

## Mental Health in a Post-Pandemic World

The words 'mental health' have become buzzwords in today's society but what does 'mental health' mean? In short, mental health includes our 'emotional, psychological, and social well-being.' (CDC.gov) This, in turn affects how we think, feel and behave – as well as how we handle stress, are able to relate to others, and the capacity to make healthy choices.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the nation's collective mental health, and brought the need for supports and services to the forefront of the country's attention, budget, and began many important conversations. According to the National Institute for Health in a 2021 study, nearly half of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and increased substance use. Isolation, job loss, complications from having COVID-19, and other life stressors contributed significantly to these symptoms. People who already struggled with their mental health had increased difficulties.

So what happens during a pandemic, when the world is shut down, and half the nation is struggling with mental health symptoms? The concept of virtual 'Telehealth' services is approved as an allowable, billable service in many states, including New Jersey. Now people who are unable to leave their home due to work or caring for children, or whose case manager, therapist, doctor, etc., has closed their doors, have a new option that allows for a full range of psychiatric services to be provided over a HIPAA compliant virtual platform, or in some cases, over the phone. Private providers switched to virtual services, and many online platforms, such as Talkiatry, Better Help, Teledoc, Cerebral, etc., started thriving. People were now able to receive services from the comfort of their home (car, backyard, walk around the block). Alternatives' CSS program was approved to provide virtual services using 'Go-To Meeting' or over the phone. This way there would be no discontinuation of clinical or case management services for our mental health clients.

Fast forward to 2023, into a post-pandemic world. For many, lives have changed drastically. Work places or school now have remote/hybrid options. The pandemic has polarized many people due to personal opinions. What has not changed, however, is that many people are still struggling with mental symptoms, with a new one emerging: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Nurses and doctors on the front line, people who witnessed loved ones dying from the virus, as well as many other situations, have emerged with significant trauma: flashbacks, nightmares, intense anxiety, reliving traumatic memories, etc. The need for mental health services is now even more necessary than ever.

The pandemic put the words 'mental health' on the table. There is now more recognition and insight when someone is experiencing symptoms. Mental Health professionals are advocating for the continuation of Telehealth as it has proven to be an exceptionally useful and engaging service for many people. This has been seen across the board with our CSS clients. Many of them have provided feedback that they prefer virtual services due to many reasons: anxiety leaving the house, inability to drive, and some individuals are more engaged over the computer or phone. It comes down to personal preference. The mental health platforms mentioned prior, continue to boom, with often more clients than therapists/doctors available. Platforms are offering generous sign-on bonuses and increasing compensation to recruit additional mental health providers.

If you are experiencing mental health issues, now is the time to seek help. There are now options of how you can receive services – in person, virtual, phone. Mental health providers are well versed in how the pandemic and the post-pandemic world has affected people in all aspects.

\*If you are experiencing thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else, please contact your local psychiatric screening service, hospital, or call 911. You can also call or text the 'Suicide and Crisis Hotline' at 988.\*

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