

Katie Johnson: Good morning and welcome to Apple A Day, Lake Region Healthcare's health and wellness podcast where we feature news and information to help you live a healthier life. I'm Katie Johnson, your host and my guests today are Dr. Dan Traiser and Maria Willits. They are both in our psychiatry department here at Lake Region Healthcare. Good morning and thank you both for taking time to talk today.

Dr. Dan Traiser: Good morning.

Maria Willits: Morning.

Katie Johnson: The topic of mental health and coping with stress and anxiety and emotional health during the COVID-19 outbreak is a huge topic and more than we can cover in our few minutes together today, but it's a critical topic and it's a stressful time for everyone from children to adults. So I want to take some time this morning to visit with you about some ways that we can help people cope and maintain good mental health through these especially difficult times. I think it's fair to say everyone is going to have heightened mental and emotional needs during the COVID-19 epidemic, but Dr. Traiser, could you talk specifically about any groups who might be at higher risk during this time?

Dr. Dan Traiser: Absolutely. One of the things we need to kind of keep in mind right now is that this is a period of uncertainty that none of us have ever really dealt with in our lifetime. But I think there are certain groups that I'm most worried about. I think our elderly individuals in our area, especially people who don't have children close by or might not have children, maybe they've lost a loved one recently. I'm very concerned about those individuals. I am concerned about children. I think the children are seeing such incredible changes in the last month or two that they've never seen before. They're seeing people walking around with masks on, their parents are helping them do schoolwork like never before. And I think it's really confusing for a lot of those kids.

Dr. Dan Traiser: I'm worried about our teenagers, especially some of them who've already been struggling with mental health issues, maybe have had suicidality. I worry if this is a tipping point for a lot of them. And then I'm really worried about healthcare providers to be honest. A lot of our physicians and clinicians and nurses are dealing with some fears and some unknowns that we've never really dealt with before. The pandemic has not really hit our area yet the way it has in other areas. And I think we're seeing stuff on TV that frightens us. So I worry about all of those individuals.

Katie Johnson: When you think about who you know, we all know some of those people. As we talked today when you think about the people in those groups, what can we do to support each other?

Dr. Dan Traiser: Well, I think the main thing is we need to realize that even though we're going to be socially isolated from each other, we still need to connect with people. We

still need to be reaching out to folks. We need to be, if we have elderly parents or grandparents, we need to talk to them. We need to call them. We need to check in with them regularly because every time we've talked to somebody, we're decreasing the loneliness for two people. And there are so many ways we can reach out to people nowadays through social media or texting or you can even write a good old fashioned letter to some of your loved ones. They'd love to get those sort of resources from us.

Dr. Dan Traiser: So the other thing I wanted to mention, Kate, is the people of course I'm most worried about in my field are people who already have mental health problems. I think that a lot of people, even if their mental health problems have been under good control lately, they're going to be at risk of recurrence because this is a fear and anxiety we've never dealt with before. People who have anxiety disorders, especially individuals that have obsessive compulsive disorder. If you already have a germ phobia or a fear of illness, this must be a time of incredible stress for them. And then people who have substance abuse problems, people who use substances to try to cope with stress, I think this is going to be a very difficult time for them as well.

Katie Johnson: Right. I wanted to ask you about that. For those who have preexisting mental health conditions, it's so important that they continue their treatment and be on the lookout for new or worsening symptoms. But when so many doctor's offices are not taking in person appointments, that makes it really difficult, but we really want to address how important that is?

Dr. Dan Traiser: Oh absolutely. I think a lot of people are realizing that our clinics are closed to most appointments but your mental health professionals are still available. The psychiatrist and almost all the other mental health professionals in town are still seeing people. Although it might be by a telephone call or it might be by televideo through your phone or your computer. But we are available. One of the things I want to make sure to point out to people who are currently being treated for mental health conditions, especially if you're on medications, now is not the time to be going off of medications, now is not the time to be rationing medications. I'm concerned people are going to spread their medications out so they don't have to go to the pharmacies or leave their house very often. But now is clearly not the time to be doing that and just be aware that Lakeland Mental Health Center, our clinic here, we're available, we're open where you can contact us and have access to mental health professionals. Even if you've never been connected with Lakeland before, they're a fantastic resource for people.

Dr. Dan Traiser: If you do need to get ahold of them. Their number is (218) 736-6987 but all the other clinics in town, the psychologists and counselors in town, social workers are available. The majority of them will be doing telephone contacts, the majority of them will be doing televideo.

