

WELL CHURCH & COMMUNITY CONFERENCE 2022

MENTAL WELLNESS Q&A SESSION

Answered by: Miquela Smith, MPH

Does the increase in suicide rates in rural areas over urban have to do with social interactions or some other cause?

There are a lot of health disparities associated with living rurally, so when you think about the challenges that people experience in seeking healthcare, it's seeking resources. It's a lot more of a challenge in a rural area compared to those that live in more urban areas. This applies to primary care providers, but also for certain health specialists like mental health providers. There's a shortage of mental health providers across the country, but we definitely see that more in our rural communities.

With the advancement and ability of telemedicine and tele-behavioral medicine. We like to think, "well people that live rurally now have access in the same way that everyone else does." I lived in a very rural county, and we don't have very good internet access to even utilize tele-medicine and tele-behavioral services. I think a lot of it goes to that foundational piece to access and resources, and geographically being a little bit more disconnected.

One of the beautiful things about small and rural areas is that people are very engaged with their smaller communities, but during the pandemic you think about having to isolate and being so far removed from people. There's a lot of challenges regarding staying connected. I think there's a lot of challenges with people who live rurally and so that also affects mental health resources access, mental health outcomes, and suicide.

What are ways to help identify "normal" feelings vs. when help is needed/required?

One of the things we talk about in mental health first aid and in our programming is thinking about the amount of disruption in your daily life a mental health challenge has.

For example, I'm experiencing the blues this week, but it's not really impacting my ability to go to work, or it's not really impacting my relationship with my family or my spouse. But it is maybe impacting some of my other routines such as going to the gym and things like that, but it hasn't impacted my basic functioning.

Now when we start to cross that line, it starts to affect your relationships, your basic functioning, your ability to "live, laugh, and love." If it starts impacting those barriers, its best to start thinking of more serious or professional help would be warranted.

Rather than think about just the feelings or emotions themselves, think about how they are impacting your ability to function and how disruptive they are to your daily life and your relationships. This thought process can really help guide “is this something that I can manage now on my own” or “is this something that warrants professional help with something more serious?”

What are some suggestions for mental wellness that can be practiced?

We’re trying to take a holistic approach to health and there’s a lot of things that impact physical health, that also impact your mental well-being. This includes being aware of your diet, your nutrition, and your physical activity. This can look like trying to be mindful when you’re eating and engaging in physical activity. Going outside for a walk (even if you’re not doing vigorous activity) is something beneficial.

I also encourage people to find some sort of meditative or spiritual practice and that looks different for everybody. It can be as simple as doing a mindful or grounding activity each day, and trying to take distractions away when you’re walking, rather than walking and scrolling your phone. Really engage with that experience when you’re eating a meal, instead of scrolling your phone or watching TV. Enjoy your meal and try to engage with that experience non-judgmentally. As I mentioned before, we often get so caught up in our thoughts and lose the experience of the present moment.

Also, sleep! Sleep is so underestimated of how it impacts our mental well-being, in addition to nutrition and staying physically active. Try to take on some spiritual or meditative practice around you and make sure you’re getting adequate sleep.

Those are some self-help strategies.