

Opinion

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION



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As COVID-19 stresses us all, let's focus on mental health



Your Turn
Jarrod McNaughton
Guest columnist

COVID-19 is shining a much brighter light on Mental Health Month this May. Too many communities, including the Coachella Valley, are struggling with the psychological and emotional toll this crisis is presenting.

Now, more than ever, it is important to reassure our community that there are compassionate people and resources available to help cope with mental health during this crisis and beyond.

Mental health was a critical concern in America before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. According to the National Institute of Mental Health Disorders, an estimated 26 percent of Americans age 18 and older already suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder.

Now with COVID-19, depression, anxiety, loneliness, increased physical and substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies are on the rise. We cannot in good conscience stand by and not help each other through these challenging times.

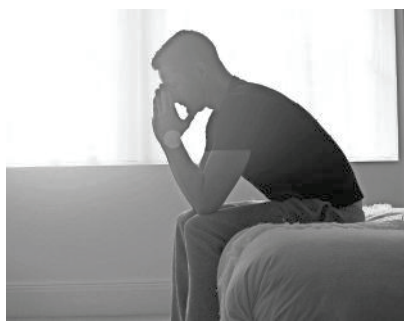
I have experienced firsthand the tragedy of losing someone to mental illness and it has had a profound impact on my life. At a time when so many people may be feeling despair and our courage is tested, hope is not lost, and we need to lend a hand and offer support, so we don't come out of this crisis with family members and friends suffering with mental despair.

So, what can any of us do to help others feel emotionally connected, valued and loved?

Sometimes, all it takes is just a smile and eye contact. Even if six feet apart, these little acts of kindness can make a world of difference for someone who's suffering in silence.

Reach out to family, friends, neighbors, and especially to older adults. Remind them they are not alone. Support older family members by making sure they stay connected. Offer to set them up on a phone, tablet or laptop so they can connect with others via video chatting apps such as Zoom or Facetime. And older adults shouldn't hesitate to ask for technology help — younger people are wanting and ready to help.

The Institute on Aging provides a great resource in the Friendship Line — the nation's only 24-hour toll-free hotline for older adults and adults with disabilities — (800) 971-0016. The helpline is staffed by people who specialize in offering a caring ear and having a friendly conversation.



Jarrod McNaughton urges everyone to help those struggling with mental health issues.

GETTY IMAGES

Equally important is helping children and adolescent populations ease their anxiety and fears, especially given that half of all mental health disorders begin by age 14 and three-quarters of disorders by mid-20s, according to the World Health Organization. It is vital that parents and caregivers watch for behavior changes in youth, talk to them about the facts of COVID-19, reassure them they are safe, and be a good role model in how you deal with stress — great tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Connecting in new ways with members and our community regarding mental health is important. As such, Inland Empire Health Plan is launching a podcast, "Chat and Chai," in which IEHP Behavioral Health Medical Director, Gayani DeSilva, MD and Clinical Behavioral Health Director, Amrita Rai, LCSW, will explore the connection between physical and mental health. They will provide practical advice and tools that shine a light on the way that our mental health plays a role in all that we do and how we can help others through conversation.

When we look back on this time, we will remember how we answered the call and how we were there for one another. It is our heart, spirit and compassion for others that will get us through these tough days and strengthen us for the future.

If you, or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression, or anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or others, please talk to someone. You can call 911 or visit the Disaster Distress Helpline at www.samhsa.gov/disaster-preparedness, call (800) 985-5990, or text TalkWithUs to 66746. If you are an IEHP member, call Member Services to connect with a behavioral health specialist today at (800) 440-IEHP (4347), TTY (800) 718-4347.

Jarrod McNaughton, MBA, FACHE, is chief executive officer of Inland Empire Health Plan. Email him at TopofMind@iehp.org.



Your Turn
Jan Harnik
Guest columnist

Coronavirus exposes local economic weaknesses

Under the COVID-19 condition, we are watching the world change before our eyes. The constant chatter of "when we get back to normal" is just that — chatter. The life we knew before — the life we participated in, built our schedules around, and made our livings from, day in and day out — will never be the same.

Our health, lifestyle, and habits have transformed, quite suddenly. The Coachella Valley has been particularly hard-hit. Why? Simply put, our economy largely is based on tourism, and tourism is not deemed essential. With the cancellation of event after event, we've seen our economy come to a screeching halt.