- Dr. Dan Traiser: The other thing to keep in mind is that our emergency room is open. If you're having significant mental health issues, especially suicidality, we're available, come into the emergency room. We have an inpatient psychiatry unit in Fergus Falls called the Bridgeway Unit. We're up and running. We are taking COVID precautions, but we do have beds available for people who are acutely suicidal. If you think that you or a loved one is really at high risk of suicide and you have concerns about that, you can contact the Bridgeway Units. Our number is (218) 736-8208 and talk to us. We're available 24 hours a day. And the other thing to keep in mind is that your primary care clinicians have availability in their clinics right now. You can call in if you're concerned about depression or anxiety issues. You can talk to your medical providers here and get really good advice from them as well.
- Katie Johnson: That's right and our appointment staff have been very well trained. If you call the appointment number they will help you determine if an in person coming to the emergency room, talking to Bridgeway or scheduling a virtual appointment is appropriate for you and we just can't emphasize that enough. You mentioned suicidality. How concerned are you about the increasing severity of mental illness and suicide during this time? And Maria, I know this is an area that you're especially versed in as well. Maybe you could offer some insight here.
- Maria Willits: Well, I'd just like to kind of piggy back on what Dr. Traiser said in regards to the groups of people that he's most concerned about right now and just to emphasize how high risk those groups of people already were before COVID-19. And in particular in our area we're already a county who has high rates of suicide compared to other counties in the state of Minnesota. We're second for the highest rate, Otter Tail County is, we're second for the highest rate of suicides in our county and highest rates of suicide nationwide anyways already in our 45 to 65 year olds. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds in the United States. It's the second leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds in Minnesota, and North Dakota, so right there we already have those groups that are at higher risk.
- Maria Willits: And then just add the whole COVID-19 and everything that's coming with that, the anxiety, the stress, the depression, the isolation, rural areas have higher suicide rates than the Metro areas because we are more isolated. It's a little bit tougher sometimes to access those mental health resources. So we really need to be watching it like Dr. Traiser said, we need to be checking in with our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors. And watching for those signs that people are becoming more depressed, becoming more anxious and reach out for that mental health help.
- Katie Johnson: So what are some of those signs?
- Maria Willits: So some of those signs, some of them are obvious signs are of course anybody who was making any threats to hurt themselves or kill themselves. Maybe they're starting to isolate and aren't keeping in touch like they normally would.

They might be acting like they're hopeless or making comments of hopelessness. They might be more anxious. You might see increased irritability, anger, substance use. That was a key one that Dr. Traiser mentioned. People oftentimes turn to drugs and alcohol as a form of self medication. So if you know that somebody has started using and didn't use before, that's a huge sign. Or maybe they've relapsed. Another huge sign. It's time to check in and find out what's going on with them.

Maria Willits: Of course dramatic mood changes could be another sign. Maybe the person is putting personal affairs in order or you might see them giving away prized possessions. Maybe they've acquired a gun or they're stockpiling pills. That too, especially if they're not a hunter or wouldn't have a reason to have a gun. You might see eating disturbances or sleep disturbances. Those are big too. When somebody beginning to struggle, they're not sleeping as much or they're sleeping too much, they're losing weight and not trying or they're gaining weight all of a sudden. So those are all some signs and symptoms that somebody might be struggling with things such as depression, anxiety, stress, other things, so it's time to check in with them.

Katie Johnson: Those are really, really helpful pieces of information. We've talked mostly about at risk groups, but honestly we are all struggling right now. As you mentioned, this is just unlike anything we've ever experienced before. Emotions we have might be overwhelming right now and you combine that with isolation and it's just a difficult time for everyone. I want to talk about how we can be really intentional about managing those feelings of loneliness and isolation. You talked about reaching out to others. What about some things we can do for ourselves?

Dr. Dan Traiser: Yeah, I think it's really important during these times where we're socially isolating, that we're not just sitting on the couch. We're not just sitting still and working in slow motion. I think it's really important now more than ever to try to keep our health in mind. We need to have the best immune system we can to try to fight this off when it does come to our area. And so I think now is the time that we need to be exercising. You can go outside, you can be out moving around and still be away from people. I think now is the time to be eating healthy. I'm finding a lot of people are sitting at home and they're probably snacking more and eating more than they ever have before. Now's not the time to be doing that.

Dr. Dan Traiser: I think now is the time where we can focus on relaxation. Things like reading, people can do yoga, they can do meditation, sometimes just sitting in a chair and literally just closing your eyes and breathing in and out slowly and working on relaxation can do an amazing thing to kind of calm us down. So I think that's really important that we do those things for ourselves.

Dr. Dan Traiser: I also think it's really important for us to reach out to other people because it can give us a good feeling to know that we've helped somebody who's maybe lonely or struggling. So I think now is the time that we need to connect with our

loved ones. Especially like I said, grandparents or older parents, I think they feel so socially isolated because a lot of them are terrified to leave their homes. Now's the time to be connecting with them.

