

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## Supporting Your Mental Health in Times of Crisis

Taking care of our mental health is just as important as taking care of our physical health. Our mental and physical health are inseparable. When we are mentally unwell, it is not isolated just in the brain, but instead affects the whole body and our overall well-being. By now, most, if not all of us, understand the impact that COVID-19 can have on our physical health, but what about the impact to our mental health? The fear and anxiety caused by the disruption to life as we know it and the social isolation that is required to keep people physically safe can pose a real threat to our mental health. If you have been feeling fearful, depressed, panicked, anxious or lonely – we understand. New stressors arise each day, making mental health in times of crisis a daily pursuit. These new challenges are shaping who we are as individuals and as communities. The question is - how do we rise to those challenges with resiliency?

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher – Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte -- and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

**Christine:** Your own instincts in response to the stress that's going on right now are real, are valid, and in some ways the emotions are good to feel. It's okay to acknowledge it in a way to honor it. We don't need to run from it or suppress it.

**Jen:** I'm here with Dr. Christine Moutier. She is a psychiatrist and the Chief Medical Officer for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. She first joined me on the WorkWell Podcast series in 2018 to discuss mental health in the workplace. Today, we'll focus on the connection between social distancing – or as I prefer to call it, physical distancing – and how we can stay mentally healthy during times of crisis.

**Jen:** So first I want to ask you, how are you doing?

**Christine:** I am doing okay. Thank you for asking. Every day brings some new challenges and sometimes a fire to put out or a really cool opportunity to respond to. At AFSP, we've got our chapter network spread across all 50 states. And so, as you can imagine, different things and different needs are going on all the time and they've turned all of their suicide prevention and mental health programming into a virtual format for the larger communities. So, lots of good work going on and, if anything, it's just such a time where our passion and advocacy around mental health is actually coming into the spotlight in some ways, in a good way. I mean, obviously out of necessity, but there are parts of that that do feel gratifying to be ready to respond.

**Jen:** We're in the midst of this global pandemic. Anxiety and worry, I know for me, are kind of common daily emotions now. So, what tips do you have for recognizing and working through anxiety and other difficult emotions, given where we are in the world?

**Christine:** Yeah, I think it's a time where a little bit of extra proactivity and also compassion for yourself and for others will go a long way. And I think the first thing is just realizing that your own emotions, your own instincts in response to the stress that's going on right now are real, are valid. And in some ways, the emotions are good to feel. It's okay to acknowledge it in a way to honor it. We don't need to run from it or suppress it. And I know that's uncomfortable for some people who aren't as well practiced at just having a self-reflective moment or letting yourself feel the intensity of it, at least for a moment. And then realize that that feeling isn't going to take over your life. You then will come back into your mind and you have choices to make, actions that you can take to decide what's the best strategy for you at that point. And, and so, you know, there are so many effective strategies for managing and working through this stressful time, the uncertainty, the anxiety, and there's lots of sort of cognitive strategies, if you will, that we could definitely talk about.

**Jen:** Yeah, I'd love to dive into that. What are some of those strategies?

**Christine:** Here's one concept: that a big part of what's creating anxiety for us is the level of uncertainty around so many different aspects of what's going on right now. And as human beings in our brains and our minds, the way we are hardwired, we want to create a plan. We want to feel in control, and we need to have a sense of certainty. And we can even use a fair amount of healthy denial in the normal times in life. Honestly, you know, to kind of go about our routines and our art, our day to day life and work right now, uncertainty is in our face so much more. And so, it is very helpful actually to kind of just provide yourself with a little bit of getting your head around it more by deciding for yourself what is out of your control and what is in your control. And trying to stay focused on those things that we do have control over, because it's actually quite a lot. It's how we choose to organize our day, how we choose to connect with and who to connect with to the extent that we have some control over who is in our household or who we're letting in through virtual meetings. And all those things that we're doing to connect. You can actually shape the way that goes, perhaps a little bit more than you think. So that's one of the concepts about addressing uncertainty and trying to regain some sense of sort of power over that, rather than feeling helpless and powerless. Another neat concept that really comes out of Marty Seligman's work in positive psychology is around the idea that we can actually sort of inoculate ourselves from overwhelming stress, anxiety and depression by using some cognitive exercises. One that he's just written about most recently – that I really love because it's so simple and it's so intuitive, but again, it's a way for our minds to create some definition around what's going on – is to first let yourself think about the absolutely worst case scenario, and then move into what is your best case scenario that your mind can come up with. And then the next step is consider and think about what is the most realistic scenario, and then move forward with your planning steps based on that realistic scenario. And again, I think it just helps organize your brain rather than it all swirling around in a big kind of black hole of uncertainty and unknown. And again, that inoculation, like then what happens next in life? Because every day is a new set of variables in front of us. We can, I think, just adapt to it a little bit better with some definition around it.

