



EXTENSION

STRENGTHENING OKLAHOMA SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER

If there ever has been time of stress, 2020 is the year. Not only are families dealing with the normal stressors of life, this year has ushered in COVID-19, which brings a new level to the chaos that is called life.

Demands of isolation, working from home and distance learning for students have left many feeling overwhelmed, said Matt Brosi, Oklahoma State University Extension family science specialist.

"Being disconnected from normal resources and routines, such as social gatherings, attending church or going to school, leads to isolation, which can compound the situation even further," Brosi said. "With many adults being laid off or furloughed, this financial stress has tipped the scale for those who are dealing with joblessness and the inability to manage all of the bills."

To combat these stressors, unfortunately some people engage in using poor and highly addictive coping mechanisms such as the use of alcohol and drugs. In addition, stress also affects interactions with families with domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect rates continue to rise.

"We're reaching a stress pileup all-time high, so the importance of talking openly about mental health is more critical now than ever," he said. "However, talking about mental health issues still carries a major stigma in our society, leaving many people feeling uneasy about addressing their own mental health needs, while others feel unsure in how to talk about them with those they care about."

Brosi said a solid step forward is becoming more aware of common mental health issues and having those conversations can help remove the stigma. Understanding the basics of how depression, anxiety, suicide and substance abuse issues develop and affect individuals and families is critical to effective intervention. This understanding also plays a role in the implementation of prevention strategies.

"Unfortunately, the vast majority of folks who die by suicide, about 90% in fact, have a mental health disorder that likely could be treatable, but went unrecognized and untreated," he said.

Mental Health First Aid USA recommends using the acronym ALGEE when talking to others about mental health issues.

- A – Assess for risk of suicide
- L – Listen non-judgmentally
- G – Give reassurance and information
- E – Encourage appropriate professional help
- E – Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

"Oklahomans know the importance of resilience in the face of adversity. We've dealt with it time and time again. Now is the time to double down and support one another," Brosi said. "Subtle ways to stay connected including calling to check on family and friends, dropping off a loaf of banana bread or cookies on your neighbor's porch or offering to make a grocery store run for those who may not feel safe getting out. These simple ways of connecting also are great ways to check in on how others are holding up."

Asking how others are dealing with the crisis creates a space that allows them to organize their thoughts about what is going on. This process can help others think more logically about the situation and whether their current response is lacking needed steps in more fully adapting to the crisis. Also, during this connecting time, ask people how they are coping and if they need support to deal with the stress.

"Helping others become more grounded in the present can be helpful. Sometimes, stress overload leaves people feeling chaotic, in despair and unable to resolve any of their problems effectively," Brosi said. "Using proven mindfulness strategies to slow down ones breathing and thinking about what they do have control over can be a first step toward more clearly thinking about available resources can be used to deal with the situation. It could be just enough to assist in calling a mental health professional for assistance, calling a lender to work out a payment plan or simply calling a trusted friend or clergy to just sit with them and listen."

