receiving counseling, nursing or doctor service sup-

port, can be obtained in the comfort of one's home, virtually via computer or cell phone.

Collier Coalition for Healthy Minds is a community response to the mental health and addiction crisis. Comprised of dedicated volunteers and community partners, the Coalition's goal is to raise awareness about the local and national crisis and how our community is working together to save lives.

They offer a series of educational opportunities so that community members can learn how to be part of the solution to the mental health and substance abuse crisis. Priorities include:

1. Building and operating a central receiving facility/system to serve persons experiencing an acute mental health or substance use crisis;
2. Increasing housing and supportive services for persons with serious mental illness and/or substance dependence;
3. Establishing a mental health and substance use disorder data collaborative for data sharing, collection and outcomes reporting;
4. Increasing the capacity and effectiveness of justice system response for persons experiencing serious mental illness and/or substance use disorders;
5. Revising and implementing non-emergency Baker Act and Marchman Act transportation plans, and;
6. Improving community prevention, advocacy, and education related to mental health and substance use disorders.

“Collier Coalition for Healthy Minds is trying to raise awareness and end the stigma regarding seeking support; no one should feel shame or guilt to ask for support,” says Burgess.

“Our message is simple, ‘You are so important, we care, we don't want you to be suffering, family, friends and professionals

want to provide support and assistance so you can thrive again.’”

As we continue to struggle with the stress of the pandemic this year, it's important to recognize when loved ones need help and offer help. Some of the signs that a loved one may be struggling include isolating behaviors, withdrawal from activities, or a sad and anxious mood that persists. Also look out for worrisome behaviors like drinking excessively, using substances, ignoring commitments and going off of medications.

Strategies for helping others include:

- Listen and provide encouragement.
- Offer support, listen and just be present with your loved one. Don't feel compelled to say the right thing to bring your loved one out of their funk.
- Offer to schedule a therapy session.
- Offer to do something active and distracting with your loved one.
- Help with some of the tasks and chores that may have been neglected.
- Provide positive reinforcement when you notice any improvement.
- If your loved one begins to talk about feeling helpless and hopeless, call a mental health professional. These are indicators of more severe depression and should be addressed right away.

To access the Virtual Care Center or for more information on Collier Coalition for Healthy Minds, visit DavidLawrenceCenter.org.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida's well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.