Dr. Dan Traiser: And the other thing I think we need to be paying attention to is our children. Children are a little frightened right now and it's really hard to explain to a young one exactly what a viral pandemic is. But you can certainly explain to them what it means to follow good hygiene. And if you're going to sneeze, sneeze into your shirt, that sort of thing. I mean I think we can try to alleviate some of their fears by just being open and honest with them and answering their questions.

Katie Johnson: And there are a lot of great resources out there, the CDC websites and we've posted many of them on our website, our COVID-19 website and on our social media sites. Great resources in terms of drawings, cartoons that help explain things to kids, good activities to do with your kids. And you're right, when you do something to help others, that's been one of the most positive things I've seen from this crisis so far is people really remembering how important it is to stop and think about what can I do for others? Doing kind gestures and then remembering how good that makes you feel. So it does have that dual effect.

Dr. Dan Traiser: The other amazing thing I've seen too that I think is really kind of interesting with this pandemic, is I think families are being pulled closer together. I'm seeing a lot of teenagers and college age kids are now stuck at the home with their parents. So now there's a time to connect and play games and enjoy each other in ways that maybe we hadn't been doing for a while. And so the other thing I want to just kind of point out to listeners is that if you're looking at media and if you're watching TV and you find that these news stories are stressing you out, it's okay to tune out and turn it off for a while. I think we all have the basics of this, that we're supposed to be socially isolating and washing our hands and such. And so seeing these frightening images from all over the world, for a lot of us, it's not really doing as much good right now. So it's okay to tune off and turn that off for now.

Katie Johnson: I guess in closing, any biggest concerns as mental health healthcare providers that we haven't talked about or other information you'd like our listeners to know before we wrap up?

Dr. Dan Traiser: I think from my perspective, I think we have to make sure that the anxiety and the fear that we're all feeling doesn't paralyze us, doesn't shut us down, doesn't keep us from taking care of ourselves and taking care of our loved ones. I worry that this time of year, and Maria can probably mention this as well, is that this is the time of year where suicide rates are typically the highest anyway, so I'm concerned that this is kind of a perfect storm of events that might lead people to suicidality. So as a mental health professional, I just want to make sure that people understand there are so many resources available out there that we can get ahold of. Like I said, there's Lakeland Mental Health Center. We do have a

mobile mental health crisis team right in our area that you can contact 24 hours a day and their number is (888) 223-4512.

Dr. Dan Traiser: There's also a really unique agency in Minnesota called the Minnesota Warmline and it's basically a peer support group. A lot of people who've been trained who might've had mental health problems themselves, but they're just basically a listening ear and their number is (844) 739-6369. I also want to point out to people that there are so many online resources available nowadays. I'm hearing lots of Facebook COVID-19 support groups that are really well attended because people want answers, they want people to talk to. The National Alliance for Mentally Ill, the NAMI, N-A-M-I has an online website as well where there are a lot of resources available. So just to kind of point out to people we're not alone, we're all fighting this pandemic together and just because we're isolated from others does not mean that we have to totally be isolated by phone or by texting others.

Katie Johnson: Absolutely. Maria, anything you'd like to add?

Maria Willits: Yeah, I would like to add as far as therapeutic wise that you can do for yourself, a lot of our area shelters, animal shelters are fostering out pets and looking for people who can take a foster pet during these times and help care for them, walk them, et cetera. So that's also a good option for folks if you're alone and you want to do something like that. And then I'd like to also add the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline telephone number is 1800-273-8255 and Minnesota does have a text line, a crisis text line. And that is MN741741, and then also in regards to the mobile mental health crisis response teams, most people are not aware that every county in Minnesota has a mobile mental health crisis response team. So all you would have to do, a person would have to do is either call that national lifeline number, suicide hotline number, they can connect you with your county's mobile mental health crisis response team or if you have access to internet you can certainly Google your county's crisis number. So the resources are there.

Maria Willits: And also at Lake Region Health Care Outpatient Psychiatry, we have a listing of many area mental health resources in regards to medication management and therapy counselors. So if anybody has any questions that they'd ever like to call the clinic psychiatry department between the hours of eight and five, you certainly can. Us nurses are there to help you and we can get you those resources even if we have to mail them out to you.

Katie Johnson: That's so good to know. Those resources are there. The clinic number is (218) 739-2221 and I think the main reinforcing message we want to leave our listeners with today is that we are not alone. We are in it together and if you do need support, there are resources. Please, please search them out and please be on the watch for those you love that might need help and offer that helping hand as well. Dr. Dan Traiser, Maria Willits from our psychiatry department here. Thank you so much for what you do every day to help people in our

community and especially for taking time to help us address the COVID-19 challenges.

Dr. Dan Traiser: You're very welcome.

Maria Willits: Thank you.

Katie Johnson: Dan, Maria and Katie on Apple A Day today reminding you we are in this together. No one is alone. Take care and have a great day.