It's time for the Coachella Valley to look at the glaring need for long-term change and opportunities.

Over the last few years, the discussions regarding our reliance on a tourism-dependent economy (and the resulting low wage service-related employment) have increased significantly. This screaming reminder makes clear we must act and invest — not just discuss.

Concurrently (and not coincidentally), the discussions include the need for higher education and the enhanced fiber and bandwidth needed for high-speed computers, dependable WiFi and connectivity. If our economy is to be resuscitated in a sustainable and meaningful way, accessible and relevant education for our entire region and the bandwidth to support that education and well-paying 21st century jobs is crucial.

In February the region came together impressively to rally for an independent four-year Cal State campus, CSUPD. That work continues under an organization named appropriately, Priority One CV. A comprehensive university offering STEM degrees is the answer to providing our students with the education and well-paying jobs that make the American dream a reality.

An educated workforce attracts businesses and employment, encourages business tourism, and with higher-paying jobs, that workforce can shop and dine locally supporting businesses and generating revenue for our infrastructure projects. An educated workforce increases quality of life for everyone.

The tough question is, how do we encourage support for the investment needed for the necessary bandwidth and infrastructure? Maybe, just maybe, the motivation might be that when our schools closed, Coachella Valley's youth were forced to study "virtually" and not all students had access to WiFi. Maybe the fact that computer-hosted meetings became de rigeur for business creating WiFi congestion. Maybe because it's tough to watch a movie when computer-related work and study is taking up the bandwidth. Or maybe it's that our economy is on life support and the future without increased bandwidth is dismal.

Fortunately, we have three strong organizations representing the cities, tribes, businesses, etc., of our valley. Using regional approaches the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership (CVEP), the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) and the Greater Palm Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau (GPSCVB) can develop a path for growth and prosperity.

A regional and comprehensive plan with shared vision and goals is necessary. Collaboration is critical.

A cautionary note: The Coachella Valley has been hit hard before and plans have been made. When the outlook improves we go back to our same old routines.

This time, let's rally together, do the hard work and make the financial investments.

It won't be easy, but continually and painfully being reminded of our economic vulnerability is not an acceptable alternative.

Email Jan Harnik, a member of the Palm Desert City Council, at jharnik@dc.rr.com.

YOUR VOICE

More protections needed before reopening

Led by Supervisor Manuel Perez, the county board has rushed to do the bidding of businesses that are eager to open before it is safe by voting to lift some of the rules set by their chief medical officer Dr. Cameron Kaiser.

Supervisor Perez has said that the governor is requiring too great a reduction of infections before businesses can reopen. However, at this time the rates of infections and deaths in Riverside County are still rising, not going down.

We live near the Salton Sea, which causes poor air quality that makes our residents more vulnerable to COVID-19 because they already suffer from higher rates of respiratory and other diseases. We agree with Dr. Raul Ruiz who has said that we should not even consider reopening without providing more testing and proper protections in place for farmworkers and

other vulnerable people.

Demands by some local politicians to overrule the governor only weaken containment efforts. The virus will not stop at the county line. COVID19 — like the Salton Sea — is a public health crisis. During these times we should listen to the medical experts, not the politicians who are unable to acknowledge scientific facts.

Chuck Parker, Palm Desert, Salton Sea Coalition

Similar 'quests'

We are still enjoying Shad Powers' March 20 piece, "My quest to find toilet paper ends in success after seven days."

I think it is one of the funniest pieces I've read in years, and we've read it over the phone to friends back in Wisconsin who have absolutely enjoyed it, too! Particularly because it's so true!

I went through the same quest up here in Yucca Valley in our Vons last week and had the same sense of elation as I left the store with the next to the last package of a megaroll Quilted Northern, tucked under my arm — success!

Did you ever get the bread?
Phil Salstrom, Yucca Valley

A stationary threat?

As you drive east on Fred Waring Drive, turn right on Warner Trail and you will see 800 to 1,000 cars parked bumper to bumper.

Cars that can burn. With fuel tanks, rubber tires, paint, etc. My fear is the fire department will have too big of a fight on their hands.

The people at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden might think about moving the cars way out of town.

John Maltbie, Palm Desert