

The Pandemic and Mental Health

The unprecedented changes due to the coronavirus pandemic affected everyone worldwide. While we took measures to protect ourselves physically, the pandemic was also affecting our mental health. As the virus spread, so did feelings of anxiety, confusion, disruption and isolation, causing us to search for ways to cope and manage emotions and stress.

People with no prior history of mental health issues may have developed trouble sleeping, concentrating or functioning normally. Some experienced feelings of anxiety, isolation or depression for the first time.

For those with previous mental health concerns, the constant reminders of the threat may have intensified symptoms. Those susceptible to addictions may have turned to alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to reduce feelings of stress. Children, once well behaved and good students, may have become disruptive and disobedient.

Anxiety and depression have been predominant concerns during the pandemic, but as Glenn Peters, Lead Therapist at LCFS, points out, mental health issues are widespread and affect people differently.

“People with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder for example,” says Peters, “often partake in repetitive cleaning behaviors. They feel compelled to do things in excess like washing hands, cleaning door handles, kitchens and bathrooms. This may not sound bad, but when it prevents them from doing anything else in their lives it becomes a significant problem. Constant news reminders of hand washing protocols exacerbated many of their symptoms.”

In many ways, the pandemic reinforced LCFS’s mission to assist those in greatest need. Many have been left without paychecks, health insurance, sick leave or day care. LCFS will not close its doors to them. The agency transformed from seeing clients in-office to conducting tele-health conference visits and video sessions. Counselors work to help those feeling overwhelmed and frightened to remain calm, limit the saturation of news overload, monitor depression and isolation and find hope and faith.

As a faith based organization, LCFS relies on clinical knowledge and expertise combined with Christian beliefs and Biblical support, sharing the promises of the Gospel while utilizing clinical best practices. As Christians, we are compelled to help, console and build up one another.

“I use scripture and Bible verses quite often,” says Peters, “to remind people that we have a God that cares for us even in the darkest of times. God does not forsake us. He cares for us body and soul and through Him we have eternal life.”

“For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you.” ~ Isaiah 41:13

Children have also been impacted by the pandemic. With schools no longer in session, school administrators alerted parents that LCFS’s in-school counselors were available via tele-conferencing to help children who were struggling.

“We are seeing children with more irrational fears that teachers or parents are going to die,” says Counselor Andrea Alfke. “We are reassuring them that they are safe and loved and teaching them ways to deal with their feelings in positive ways. Kids are very resilient but having tools to help themselves is important for their future well being.”

Peters recalls “Someone said to provide five doses of Vitamin C: Caring, Compassion, Courtesy, Consideration and Community. I think that’s a perfect description and what we do here at LCFS.”

If you, a friend, or a loved one is struggling, please know that we at **Lutheran Counseling and Family Services of Wisconsin** are committed to helping alleviate the fear and uncertainty during these challenging times and into the future. Please contact our office at 414-536-8333 or 800-291-4513.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” ~ John 15:13

Finding A New Normal

Of all the phrases and mantras during the pandemic: “We’re all in this together”, “Patience and faith will guide us”, “Stronger together” – there’s one that should be a lesson to us all as we move forward: “It’s normal to not feel okay and it’s okay to not feel normal”.

During quarantine, self-isolation and social distancing, routines were dismantled and ‘normal’ no longer existed. Feelings of uncertainty and helplessness caused us to search for our individual coping mechanisms. For some it was a sudden release of tears, for some it was curling up in a ball and tuning out, some kept their hands and minds busy, others relied on meditation and prayer. These mechanisms got us through our toughest times. What happens going forward?

What was our normal will soon be replaced by a new normal. And it is definitely okay to not feel right or comfortable in it for awhile. The pandemic affected every person across the globe, regardless of country, age, or any other thing that separates us. Going forward, we will all have to find a new level of comfort and normality. For some, the new normal will begin in heart-wrenching reality – an empty chair at the dinner table, a missing co-worker, a livelihood or career in jeopardy. For others, the changes will be more subtle – less travel, a favorite bar or restaurant no longer in business, dreams put on hold. It will be important to remind yourself and others often that it is normal to not feel okay and it is okay to not feel normal.

Change is not easy for most people, especially when it is imposed upon them. There are a couple of things that may help you as you transition into a new normal. First, give yourself and others time and flexibility to adjust and settle in. Allow yourself to acknowledge your feelings – grief, nostalgia, confusion, hope. Trying to place blame or question why it happened is wasted energy. Focus on the positive. Remember that you are not in this alone and believe that in time your new normal will become familiar and comfortable. Give yourself that gift of time.



Following are tips from a few of the counselors at LCFS as you build and embrace your new normal:

Deb Rayburn, MS, LPC, serving the Milwaukee area: *"Try this simple breathing exercise to calm yourself and reduce physical symptoms of anxiety: Breathe in deeply through your nose for four seconds, hold for seven seconds and slowly breathe out through your mouth for eight seconds."*

Brooke Siddell, MS, LMFT, serving the Fitchburg and Sun Prairie areas: *"Practice noticing the things you are grateful for each day. Keep a gratitude journal by writing 2-3 things daily that brought you joy. Share it with your family at a meal together, or call a friend and share with them."*

Lisa Hecht, MSSW, LCSW, serving the Sun Prairie, Portage, Reedsburg & Fitchburg areas: *"Resilience is, in part, having a healthy perspective on life challenges. What is your perspective on life's challenges in general? Does that view need adjusting? Upgrading? A total rewrite? Ask a friend or elder their perspective on the hardships of life."*

Donna Powless, Ph.D, LPC, serving the Green Bay and Shawano areas: *"There is nothing greater to bring us back to a normal feeling, than to dig in the dirt and feel the dirt between our fingers moving plants around."*

Deborah VanderKinter, MS, LPC, serving the Milwaukee area: *"Even when you are staying at home all day, get up in the morning, make your bed, take a shower and get dressed as you would if you were leaving your home. Getting up and getting ready to face the day can help you feel more awake and productive."*

Glenn Peters, LPC, SAC, serving the Milwaukee area: *"Get outside for some movement and fresh air. Just 15 minutes a day can improve your health and your mood."*

Rory Gaouette, MS, LPC, serving the Milwaukee area: *"When feeling anxious about the future, intentionally bring yourself back to the present moment. Focusing on your breath or engaging in activities that involve your 5 senses can help you to do this."*

A Message from the CEO ***Deb Rayburn, MS, LPC, CSAC, CSIT***

While the pandemic has been challenging, it also shows the very core of LCFS's mission: We are here to help people through the most challenging of times.