**Jen:** Something that works really well for me that I've been doing quite a bit of is reframing. So, concepts like "I have to work from home," to "I'm incredibly blessed and I

get to work from home, and I have the capacity and the capability to do that." What do you think about that as a strategy?

**Christine:** Yeah, I love it. I think reframing is very much tied to a practice of gratitude. That's another kind of angle on that reframing. It's also links up with some of the things I was saying just earlier that it's a way to realize what you do have in your control, or those things that are the silver linings going on. I think we do so many of these things very intuitively, especially if we've been through past struggles. And all of us have, of course, but especially if you've taken that extra step to get therapy and have had the guided experience of learning some techniques that you've found really useful for yourself. Now is the time to go back to those things that do work for yourself, and also for all of us to be trying some of those new things. I love the reframing thing is just so simple in that way and yet absolutely powerful.

**Jen:** If you are experiencing unusual amounts of, of worry, anxiety, stress, perhaps depression, how do you know when to ask for help? At what point should you reach out to ask for help and where can one go to get help right now?

**Christine:** My personal view is that as a society, we haven't learned about when to recognize when it's time to seek help, because we've been so well-practiced at writing everything off to the stress or the circumstance of the moment that we haven't realized that, certainly while things absolutely are tied to the things happening in our life, moment by moment, that there's nothing incorrect about that. But it kind of takes a passive approach then like, well, so let's just wait and see then when this stressor ends, how I'm doing then, or, well, wouldn't anybody be that stressed out if they were going through X, Y or Z? And I actually view that as a very dangerous, but yet common and alluring way of thinking because it says that on the one hand, we're all having very normal human responses in a way. It's like a trauma response. There's a human response to that that's completely natural. And yet it doesn't mean that we don't seek help for those things. And so, if for example, you're finding that your sleep is being disrupted and you're having trouble self-managing that and getting it back intact, that is a sure sign that it's time to try something new. At least get some input on what can be done to manage what's going on, if not a specific sleep strategy, but even just a stress management strategy, or therapy for the anxiety specifically. If you find that the anxiety, which most of us are having right now, but if you find that it's sort of all-consuming and that your worry is front and center and it's very hard to focus on anything else. Of course, that's one of the reasons that we're all saying really limit your media intake right now and absolutely avoid sensationalized information right now, because it's just fuel for that fire of anxiety. Some people are very much more vulnerable to going down that deep anxiety hole that it takes us into. We don't realize that it is something that is treatable because it feels so in line with reality, the circumstance that we're in, and yet the ramifications of it in your life and your health, it can also be a very physical response. If you find that you're having headaches. I already mentioned the sleep disruption, but changes in your appetite, if you're overusing alcohol or substances, physical tension in your body, sexual dysfunction can happen related to stress and overwhelming anxiety, all of those physical signs would also be indicators that it's time to seek professional help.

