

Mayo Clinic Q & A_ Dr. Craig Sawchuk_ Mental Health and the...

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Dr. Craig Sawchuk, Narrator

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 00:01

Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A, the amount of stressors and different uncertainties that we've been going through. So, it's that wear and tear gets to us, and if there hasn't been an opportunity to do some more restorative things, then after a while we do become more fatigued.

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Narrator 00:19

The lingering COVID-19 pandemic is not only causing fatigue, but it's also contributing to stress and anger. Today on Mayo Clinic Q&A, we'll discuss our mental health and get some tips to minimize the effects of pandemic related stress.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 00:34

Because there's probably a whole host of things that we're getting really angry and frustrated about that are really based upon things that we don't have much control over. Maybe we can put aside some of the parts that we don't have as much control over and try to use that anger in a motivational way because anger is an upper regulating emotional state, can we funnel that anger towards doing something that may be more productive or may be able to help us out a little bit more?

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:03

Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A, I'm Dr. Halena Gazelka. The Delta surge is just the latest wave in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For healthcare and frontline workers, there's fatigue due to stress, fear, and sadness about ongoing disease and death that they see every day. But this is taking a toll on all of us. For over 18 months now, we've all lived under a heightened level of stress with COVID-19, and it's taking its toll. Nearly four in 10 Americans have reported that worry and stress related to COVID-19 has played a negative role in their mental

health. So, how can we better cope with this and deal with our feelings? Well, here with us to discuss today is Dr. Craig Sawchuk. Dr. Sawchuk is a Mayo Clinic psychologist. He's the Division Chair of Integrated Behavioral Health. Thanks for being here today, Craig.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 01:57

Great. Thanks for having me back. Dr. Gazelka.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:59

Well, I love to have you here, Craig, because you're a boots on the ground guy. You're not just a guy who works in research, you are seeing patients in the clinic, day in and day out, and I'm sure are familiar with the stress that COVID-19 is taking.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 02:15

Yeah, without a doubt, you know, it really is a blessing to be on the front lines with our colleagues in primary care, family medicine, and pediatrics. And under normal circumstances, that's the first place that people go to for their health care, mental health included. But certainly, over the course of the pandemic, we have been seeing everything that our patients, and also our staff, have been going through on a day in and day out basis across the entire pandemic.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:41

Yeah, I do love, it's a discussion for another day, but I love the concept of you being integrated into the primary care clinics. I think that's fantastic.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 02:49

Yeah, it's the best way to deliver mental health care these days. And there's certainly no shortage of mental health things that we're able to do to help folks out now.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:57

That's great. Craig, tell us a little bit about compassion fatigue, what is meant by that? And what are people experiencing?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 03:05

Well, you think about it, not only from a healthcare perspective, or a health care, professional perspective, but just a human perspective, being compassionate, and empathetic is just part of the normal human experience. And whether it be that you're caregiving for folks in your own life, being just a supportive, you know, colleague or friend, or just even the reasons why you know, folks get into health care in the first place. Just being empathetic and

compassionate, helps us to connect and to be helpful. But at what point does it become too much of a good thing? You know, we think of just the wear and tear that the pandemic has had on all of us, we kind of think about it almost like an erosion effect over time, with the amount of stressors and different uncertainties that we've been going through. So, as that wear and tear gets to us, and if there hasn't been an opportunity to do some more restorative things, then after a while we do become more fatigued. So, this is where people may start to get a little bit more edgy, a little bit more irritable, a little less patient. And of course, that can happen on a continuum as well.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:16

Why do you think people are becoming more edgy and even, I mean, I would say angry sometimes in some of the things that I see on social media, for instance,

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 04:27

Well, the latest catchphrase is panger. You know, how our kids used to talk about being

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:32

I didn't hear that one yet.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 04:33

