

Low spirits, high anxiety

AS SECOND WAVE OF PANDEMIC SWEEPS MANITOBA, MANY STRUGGLE TO COPE WITH FEAR, ANXIETY

By: Eva Wasney

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Piotrowski says it is helpful to think of this time as temporary, rather than the new normal.

A second wave of coronavirus infections has long been anticipated, but that doesn't make a second lockdown easier to swallow.

Winnipeg moved into critical or "code red" status on Monday after weeks of climbing case numbers and the public health order is a reminder that, eight months in, the pandemic is far from over. If you're struggling to cope with code red, you're not alone.

"People are tired, they're exhausted," says Dr. Andrea Piotrowski, a clinical psychologist with Shared Health. "We've been in this for a long time... and people really do want their normal lives back."

The initial shock of COVID-19 has subsided for most, but fatigue and symptoms of anxiety and depression have been booming. Surveys conducted this year by Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) indicate that the number of people experiencing high levels of anxiety has quadrupled during the pandemic, while depression has doubled. Those numbers remained steady over the summer despite a dramatic reduction in restrictions.

Symptoms of concern include a persistent low mood, difficulty sleeping, trouble concentrating, significant weight gain or loss and thoughts of self-harm — although Piotrowski warns against self-diagnosis and recommends seeking a professional opinion.

Uncertainty about the future, financial stress and worries about getting sick are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the leading causes of poor mental health during the pandemic.

"People have difficulty tolerating uncertainty," Piotrowski says.

"There's a lot about this pandemic that we aren't in control of; we can't make a (vaccine) be developed any faster, we have to leave that to the experts. But what we do have is control over our own behaviours."

If contracting the virus is a major stressor, focus on following public health guidelines — wearing a mask, washing your hands and staying home — to limit your risk of exposure.

Setting goals, even for small household tasks, and challenging catastrophic thinking can provide relief from uncertainty.

"This isn't the first time the world has experienced a pandemic," Piotrowski says. "Being able to think of this time as temporary, I think, is helpful, rather than calling it the new normal, because it really is a temporary normal."

Noticing and naming difficult emotions for what they are goes a long way in dealing with mental-health issues, says David Ness, director of the University of Manitoba's Student Counselling Centre.

Grief is one emotion that tends to fly under the radar. While the pandemic has resulted in the loss of life it has also resulted in the loss of human connection, opportunities and recreation for every demographic.

"There's grief everywhere, it's palpable," Ness says. "We don't even really have a language to talk about these other types of loss."

For many, code red comes with a second wave of grief. Coping mechanisms, like the gym and socializing with friends, have been taken away and jobs — many of which are service industry positions held by university students — have been cut again.

The students Ness works with describe difficulty staying motivated during remote learning, struggling with relationships and missing out on the campus experience. Add this week's news of a possible faculty strike to the mix and it's no surprise



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students are feeling burned out.

"Everybody has a limit to what they can cope with," Ness says. "A message I give to students is that you're a normal person having normal reactions to an abnormal (situation)... be kind to yourself, compassionate to yourself and use resources and supports."

Stephen Sutherland, program director with the Canadian Mental Health Association, says it's helpful to focus on activities that are still possible — such as grocery shopping, spending time outside and phone calls with friends — in the midst of so much loss.

"Plan the practical things out," he says. "Figure out how you're going to do life for the next few weeks with the restrictions and ask for help, that means staying connected with others."



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"Even though we have to physically distance ourselves, that does not mean that we socially, emotionally distance ourselves."

Sutherland also recommends practising healthy habits, like getting enough sleep, eating well and drinking water, while phasing out behaviours that don't benefit well-being, such as dwelling on the news or spending too much time scrolling through social media.

"Too much of anything is not helpful," he says. "Part of it is learning our capacities, right? So if we know that we're going to be activated and triggered by watching copious amounts of news... we can turn our phones off."

"My encouragement would be to test drive that and if you're feeling good about that, and we're feeling more calm, then maybe that's something that people want to put in their daily routines."

eva.wasney@freepress.mb.ca

Twitter: @evawasney

Eva Wasney

Arts Reporter

Eva Wasney is a reporter for the Winnipeg Free Press.

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LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

- Canadian Mental Health Association: 204-775-6442, mbwpg.cmha.ca
- Shared Health Crisis Response Centre: 204-788-8330, sharedhealthmb.ca
- Addictions Foundation of Manitoba: 1-855-662-6605, afm.mb.ca
- Klinik: 204-784-4090, klinik.mb.ca
- Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba: 204-786-0987, mooddisordersmanitoba.ca
- Manitoba Suicide Line: 1-877-435-7170, reasontolive.ca

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