**Jen:** Some of our usual ways that we would seek help have changed. So where can one go to get help right now?

**Christine:** Well, if you are somebody with an employer that offers an employee assistance program or a health insurance plan, those would be, I would say, your two first-line places

to find out what your resources even look like. So, one thing that's happening right now related to COVID that is really special and important is the rising up of the offering of tele-health services. The federal government has made a way for people to get tele-medicine services, so they don't have to go into their primary care doctor and get exposed to the virus and other things right now. But the same lifting of those restrictions that the federal government and states are doing also relates to tele-mental health services. It may be a time where you can get therapy or a psychiatric evaluation more readily through tele-services than you've ever been able to do before, because, interestingly and perhaps ironically, because of the Coronavirus moment that we're in. So, checking on your insurance website or calling your insurance would be the first place I would go to see if you have access to tele-health and specifically tele-health mental health services. The other thing to think about is that there are also treatment finder tools out there that are really good. And the one that we at AFSP like probably the most is the SAMHSA one. It's on [find-treatment.samhsa.gov](http://find-treatment.samhsa.gov). MHA, the Mental Health America group, also has a wonderful treatment finder and those are all on AFSP's finding treatment website as well. There are also specific treatment finders for substance use problems that are also on AFSP's website as well as those websites. If you are somebody who struggles with substance use and addiction, the use of virtual 12 step programs and ways to connect with your sponsor or to find help for the first time are also now really being messaged and made more readily available through the internet. And, one last thing I would be remiss in always sharing that if somebody is reaching a crisis point, or if someone in your life is reaching a crisis point, please know that the national suicide prevention lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK is there for any type of crisis and for you as the one in distress or you as the helping person with someone who's in your life and in distress. And the same thing goes for the crisis text line, if you text the word TALK to 741741. Those are our best solid national resources that are available 24/7.

**Jen:** Thank you for sharing that. Physical distancing, or social distancing. While I understand, and I think we all understand how necessary it is right now, why is it so difficult for us as human beings?

**Christine:** Oh, my goodness. I love this, because it's sort of invisible to us most of the time how incredibly hard-wired we are as social creatures. We just need the contact of other human beings, and animals – for some people it's very important as well. We need human contact at a very basic primal level in the core of our being and the brainstem of our brains. And so, during a time when we need to keep physical distance, for some of us, if you're part of a family unit where no one is having to be quarantined, that's a simpler matter. We have each other, you're kind of hunkered down, and I think we're all finding ways to virtually connect with our friends and family and coworkers, who aren't right there in our physical space. I think it's the hardest on people who don't already have those networks really solidly built in. For example, people who have preexisting mental health conditions, or who already, for reasons of circumstance or demographics are already somewhat isolated. Now is going to be a time when some of their usual ways of having contact with – let's say you're an older person living in assisted living or an environment where you live alone – and now the regular social services have Meals on Wheels and other ways that you're coming into contact with your usual support systems, even family members, are just sort of being disrupted and having to kind of be rejiggered and redefined. So, I worry the most about those individuals who have some barriers in the way. What we see happening on a wide scale are some beautiful and very creative ways of adapting and connecting, and that is fabulous. I've talked to some people at very kind of hardcore business industries of our sector, of our society who are telling me that they're talking to their colleagues now, you know, in some new ways just because it's this weird moment we're in, that they're sharing more about how their families are doing and the ways that they're finding to cope and stay

healthy and that they're kind of like in a way sort of surprised and delighted at how good that feels to do that kind of sharing.

**Jen:** I'm certainly seeing that in my own life, and I think many of my colleagues as well. I mean, we now know the names of everybody's children, and they show up on our video calls, and my team and I have all brought our pets to our calls and, shared embarrassing pictures from our childhood. And so, you know, we're taking these moments of humanity that I think we may have overlooked before because they were so accessible. So, we're getting to know each other in a way that we didn't have before and perhaps that's a silver lining or maybe the flip side to physical distancing. That is certainly something I'm hopeful that we hold on to long past this pandemic.

**Christine:** I could not agree with you more. It would be a remarkable thing to have our relationships deepened in a way that we realize we can do ongoing. We don't have to be in a state of a public health crisis.

**Jen:** If you do have a friend or a loved one who is isolated and alone, like you were speaking about, are there things that we should be doing to help them stay connected? Are there ways that we can reach out? Are there ways that we can show up and provide support that still keep us and them safe?

