

MENTALLY QUARANTINED



Social distancing is impacting the mental health of the East community

*names changed to protect identity

by | campbell wood

With the global COVID-19 pandemic holding the U.S. on lockdown until at least April 30, social distancing has worsened students' mental health as a result of isolation and uncertainties regarding what's to come.

Although the goal of social distancing is to preserve people's physical health, it has taken a toll on the mental health of those in and around the East community. Results of an Instagram poll determined that about 68% of 284 community responses have experienced increased levels of anxiety and depression since the start of quarantine.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention lists children and teens as one of the more vulnerable groups in terms of heightened anxiety levels during this time, along with those at a higher risk of contracting the disease.

School nurse Stephanie Ptacek explains how it is crucial for students to have human interaction in terms of their social development. She says this age, specifically, is a time when teenagers learn to develop social skills and that interaction is a necessity for maintaining and developing relationships. And with students self-isolated, technology holds the key to interaction in a way it never has before.

"Come to find out the curse, which is technology, is the cure," Ptacek said.

Ptacek sees technology as a way to keep students' social lives strong. The American Psychological Association says that social isolation comes with adverse health consequences, one of which is depression. Ptacek recommends talking to a friend each day through Zoom or FaceTime to maintain a more secure level of interaction.

Sophomore Chris Alka has noticed himself feeling more depressed since the announcement of school being cancelled for the rest of the year, resulting in many FaceTime calls to friends and family members.

"I think I've appreciated more technology now," Alka said. "[Technology] never really affected me until now. So definitely calling people has been sort of a help, but I think it's still that you don't get to see people in person and there's a difference when you think about it, it's just not the same."

Licensed clinical psychotherapist Lindsey Murray, who works with patients in the Kansas City area, emphasizes how stress levels are higher during this time with concerns about contracting the virus or fear as to whether life will return to normal again.

"Most of us have kind of lost the typical coping strategies that we might use to deal with just general life stress — friends and family, exercising at a gym," Murray said. "Having these outlets that we usually do to manage stress in our lives, I think is one of the biggest issues that I'm working with people. How can we find these outlets and be creative

with them in our home environments, when normally those were achieved outside of our homes?"

Part of building a new "normal" in quarantine comes from routine, according to Murray. Being able to provide a sense of structure in a chaotic time helps to reduce anxiety levels. During Murray's online therapy sessions, she reminds her patients that the baseline for anxiety levels are higher since it's an unfamiliar situation for everyone. Acknowledging this makes it easier to develop structure and find ways to still work towards their individual goals in terms of anxiety.

Not having a schedule has caused a spike in anxiety for senior Janice McWilliams*. McWilliams has dealt with mental health struggles in the past and has been going to a therapist weekly for over a year, but now she doesn't have a routine to busy herself in — and the use of technology for her now phone call therapy sessions doesn't have the same effect as those in-person.

"It's just a completely different experience," McWilliams said. "I think it's a lot easier to connect with someone when you're in person...I think body language is a really important thing, and it just seems a lot easier when she can look at me, I can look at her and you can read someone. Which I think, then in a therapy setting, everything just goes a lot smoother."

McWilliams has trouble opening up to deep conversations with her therapist when the conversation is over the phone. In efforts to maintain a more comfortable talking environment, McWilliams will walk around the neighborhood talking to her therapist on the phone. Together, they've spent the past three weeks building a quarantine-fit routine to better her

mental being — it feels good to talk to someone and find the positives right now, McWilliams said.

One thing both Murray and East social worker Emily MacNaughton suggest is to make sure that the news is turned off — this helps prevent growing any additional fears in regards to the coronavirus. While it's important to stay updated on what's going on, it shouldn't consume all of your attention.

Junior Iris Hannon has struggled with hearing the seemingly apocalyptic news, making her feel more anxious at times. To combat the negativity, Hannon is working on building stability by picking up old hobbies and focusing on developing them, a technique Murray suggests and has been working on with some of her patients.

"I've been cooking a lot more and kind of exploring different things and different ways of coping that I hadn't really considered before this," Hannon said.

Learning how to cook sushi and crab rangoon has helped Hannon redirect her energy away from the coronavirus. Murray believes that this is a time where we have to work extra hard to achieve happiness based on our values — whether that's family, religion, exercise or other enjoyed activities.

Ptacek affirms that students should look at quarantine as a time for self-growth to strengthen mental health.

"I do think that there are some positives to this and that when we get on the other side of it, students will see how resilient they really are, and that they can do hard things," Ptacek said.

WAYS TO HELP YOUR MENTAL HEALTH



A few other ways to make sure you're taking care of your mental health during this time while remaining safe and healthy indoors

REACH OUT TO OTHERS | keep in touch with friends and family by calling them via Zoom or FaceTime



ROUTINE | having a daily routine keeps you organized and productive



NEWS DISTANCING | stay informed, but don't overwhelm yourself with negative news



VALUES | find things that makes you happy, and put your energy towards them