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Maintaining Mental Health through COVID-19. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services describes mental health as our emotional, psychological, and social well-being (2019). Mental health affects our entire being, how we think, how we feel, and how we act. I have read and shared information on physical health and best practices for COVID-19 (short for Coronavirus Disease 2019), but now I would like to share a few tips and tidbits on mental health.

Humans are social beings; we live and thrive in social settings. Even introverts seek social interactions. As we navigate through the next few weeks (or months) we may encounter situations most have never experienced. Many are already at home and actively practicing social distancing while the rest may be preparing to do the same. If you are in either category, I am writing this article for you.

Before I go further, I would like to discuss social distancing, quarantining, and isolation. If you watch the news, read the paper, or scroll through social media, you are probably familiar with these terms but you may not know the difference. Social distancing is a way to prevent the spread of an infectious disease by creating a physical space between yourself and others. Churches, schools, restaurants, night clubs, stock shows, office buildings, stores, and any other populated places or events put you in close proximity to others and increase your chance of exposure. Quarantine is a separation or movement restriction of people exposed to a contagious disease. A quarantine is in place enough time to ensure the exposed person did not contract the infectious disease. Isolation occurs when a person has contracted an infectious disease and is separated from those not infected. Isolation will last until the person is no longer contagious to others (SAMHSA, 2014).

Over the new few weeks, keep in mind people react in different ways to stressful events, not everyone will feel, respond, or have the same opinions as you. Rather than dismissing differing views, judging, or panicking, try to empathize and understand personal vantage points are shaped by individual life experiences unique to each of us.

It is normal to experience anxiety, worry, and/or fear when facing situations such as COVID-19. You may experience these feelings in response to the infectious disease or you may experience them in response to an associated factor or unknown, such as loss or reduction in work and pay, concern over the health of loved ones, or a lack of groceries or supplies. Unknowns create a perfect environment for a downward spiral of negative thoughts and emotions. If you feel information overload or panic, make a focused effort to regain control of your thoughts; turn off the television, put down your phone, and take a deep breath. If you can, go outside or open a window to breathe in fresh air. Acknowledging and accepting fears and emotions play an important role in maintaining or improving your mental health. Reverse negative influences by instilling positive ones to help change your approach to a situation. Rather than thinking about being “stuck inside” try thinking how social distancing has provided an unexpected opportunity to begin a new hobby or clean the closet you have avoided for a year.

Being home with children for an extended period of time creates a special set of challenges. In addition to socialization and education, childcare and schooling provide routine; and while adults may tire from predictability, children usually flourish in the security of structure. If you are struggling to find a sense of normality during this time, take a moment to develop a routine that works for everyone. Try to maintain as much of your pre-COVID-19 schedule as possible (chores, laundry day, mealtime, wake and bedtime, etc.), this will help keep your household active and ease the return to normal life, post-COVID19. If children are

assigned schoolwork while at home, set a time each day to focus on assignments, schedule in breaks, fun activities, and quiet time. Do not expect your children to be in student mode for eight hours a day as they would in school, they are at home not school; trying to be something you are not will wreck havoc on everyone's mental health. I assure you, it is okay for them to enjoy an extra week or two off school; let them be children. I also encourage you to talk to your children about the current situation. They know things are not normal, so answer their questions in a positive and reassuring manner. Keep in mind, their emotional state will reflect what they see and feel from you. Be honest but optimistic and above all else, make them feel secure.

I mentioned this earlier, but it is worth mentioning again, turn off the television and put down your phone. Obsessing over COVID-19 coverage will have a negative effect on your mental health. As wonderful as social media can be, it is a hotbed of misinformation. If you must look up information, limit the amount of time you spend each day and make sure you are accessing material from a credible source (websites ending in .gov or .edu provide research-based information). Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and Texas Disaster Education Network provide extensive information on COVID-19, for additional information you may visit <https://texashelp.tamu.edu/coronavirus-information-resources/>.

If you find you are unable to lighten your mood, feel overwhelmed, have irrational thoughts, or notice anything out of the ordinary, talk to your doctor. Your mental health is important and should never be ignored or minimized.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact me, (903) 473-4580 or email Sarah.Latham@ag.tamu.edu. You may also read more about this and many more topics on my blog, <http://agentsarah.blogspot.com/>. Follow Rains County AgriLife on Facebook for additional information and upcoming events.

References:

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2019). *What is Mental Health*.
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