**Christine:** You know, I think we really underestimate how powerful it is just to have the caring message come through the simple check-in: "Hey, how's it going? I'm here if you want to talk," so it doesn't actually have to be a big deal. In fact, I think sometimes those ways, of just a short text message, is a way to say, "I'm thinking about you, and I'm here at whatever level you want to engage." Kind of also addresses that concern of am I going to be overly intrusive? Are they going to misunderstand or think I'm being patronizing? You know, all those sorts of things that we worry about. But the quick line I think is a great way. And if they do respond, don't underestimate what their response might mean in terms of how much they actually do need the connection. Then I think offering more specific things like, do you want to have virtual happy hour, or do you want to join? I'm thinking of the people who don't have those built-in friend groups so that they're not getting invited to the virtual treasure hunts and movie nights and neat things that are going on. And so just thinking about, you know, those individuals who, who others may not be including.

**Jen:** Yeah, and that kind of leads me to another question that I have for you. I recently heard or read that you can benefit or receive the positive psychological effects of connection, and that they're kind of less about physical proximity to somebody else and more about a felt sense of connection. So, you know, it's really an inside job, if you will. Can you talk to me about how that works?

**Christine:** Yeah, this is so, so cool. I love this. It is so true. If you think about what we know about even population density, like the areas in our country that tend to have higher quality of life, lower suicide rates, et cetera, are sometimes the most unexpected places like New York City and the places that are the most densely populated. And part of that I think is that the rate at which we bump into each other, but it's not, I agree with you, it's not that physical piece. I mean it's nice to see people of course, but you know, some people actually prefer some solitude and actually are a little, like, it's too much to be in that kind of environment. But that population density simply allows us to have these little exchanges with people, you know what I mean? When you have an unexpected conversation with someone at the checkout line or in a store or a stranger on the subway, or a coworker, where you just happened to get into something that encourages you. I mean, it could be

something as simple as, you know, they notice something you're wearing or, for me it's always when somebody kind of discloses. Sometimes that has to be you to do the first disclosure, where you say something that's a little bit more from the inside, a feeling you're having, an insight how something made you feel or like you thought you were the only one, you know, those kind of universal experiences that we tend to have where we feel on the fringe, where we feel insecure, where we feel like a little bit of imposter syndrome. Those are some to some extent, very universal. And when you share that you're having something like that, it's potentially an immediate source of connection to the other person and also makes you safe for them to share something a little bit deeper with as well. So, it is 100% true that it's that kind of communication that fills our spirits up and makes us feel connected to the larger community around us rather than physical proximity. And in fact, you know, here's a one really concrete way to think about it. Think about the times when you've been surrounded by people, whether at a party or at a mall or a concert. And yet you feel utterly alone. That is entirely possible because it's an internal construct and feeling that you're having. Whereas you can be sitting alone in a space and never have felt more connected to loved ones, or to the community, to nature. All of that is just incredibly nourishing for our spirits and it helps us to keep resilient during these times.

**Jen:** Are you worried about the state of mental health when this is over and the impact that it's going to have on so many of us?

**Christine:** Yes. I worry about that too, for sure. We're having this shared experience and yet for some, because of preexisting vulnerabilities or because of their actual COVID-related experiences, right now it is big "T" trauma. I think we as a group, as a society, we can realize that providing expressions of support and caring and appreciation for anyone who's going through the tougher experiences right now, whether they are first responders, healthcare workers on the front line, or whether they are the people who are getting sick or the family members of those who are getting sick, with this unique situation where family members can't even be near them while they are sick or even while people are dying. And that is something that is awful and where at any moment of grief, we can put it into a trauma model. We can also put it later on. And for some already, this is a period where grief is going to be present. Absolutely. And when there is grief, we need community support. And so, it's not a time to be withholding. Don't assume that since you don't have that shared experience, you have no place in saying anything. That is not true. Tell the person how much you care and that you're there for them, that you can appreciate that they're going through something now and you want to understand it. You want to be there for them. It's that internal experience of feeling supported and feeling connected that matters the most to us as human beings. So, I do worry, but I think we can be really proactive about that and actually see that sort of the next wave that will be coming will be one of post traumatic experience and grief.