As CEO I am concerned not only for clients, but also for the well being of our staff. They too are facing uncertainties and unknowns. But they are an amazing group! They adapted immediately to a new way of conducting counseling sessions, they took on additional clients, some exhibiting high levels of anxiety and many in crisis, they pitched in locally to help those struggling around them and they never complained. I am eternally grateful and blessed to witness the strength and resiliency of these front-line heroes.

Thank you to all who have kept LCFS, its staff and its clients in your prayers. Going forward, I am confident that LCFS will continue to take on challenges, persevere and help those in greatest need.

Blessings to you,
Deb Rayburn, MS, LPC, CSAC, CSIT

"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." ~ Romans 5:3-5



Happy Retirement Pastor Paul!

Five years ago, Paul Koester, LPC, CSAC, joined the staff of LCFS to share his compassion, talent and expertise with a Christian approach to family and individual counseling.



"Pastor Paul" as he was known to staff and clients touched the lives of so many through thoughtful insights, caring words and gentle optimism. He brought humor, laughter and hope to all he served, strengthening marriages, motivating individuals and reinforcing the mission of LCFS.

Paul is looking forward to spending quality retirement time with his wife, Carol. We wish him all the best and thank him for all those he served, healed and cared for.

No Masking An Act of Kindness

During normal work times, Kate Feiertag is LCFS's Adoption Coordinator, helping unite children with adopting families. Seeing a need during the pandemic, Kate added face mask seamstress to her list of duties.

During the Safer at Home business closures, each of LCFS's five thrift stores had to close. Each store is run solely by volunteers, many of whom are older adults committed to helping their communities and supporting LCFS's work and mission. During the closures, the volunteers have missed their stores tremendously, many asking if they could still come in to clean, straighten and prepare for reopening. They are eager to see friends, co-volunteers and regular customers again, but they are fearful of the virus and want to take as many precautions as they can.

Kate wasn't asked, but offered to hand-make over 60 masks for the volunteers so they could feel safe when returning to the stores. To us, she is a true hero, not just to the many birth parents and adoptive couples she serves, but also to our valued volunteers. Thank you Kate!

All thrift stores will be open May 26th with safety precautions in place. Please support your local store! (locations at www.lcfswi.org)

Right: Kate fashioning one of her homemade masks.



A Life of Service and Commitment

Lutheran Counseling and Family Services of Wisconsin had the honor and privilege to be led by a true servant of God. Don Druckrey worked nearly his entire career for LCFS, starting when it was known as Lutheran Children's Friend's Society.

Under his guidance and dedication, thousands of children found loving Christian homes and generations of families were created. Don passed away in October 2019, leaving an indelible impression and a legacy that lives on.



Thank you Don for all the lives you touched and the joy you brought to the work and mission of LCFS.

Contact LCFS at 414-536-8333, FAX—414-536-8348 or EMAIL at lcfs@lcfswi.org

A Family Comes Together, Even Through Quarantine — Kate Feiertag

When a couple begins their adoption process, they keep their focus on the end result: the day they stand in front of a judge, with their friends and family, to make the adoption of their child official. I have attended many adoption hearings in my time at LCFS, and each one brings joy, tears, and immense relief that their families are now permanent.

Kristen and Ryan started their adoption journey with LCFS in August when they were matched to adopt twin boys. They understood they were required to participate in 6 months of post placement visits before they could petition the court to approve and finalize the adoption. In February they were notified the adoption hearing date was set for March 25 and Kristen and Ryan began inviting friends and family to attend the hearing and organized a party for afterward to celebrate.

As the adoption date neared, our country became increasingly affected by the coronavirus. A safer at home order was issued, which ultimately led to the closure of businesses and in-person events, including most court hearings. Kristen and Ryan's adoption hearing was being pushed back to May 5, with hopes that businesses would be back open by then.

Kristen and Ryan were disappointed, but did not lose faith that their adoption dreams would still come true. We continued monthly home visits, but through video conferencing. For several weeks, they wondered if their hearing would be postponed again, or if they would be

able to legalize their family in May.

Finally we received word that the court hearing would proceed by video conferencing. There was relief, but also sadness that their dreams of a big celebration had been dashed. On May 5, 2020, while standing in their kitchen, Kristen and Ryan held up their right hands and were sworn in to testify. The judge, attorney, court reporter, and I were all in virtual attendance and watched as the couple promised to raise Jax and Milo to the best of their ability. With a smile, the judge granted the petition, and the twins were officially part of the family. Big brother Ashton stood nearby to celebrate and the boys were brought into view so the judge could see their beautiful faces. Even the dog let out a happy yip.

The coronavirus is devastating. It is a challenging time for everyone. However, there

are pieces of happiness sprinkled throughout the struggle and pain. This couple understood that becoming a family didn't require a fancy court hearing or a big party. They have found the good among the bad. There will be a party one day, when it is safe to do so. For now, they are happy that their family is whole.



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