Yeah, well as our kids used to talk about being hangry you know, being irritable when they're hungry. Well, now it's kind of irritable with the pandemic. So, panger is what we're seeing. And honestly, the anger is coming from so many different angles. And again, it's been going on for a long time. So, we can think about just frustration with wanting to get our lives back. You know, we're just hoping for the end of the pandemic so we can get back into doing the things we would ordinarily do, the things that we've been cut off from over time. Then we can think about just frustration that we can have with people that we feel are not doing their part, to manage a pandemic, whether it be pushing back on vaccines, not social distancing, or masking, or doing other things like that. And then reverse some people who are just angry because they feel like their rights are being infringed upon because of these different mandates that are put into place. And then you also like take this backdrop of other stressors that have been happening to us that also evoke anger, you know, civil unrest, and some of the political things that have been happening. So, it's just been a lot of anger all coming together kind of at the same time.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 05:49

So, how can we fight that? Craig, how can we encourage the development of empathy in ourselves and in others?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 05:58

Well, I wish it was as easy as it is, would be to say, well just stop being angry, you know, just relax. It's not that easy. It's a lot easier said than done. I think, you know, the number one thing is we have to acknowledge, you know, the anger. Anger is a normal human emotion. And there are lots of things to be angry about, you know, these days. So, we just got to be honest with ourselves that just because we're feeling that anger, feeling that frustration, we don't

want to overly pathologize it. Now, again, it can be too much of a good thing. But there's a couple of strategies beyond acknowledging that, that you want to pay attention to. The first one is actually recognizing that as emotions get cranked up that flexibility in our thinking, and our ability to problem solve actually goes down. This is true for all emotions, anger included. And unfortunately, we can all point to experiences in our own lives where, yeah, anger has kind of gotten the best of us. And then after the fact we're thinking that probably didn't come off, you know, the right way, or it's gotten us into trouble in some ways. So, one of the first tips, you know, beyond acknowledging that anger is to even do some brief relaxation related exercises. These are among the most easily done portable types of skills that we can have out there. But what it does is it helps to give us more flexibility in our ability to think and to problem solve. So, doing relaxation is one. Second is part of our mindset as well, too. And that's really where acceptance comes into play. Because there's probably a whole host of things that we're getting really angry and frustrated about that are really based upon things that we don't have much control over. So, if we can acknowledge, well what parts of this equation can I have control over and what parts do I not? Maybe we can put aside some of the parts that we don't have as much control over and try to use that anger in a motivational way, because anger is an upper regulating emotional state, can we funnel that anger towards doing something that may be more productive, or maybe able to help us out a little bit more?

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:11

Craig, one of the things, little practices that I have in my life that I think has helped me is that I try to practice gratefulness on the way to work in the morning. So, I have about a 15-minute drive into Mayo Clinic in the morning. And so, I try while I'm driving in the car to list things. I'm alone, so I can do it out loud, that I'm grateful for and I try not to make it be the same things every single day. But I think that helps put me in a better frame of mind as I'm facing the day.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 08:37

That's another great strategy that you identify there because it's very portable. And it's really helpful for us because if we think of how the brain works, the brain is just naturally hardwired for threat. So, we're much more likely to pay attention to that threat, and again, there's threat everywhere these days. So, we actually have to like help our brain to kind of balance it out and refocus a little bit, and doing very deliberate practiced gratefulness exactly like how you're describing it and kind of weaving it into already part of you know, the daily routine is a wonderful way to kind of get your mind in that better mindset. And kind of depending upon the morning, and where you're at sometimes maybe taking a scenic route into work and maybe giving yourself 20 minutes or 25 minutes to get in, you know might be helpful as well, too.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:27

I might need a little more time for my gratefulness.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 09:29

Exactly, exactly.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:32

Craig, I've been curious about the toll that the pandemic has taken on mental health in the United States. I have

often wondered if there will be some incredible fallout from this in some way. Is there are more anxiety and depression due to the pandemic?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 09:53