**Jen:** So, you led beautifully into my next question, because I recently just read an article that said, even though this is temporary, we're all feeling a number of different griefs right now. The grief around loss of life as we know it, normalcy and routines, the loss of control, loss of connections, all the things that you and I have talked about during this episode. What is the best way? I think you just said it, kind of staying connected, the internal feeling of feeling supported, but what are some strategies outside of that to deal with loss and grief?

**Christine:** Well, there are lots of self-care strategies that people find helpful and we're not all wired the same in that regard. So, have the realization and compassion for those in your circles, that people's response can be of different levels of intensity, and their natural

instincts about how to care for that moment of sorrow or grief can be as different as the impulse to organize closets, and then, meanwhile, your loved one just needs to chill out and binge watch entertainment. And those are all good if they're helpful for the person to feel grounded and more secure. But, there's a whole kind of grief area of expertise where people who have taken an interest in their own experiences of grief, some of them will facilitate grief support groups. There is grief counseling. There are many different ways to access these self-care strategies as well. And some of those are as simple as writing about your experiences. That very act of writing, like processing with a peer or a therapist can be incredibly therapeutic and protect you against what might have been the otherwise really negative impacts of grief. Because the truth is, while none of us probably grew up in environments that taught us how to process emotions very well, when we avoid them and think that the strategy that is best is to just brush it under the rug and kind of forge through as if it never happened. That comes back around to us. And the grief for those negative, unintended emotions will manifest either physically or in temper, anger problems, physical health problems, substance use problems. We can actually prevent some of that just by the simple act of processing through.

**Jen:** On the flip side of that, I'm seeing more and more examples of very prominent leaders bringing mental health to the forefront of the conversation as a result of COVID. Do you think this collective permission to speak about mental health and mental illness will shape the future and hopefully, we'll do things differently?

**Christine:** I really do. And now I have a biased view of the world because – and I'm sure you do, too – this is on our minds all the time and we are experiencing this incredible level of interest in how do I cope? How do I stay resilient? How do I thrive? Is this normal to feel this way? Give me some strategies. And it's very much at the core of how do we optimize our mental health that happens to be in this moment where people are hungrier and much more attuned to a feeling of really, in some cases, desperation to learn how to do that better. But what it ties into in the long view is the change in culture that's been happening over recent years has been tremendous in this regard. But, of course, it hasn't been universal, and it hasn't touched every community or industry or workplace culture. And yet, now, it's kind of busting through a lot of those, just before the COVID moment. Those still existing barriers of just either not realizing that it must be a priority because it relates to so much of life. Our physical health, our workplace productivity are, you know, there's so many different ramifications that can now be measured, but it wasn't on everyone's minds, but now suddenly it is much more so. So, I think that will not be a forgotten moment or a blip. I do think that just continues to deepen the already existing kind of culture change that we've been seeing.

**Jen:** Well, I'm with you and that's something that I'm really looking forward to. So, we've talked about the concept of resiliency and of building our resiliency. What are some things that we can all be doing right now to build our resiliency for this moment, but also the future? And, also, what is your go-to resilience strategy?

**Christine:** So, let me speak more broadly. So, I sort of have it in my mind as the categories for keeping our resilience optimized and sort of protecting our mental health right now are in two basic camps. One is the basic universal strategies that pretty much every human being needs and those are protecting your sleep and your rest, getting the right kind of regular nutrition and hydration, monitoring and limiting your alcohol intake. Some regular exercise actually is good for all human beings. As much as you know, some feel like "I'm fine without it." Then, I would add to that: some of the other basics are create some routine and structure to each day or to your week. And then staying connected as we've been

