

UW Health: Offers strategies for managing psychological impact of COVID-19

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MADISON – COVID-19 often takes a toll on the mind as well as the body, especially for those long-haulers who experience lingering symptoms of the disease. One [study](#) out of the University of Oxford found that in patients with no previous psychiatric history, a diagnosis of COVID-19 was associated with an increased incidence of developing a first psychiatric diagnosis in the following 14 to 90 days after contracting the virus. The most prevalent psychological conditions reported were anxiety disorders, insomnia, and dementia. Issues with fatigue, sleeping difficulties and cognitive difficulties (brain fog, memory issues and difficulty concentrating) were also common.

“When COVID-19 symptoms continue to linger, people can start feeling anxious or depressed because they begin to worry that consequences of the disease will never go away,” says Shilagh Mirgain, distinguished health psychologist at UW Health. “This not only highlights the need for psychological treatment and coping strategies that address the mental health toll of COVID-19 but also underscores the need for a public health response that acknowledges and addresses the pandemic’s mental health consequences.”

Mirgain says the disruption to people’s social, work, and exercise routines (as well as the limited access to typical coping strategies) are often worse for long-haulers, but even those with mild cases of COVID-19 may have lingering symptoms that can make it feel like the disease has upended their life.

Here are some strategies that Mirgain says can help us more effectively manage the psychological impact of a COVID-19 diagnosis and improve our quality of life:

- **Develop a tolerance for uncertainty:** Focus on what you can control. Practice mindfulness to live in the moment and let go of stress and anxiety, be kind to yourself during the difficult moments, and recognize that others are going through similar things and that you are not alone.
- **Pace Your Level of Activity:** Take breaks, be aware of how much energy you have and create a strategy for how you approach your activities. Prioritize using your energy and time for those things that are most important. Allow others to step in to lighten the load.
- **Grieve the losses:** Take time to grieve the losses of the pandemic and the changes that a COVID-19 diagnosis brought. Know that you can create a new normal and move forward.
- **Meaning and purpose (MAP):** Making meaning and cultivating purpose involves taking action in ways that feel more authentic and true to one's inner self and one's unique path in life. Ask yourself: what do I want to be about in the face of this difficulty?
- **Strengthen your support:** Stay connected to your support team, consider joining a COVID-19 recovery group, let people know what kind of support would be helpful to you. Set boundaries around what is not helpful to you and speak up about what you need. Seek professional care by talking with your physician about your experience and setting up an appointment with a behavioral health specialist.

Mirgain is available for interviews between 11:15-11:40 a.m. and 12:15-2:15 p.m.