



►► THE BASIC FOUNDATION FOR INCREASING BEHAVIORAL MOTIVATION AND HEALTH INCLUDES TAKING GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF, GETTING REGULAR EXERCISE, HAVING ADEQUATE FOOD AND NUTRITION, AND GETTING PLENTY OF SLEEP.



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Psychological Tolls

An expanded look at civil and political unrest, economic instability, and COVID-19.

IT IS CLEAR THAT THE YEAR 2020

and the ramifications of the many events that have transpired throughout it have resulted in significant increases in mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, stress, domestic violence, and suicidal ideation and behaviors. Prior to COVID-19, the U.S. was already experiencing one of the deadliest periods in drug overdoses—71,000 deaths in 2019. Currently, the Associated Press and national data on emergency responses reported that overdose deaths were already trending upward. This preliminary data tells us that there has been an increase in drug-related activities, which increases the potential for drug overdoses. Significant increases in alcohol and cannabis sales in Illinois since the pandemic confirm this statistic.

Stay-at-home orders, job losses, social isolation, and a decline in social activity have played major roles in an increase in mental health symptoms, substance use, and relapse. Many people are experiencing an increase in already-existing mental health symptoms; others are experiencing mental health symptoms for the very first time. Increases in people working from home, loss of social connections, homeschooling children while maintaining a job, and the lack of accountability to others have significantly affected many people. Women are leaving the workforce in record numbers due to their inability to manage their heavy workloads with the demands of raising and educating their children. Of the 1.1 million people who have left the job market in September, more than 860,000 were women, according to September job reports. The long-lasting implications of this defection from the workforce are yet to be

seen; but, most likely such departures will have a significant negative impact from financial and cultural standpoints.

Tending to basic needs

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 31.8 million people were receiving unemployment benefits at the end of July 2020. Much research has been done on the impact of losing one's job and the toll of unemployment, financial instability, and long-term job loss. The data consistently show that these factors are closely related to higher levels of anxiety, depression, life dissatisfaction, and psychological and financial trauma. The more likely a job loss threatens someone's ability to pay for basic needs—including food and housing—the more they are at risk of experiencing mental health problems.

Seventy percent of employed adults indicated that the state of the economy is a source of great stress, according to a study conducted by the American Psychology Association in May 2020. Additionally, the stress of the pandemic, its increasing death toll, the fear of spreading or getting the virus, the disruption to routines, and the decrease in social connections—to name a few—heightens these stressors. Stress can be manifested in the following symptoms:

- fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones;
- changes in sleep or eating patterns;
- difficulty sleeping or concentrating;
- worsening of chronic health problems;
- worsening of mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, suicidal thinking; and
- increased use of alcohol, cannabis,

tobacco, or other drugs, including prescription medications.

What can we do to combat and lessen the negative psychological impact that these stressors have placed on us? We must first address our basic needs, as described by American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his “hierarchy of needs” theory. Maslow’s theory suggests that basic needs must be met first, including physiological needs such as food, water, warmth, and rest. Feeling safe and secure is also an essential need. The basic foundation for increasing behavioral motivation and health includes taking good care of yourself, getting regular exercise, having adequate food and nutrition, and getting plenty of sleep. However, when our basic safety feels threatened due to the trauma of experiencing a pandemic, civil and political unrest, and economic uncertainty and fear, we often overlook and are unable to prioritize these basic needs. This leads to an increase in mental health problems and physical unwellness.

Despite the physical vulnerability

of older adults who are exposed to COVID-19 (80 percent of COVID-19 deaths have occurred in people 65 and older), seniors have proven to be more psychologically resilient than the younger population in new research published in *The Gerontologist*. As the pandemic lingers and appears to be of long-lasting duration, many older adults have been changing their behaviors to cope with and manage their distress, including addressing feelings of loneliness. Older adults have listened more to public health officials to lower their likelihood of being infected with COVID-19 and they have altered their routines, including engaging in social distancing and self-care practices. Additionally, older adults are socially engaging more with friends and family, going outside more frequently, exercising more frequently, pursuing new hobbies and interests, and staying connected to faith-based communities.

The Illinois Lawyers’ Assistance Program has seen a significant uptick in the need for services for mental health and substance use problems, especially

during the past few months. While there had been a slight downward trend during the initial stages of the pandemic, upon people returning to the workforce beginning in June 2020 there has been a steady increase in the need for services. We anticipate this to continue into the fall and winter as COVID-19 cases increase, exacerbating the pressures and stressors that people were already facing. Feelings of isolation and loneliness will increase as well, especially during the holidays when routines may need to be altered to remain safe and healthy. Utilizing appropriate and healthy coping strategies to offset or minimize stressors will be vital moving forward. We must remain united and vigilant as a legal community to our own problems and to the problems of those around us as we enter into uncharted territory for the next several months. Please reach out to LAP if you or someone you know is experiencing an increase in mental health or substance use problems (give us a call at 312-726-6607 or email gethelp@illinoislap.org). We are all in this together. 

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Vol. 108 #12, December 2020.
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