talking so much about with other people. To me, those are the basics that we need to pay attention to, to some degree during this time. And then the other category are those strategies that are kind of maybe a bit quirky and unique to you as an individual and only you will know what those things are. For some people it's going to be a certain hobby or craft or playing music, or a certain type of exercise. I mean you name it, I think there are some really fun and creative things going on that are absolutely resilience building. And we should really be celebrating that even if it comes across as kind of odd or strange to you to really appreciate that and encourage the people around you for finding those things. And also, for trying some new things during this time. For me personally, exercise has always been one of my go to physical and mental health boosters and really packs the most punch for me. The challenge during this time is that if you were going to the gym or in person classes, you have to kind of flex with that and figure something else out. What I've been doing personally is I had been going to spin class and barre method and I don't have a bike at home. I am doing little kind of fun bike rides around the neighborhood with my family. But the barre thing did go online and actually that gave me the opportunity to invite some other family members to do it with me. So that's kind of fun, too, to have your own little personal group doing something positive together like that. I think the other go-to for me is making sure that in my relationship with my husband and my children, also with my coworkers, that it's the right mix of the business that we need to take care of, the business of the day and groceries, and all the things that we need to be making sure we're dotting all our I's on. But, also the balance of some fun, some laughter, some meaningful, again, like tapping into "How are you doing?" and giving people a chance to share about what their week is like right now for them. We did that around the dinner table last night. Just little things like that.

**Jen:** That's great. Yeah. For me, exercise is also one of my go-to's and I've said for a long, long time, that exercise for me is much more about my mental health than it is about my physical health. I've gotten creative and I do parking lot workouts now. We did talk a little bit about this, do you think we'll be more mindful of our physical and mental health when this is over?

**Christine:** You know, I think so. Overall, I think what is so natural that will always happen as with us as human beings is, we kind of do have short attention spans. We're on to the next moment and it will feel a bit like a distant memory. It will not be so vivid on our minds, for most of us. Now in some ways, though, I think there will be possible ramifications moving forward. Some of those good and some of those harder. For workplaces, for the delivery of healthcare, again, lots of good there and I think realizing how much we can do and how much of healthcare can be delivered remotely, that's a really important thing for rural areas and for access to quality, mental health services. That is huge. But I think there'll be some getting caught up in whatever will be the next thing on our minds and so pressing. But I do hope that just the experience of seeing and feeling what works for us as individuals and collectively during a time when we do feel so under threat in a way that I think can make an impression on us that we don't easily forget. So, I am hopeful in that way.

**Jen:** So, last question. What makes you hopeful? I know you've already stated a few things, but what truly makes you hopeful in this moment?

**Christine:** Well, yeah, I've mentioned the actual legislative changes that have happened related to COVID, about tele-services for medical and mental health services. That's, I think, one of the hugest things that we could take forward that could have big scale positive impacts for many different people. And possibly even related to our cause at AFSP for

suicide prevention. So, that's a really big thing. We want to make sure that there isn't an automatic reverting back to the previous ways that were so restrictive that it didn't really allow for a lot of healthcare to occur that way. I think on the more global scale, the thing that I am the most hopeful about is when I see the spontaneous things that are happening in different communities around the country. The ways that, just for example, my colleague who is a training director for emergency medicine in a New York City hospital and who's been involved in disaster response for New York City and actually for the world for decades. So, he's been through trauma after trauma, and disaster after disaster, and sees the resiliency of healthcare workers and regular people. He was sharing with me that the New York Fire Department, the firefighters had finished their dinner one evening last week, and without any media involvement or any big plan or anything, 60 fire trucks pulled up in front of some of the New York hospitals and they ran their lights and they all got out of their trucks and clapped and cheered for the nursing staff and for the medical staff for like five minutes. And everyone came out and just feels that moment of connection and gratitude and being there for each other. Another example going on in New York City is every evening at 7:00 PM, people are leaning out their windows and clapping and cheering. If you haven't seen that on social media, it's like, it takes my breath away. It's just we are so connected. And, it's kind of a rare moment to feel that, on that concrete and emotional level with other people. And we have that, and we can take that with us, too.

**Jen:** I'm so grateful Christine could be with us today. Although right now the pandemic may feel endless, we need to remind ourselves and each other that it won't be the need for social distancing and the disruption to life as we know it is not permanent. And knowing that can make it easier to cope. Remember to focus on what you can control and find hope and joy in everyday moments. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more, and if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter @Jenfish23. We are always open to your recommendations and feedback. And, of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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