

Mental health awareness month in a time of coronavirus

By Monsignor John Talesfore

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Having survived this long month of April “Separated Together,” we as a community might be in a much better position to understand the significance of May 2020 as Mental Health Awareness Month. With a bit of reflection on our instinct to reach out to neighbors, family and long-lost friends, we can recognize the impact of something as simple as a phone call, some FaceTime or a Zoom reunion to help cope with the experience of isolation, fear and disorientation.

Hotlines providing emergency help to people suffering from emotional distress report enormous upticks in calls. Just about half of Americans say the coronavirus outbreak has taken a toll on their mental health. Disruption to our plans and daily lives can bring waves of anger, depression, anxiety and grief wrapped up in threats of physical illness and financial insecurity.

But we had already been in crisis, a crisis that was experienced in isolation and all but ignored. Long before this pandemic, members of the community suffered in isolation due to stigma, deaths due to addiction and suicide at rates never seen, impacting all generations and all ethnic and socioeconomic groups with differing degrees of severity.

Aware of this crisis, the California Catholic Conference of Bishops published “Hope and Healing” two years ago. It is a call to all Catholics and people of goodwill to advocate for mental health support everywhere that people show up with needs. No one should have to wait until they are in crisis or have a diagnosis to get this help. We should be equipping our faith communities, our schools, our prisons, our libraries, our technologies and every concerned citizen with the ability to address mental health and addiction impactfully.

That call was in 2018. Now we are told the dire situation before this pandemic will only get worse. Those in the field are sounding the alarm of an emerging mental health crisis alongside COVID-19. According to a recent report from the Journal of the American Medical Association, or JAMA, it is expected that there will be an “overflow of mental illness that will inevitably emerge from this pandemic,” and that structures are not in place to respond. They suggest that “communities and organizations could consider training nontraditional groups to provide psychological first aid.” As such, they recommend the simplest outreach. “Even small signs that someone cares could make a difference in the early stages of social isolation.”

In response to the 2018 call of “Hope and Healing,” the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco, in collaboration with the National Alliance of Mental Illness, adopted a model of Mental Health Ministry to help prepare members of the community to do just this. Saint Matthew’s Catholic Church in San Mateo and Our Lady of Angels Church in Burlingame were

chosen to pilot the program locally. With proper vetting, formation and supervision, trusted community members are equipped to offer spiritual companionship, practical support and community education. In line with the recommendation of the California bishops and the more recent study in JAMA, the mental health ministry members do not function in a professional capacity but are available to meet and confidentially talk with those individuals and families seeking support. Ministry members are familiar with the many public and private support services available to families in their local communities and will help families locate suitable providers, keeping in touch to help ensure that positive outcomes are occurring. The ministry team provides mental health educational opportunities to the larger parish community regularly.

Personal experiences of support for one another during the stress and isolation of this last month might encourage other faith groups, employers and public institutions to consult with NAMI about training resources for their own membership. It is doable, impactful and cannot be left to the professionals alone. Think just what a difference your recent phone call meant to someone and how much a similar outreach meant to you. It can be so simple amid stress and fear. No one made a diagnosis. No one solved anybody's problems. But someone listened. Someone cared. Together we can do this!



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