

BRONX VOICE

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NAVIGATING SUICIDE PREVENTION IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: HOME HEALTH CARE INSIGHT



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When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit New York City, our daily lives shifted dramatically—and rapidly. It is not unusual during these unprecedented times to experience being overwhelmed with feelings of worry, sadness and loss—loss of how things were, of connections to others and loss of certain freedoms and privileges.

If any of these sound relative to your own experience, you are not alone. According to a recent study conducted by the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), 40 percent of U.S. adults reported dealing with mental health issues or substance abuse in late June, 11 percent of which seriously considered suicide. Additionally, essential workers, unpaid adult caregivers, those who are racial/ethnic minorities and younger adults ages 18-24 reported [disproportionately more severe](#) mental health struggles, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.

It is important to note that while this time of crisis has exacerbated increased symptoms of mental illness, suicide was a public health concern even before the pandemic and continues to be so.

In my role as Associate Director for Community Mental Health Programs and Clinical Operations at the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#), my colleagues and I are trained to observe and skillfully respond to people of all ages who may be struggling with mental health issues.

[September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month](#) and a time—perhaps more fitting than ever—to discuss how those struggling with mental illness and their loved ones can navigate a public health crisis during a public health crisis.

Look for Signs

Use the increased time you are spending with roommates or family to be one step ahead when it comes to recognizing signs and symptoms someone you love might be contemplating suicide. Phrases like, “I can’t do this anymore,” “I just want to give up,” or “I’ll never be good enough,” may disguise suicidal desires and can be a transparent but overlooked sign that someone might be thinking about suicide.

Other signs and symptoms to take note of include: increased use of drugs or alcohol, a change in sleeping habits (either can't sleep or sleeping more), introduction of new habits, reckless behavior, or the giving away of prized possessions. While we have all endured a social disconnect in some variety during the pandemic, uncharacteristic withdrawal from social interaction can also be a sign that someone is severely depressed or struggling with suicidal thoughts.

Stay Connected...

Humans are social creatures, but once social distancing regulations were put into place many of our daily face-to-face interactions stopped. That may be taking a bigger toll after more than six months of what feels to many like a "lockdown." It's natural to feel alone during this time or believe your relationships with friends or family are drifting apart, both of which can produce depressive patterns.

Now is the time to let technology help you stay connected with loved ones, whether through a simple text message, a humorous meme, social media post or through more personal avenues such as a voice or video call. While there may not be game-changing updates to share, a quick touch-base can mean a lot in these challenging times. Don't be afraid to ask someone you care about if they are struggling. And don't be afraid to listen to what they say if they open up. It is important too not to minimize what someone says with comments like, "don't say that." Just listen and let them express how they feel.

...But Know When to Disconnect!

Anyone listening to the news these days might find themselves feeling overwhelmed, endangered or hopeless, wishing there was a way to "make things better." We live in a time (and city) where things are so fast paced. There's a wealth of information at our fingertips, but as efficient and helpful as this might be, it is also important to know when information overload becomes too much to handle. Try setting aside time once or twice a day to get news updates. "TMI" can add to stress in our already stressful lives.

Air it Out!

Quarantined conditions have given people limited options when it comes to enjoying activities beyond the square footage of their homes. Spending too much time in one indoor space can increase feelings of agitation, anxiety or confinement. Additionally, many people who cohabitate are spending extended time together in tight spaces, which has the potential to create conflict fueled by general stress. Remember that we all need alone time, even if we're isolated from the rest of the world! Getting outside, even just sit on your stoop or a park bench for a few minutes, can be a much-needed change of scenery and a simple way to break out of repetitive routines.

Find Hope in Each Day

It's standard to feel hopeless during a pandemic, but hopelessness can often trigger suicidal ideation. Take some time each day to practice self-care and do something enjoyable, whether it's watching a TV show, working on a craft, trying a new recipe, taking a hot shower with your favorite scents or reading a book. Make sure you are also eating and drinking water properly and keeping physical active—even if that means dancing to a favorite song or walking laps around your room!

Many of us have also had radical changes in how our time is structured, so keeping a schedule can be a great way to not only have your priorities in order, but also ensure that you pencil in self-care activities and always have something to look forward to! Thinking about the future—or even the next month—can be intimidating and even feel impossible at times, but conquering life one day at a time will always provide you with a daily gift: You've won another battle—and you are a winner.

If you or someone you care about seems seriously anxious or depressed, it's time to get help. Remember to Ask, Listen and Get Help by calling [NYC WELL](https://www.nycwell.org) at 1-888-692-9355.

To learn more about the VNSNY Bronx Mobile Crisis Team and other community mental health services visit [VNSNY.org](https://www.vnsny.org).

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