How to combat COVID-19’s disparate mental health impact

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More than 90% of the United States population is under a stay-at-home order designed to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2. The impact that COVID-19 is having on American society is well documented, from the more than 50,000 deaths caused by the virus to the more than 26 million people who filed for unemployment in the past five weeks.

COVID-19 is also having an enormous mental impact on individuals, particularly those encumbered by social factors that impede high-quality health outcomes. Psychiatrist Frank A. Clark, MD, Young Physicians Section Representative on the Minority Affairs Section Governing Council, joined AMA Director of Health Equity Policy and Advocacy Mia Keeys, MA, on Friday for a webinar about Mental Health and COVID-19.

The event was hosted by the National Minority Quality Forum and Keeys moderated the conversation, which also featured Lanada Williams, PhD, a trained counselor and CEO of Alliance Family Solutions.

“During this time of the pandemic, our world has been turned upside down,” said Dr. Clark, who serves as the medical director and division chief for adult inpatient and consult liaison services for the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine at Prisma Health in South Carolina. “It is important to acknowledge how we’re feeling.”

Williams said it is critical for individuals to consider how they are taking care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, and she added that is important to recognize that people can have mental health issues without a formal diagnosis.

“We are all in this state where we’re trying to scramble and get things together,” she said. “We’re all experiencing this level of crisis inherently that’s been thrust upon us very quickly.”

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Dr. Clark did not mince words when he spoke about how social determinants of health are influencing the rapid rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths, particularly in his hometown of Chicago. About 70% of the Chicagoans who have died from COVID-19 were African American, despite the fact that African Americans make up just 30% of the city’s population.

“Social determinants of health have plagued our nation for centuries, especially when it comes to communities of color,” he said. “We know that an unequal distribution of power, resources and money can have deleterious effects on one’s health.”

Read more about how COVID-19 is affecting physicians of color across the country.

Expert advice on handling the stress

The realities of the pandemic can lead to a wide variety of stress in individuals. Even the term “social distancing” can have its own negative connotation, as people inherently are not meant to be in isolation. Dr. Clark said using the term “physical distancing” instead can be a more concrete description of what is expected of the public.

Keeys said she turns to yoga as a way to relieve anxiety. She also offered her own piece of advice in an effort to help others improve their mental health.

“One way to remove yourself from your own worries is to ground yourself in the life of someone else and scale up empathy by putting yourself in someone else’s shoes,” she said. “It truly is helpful for that other person, but the residual is you also feel less anxious.”

Keeys and Dr. Clark both encouraged the public try out the Headspace mobile app as a tool for
meditation and stress relief. Headspace is offering all U.S. health professionals who work in public health settings free access to Headspace Plus through 2020. Learn how to redeem a subscription using your National Provider Identifier.

Teach your children well

Everyone’s life is being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. That's particularly true for children, many of whom are now at home all day instead of school, deprived of their normal routines and in-person visits with friends. In times of crisis, kids look to their parents for relief and to understand how they should feel.

Williams and Dr. Clark are both parents and addressed how they have handled the current situation with their families. They offered these suggestions:

- Create a schedule for the day that children can visually see, and make sure there is a spot in the day reserved for family time.
- Get physical exercise with children.
- Acknowledge to children that they don’t have to like the current situation, but must try to adapt as best as possible.

Williams suggested grown-ups share examples of when they needed to do something they didn’t like—for medical professionals this can be taking clinical notes or entering information into an electronic health record.

Dr. Clark echoed that sentiment, explaining how important it is for children to see and understand the importance of acceptance and vulnerability.

“Our children look up to us,” said Dr. Clark, also clinical assistant professor at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine-Greenville. “No one wants to see their children hurting, but if our children can’t see us express emotion, how can we expect them to express their feelings?”