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For immediate release

March 20, 2020

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How to Protect Your Mental Health from COVID-19

In only a few weeks, life has changed drastically in Lewis and Clark County. And change, as we all know, can be hard to accept.

Health officials are urging social distancing and self-quarantine as effective ways to stop the spread of COVID-19. That means avoiding gatherings of 10 or more people, staying six feet away from others, and staying home if you're sick or have had contact with someone who has the disease. Science has proved that these measures really work.

But what's good for physical health can be hard on mental health. How do we stay mentally and emotionally sound when we're feeling anxious and isolated? Here are some suggestions from Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH):

Check In

Check in with others via phone, text message, video chat, social media, or other forms of technology. If you have coworkers, friends, or family who have problems with mental health or substance abuse or who seem particularly stressed, your support can be key.

Simple contact can help reduce anxiety, giving people a chance to vent their fears and concerns and feel cared for and validated.

"The brain is part of the body," said Jess Hegstrom, suicide prevention coordinator at LCPH. "So managing stress, staying connected, and encouraging others to do the same can actually help to boost your immune system.

"That's exactly what we need right now. Plus, strengthening our mental resilience will make it easier for all of us to get through this challenging time."

If someone seems to need more help or is in crisis, refer them to the free and confidential Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or the Crisis Text line: text "MT" to 741-741. Both are available 24/7, and the text line will give people a way to "cool down" during this challenging time.

If you know of someone who's at immediate risk of harming themselves or others, contact 911.

Volunteer

If you're feeling lonely, bored or helpless sitting there at home, consider volunteering in a safe environment. Watch local media for volunteer opportunities, or contact the Elkhorn COAD (Community Organizations Assisting in Disaster), 442-8244. This organization is a collaboration of the Salvation Army, American Red Cross, and Helena Food Share, and it's taking pains to make sure that volunteers are able to maintain an appropriate distance from one another.

"Volunteerism is good for your mental health," Hegstrom said. "It can reduce stress, prevent feelings of isolation, increase your confidence, and give you a sense of purpose and meaning."

Manage Stress

There are plenty of ways you can help ease your own stress and anxiety while continuing to protect yourself from COVID-19. Here are a few compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- **Get the facts.** When you think you're missing important information, you may become more stressed or nervous. Watch, listen to, or read the news for updates from health authorities. Recognize that rumors and misinformation are common during a crisis, especially on social media. Always check your sources, and rely on those you know to be reliable.
- **Take breaks** from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
- **Take care of your body.** Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- **Make time to unwind.** Try to do activities you enjoy. Watch a movie, play a video game, do a jigsaw puzzle, take a hike, or go for a drive.
- **Seek help when needed.** If distress impacts your daily life for several days or weeks, talk to a clergy member, counselor, or doctor, or contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration helpline at **1-800-985-5990**.
- **Call your doctor** if you have signs of respiratory disease, including fever, cough, and shortness of breath.

For more information about COVID-19, visit www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19.