Yeah, we initially saw this anecdotally, but clinically and now the research is really backing it up, as time is going along the studies are now starting to come out that are just tracking what's the pulse of mental health symptoms that people have been reporting across time in the pandemic. And one of the largest studies that have come out over the course of the pandemic, has looked at reports of symptoms of anxiety, depression, even trauma, and insomnia are up anywhere between two to four times higher over the course of the pandemic, as it was at the same time, kind of pre-pandemic. So, we're seeing, you know, this big surge and it totally, you know, again, it totally makes sense when you think about the human experience of dealing with these stressors, the uncertainty, the job instability, economic fallout, you know. As you mentioned, and all these other things, not being able to do the things we'd ordinarily enjoy doing or blow off steam. A lot of that is leading to just that increased pressure. And you really see not only people that historically have struggled with some mental health related difficulties, but we're also seeing people that maybe have, you know, have had stressors in life, but maybe not to the point where it's gone into the direction where they've been experiencing more breakthrough mental health symptoms. We're seeing a lot of that as well, too.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:19

Craig, do you think people are more willing to seek help for mental health issues now? And how should an individual know if they need to seek help?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 11:27

Yeah, it's been in a weird sort of way it's been one of the silver linings to the pandemic, again, I say that.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:33

I love silver linings.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 11:33

Yeah, we need silver linings as part of the things that we're grateful for. But do we ever want a pandemic? Of course not. But one of the big things that's come out of the course of the pandemic is just an awareness of the toll and the mental health toll that this is having on us. So, in turn, we've seen a lot more public health messaging about the importance of looking at your mental health, as health. We've also seen a lot of clinics and other hospital, you know, programs, really investing more in their mental health services, companies increasing, you know, their insurance to be able to help support people with mental health. We've seen transitions in the delivery of mental health services by going from in person to now doing virtual, both individual and groups. So, these are some really good things that have come out of it. Certainly, when you're finding things like worry, and stress, and even your mood going down to the point where it's really causing problems in your day to day living, being able to keep up with things, whether it be at work, or at home, or even withdrawing more socially much beyond what we're recommending from a public health perspective, these days. That would be important, you know, to check out. And always one of my favorite places, and

I know I'm biased with this, but one of my favorite places to check out first is to talk with your primary care team. They know you, they know your health care, they also know what resources are available, and they can help you with focusing your search on finding what might be the best mental health resource or resources for you.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:46

Again, I'm going to switch us a little bit to the holidays because they're looming large. We're getting very close to October right now. As we get to the holidays, is it okay for family members to discuss their vaccination status, and to make decisions for the holidays based on that?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 13:32

Yeah, when you take a step back, we're still in a public health crisis. And when we think about the nature of COVID, where it's a publicly transmittable, you know, condition, and the consequences of that can be, you know, quite terrible, it totally, totally makes sense, you know, to be able to have this as a focus of conversation in your planning beforehand. And chances are, we're this deep end of the pandemic that families already have been having these conversations, sometimes arguments, you know about where they stand, you know, on the pandemic. But when we think about, like, under normal circumstances, under non pandemic times, when we get together with our families during the holidays and traditions, well, what does it look like? We're all kind of crowded in a small area, probably not ventilated, you know, the best where we're hanging out, there's lots of contact and touching, we're sharing food and other things. I mean, and that's great. And that's how holidays should be spent. But if we think about that in the context of a pandemic, you know, right now, that's really hard to navigate. And especially folks that may not be vaccinated, you know, during that time. And that's where I think it's very, very appropriate that people do hold those conversations so they can think about the planning for that.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 14:57

How do you say that nicely if you feel you shouldn't participate? How can individual share that and be as least offensive as possible?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 15:07

Yeah, and this is where we always want to think about both the message and the delivery of it. But we'll take a step back. And I think what's important too, is pay attention to your own values. What's important to you? Is important for you to maintain safety and health of not only yourself, but of your family as well, too. And if that's a primary value, that should be a good motivator to hold, you know, these conversations when we're worried about getting into a situation, or maybe even pressured or guilted into getting into a situation that objectively is higher risk. So, it's important that when we're planning on having a conversation like this is that we're doing it in accordance with our own personal values. Now, it's also important to know that this isn't going to be a debate. The last thing that anybody needs to do is get drawn into a debate to defend, you know, their position on things. So, you can always couch it in a way that, I love you, and I want to be there, or a family wants to be there, but given where we're at right now in the pandemic, we're unfortunately going to have to take a pass on it this year. Likewise, you can also look at, well, what are some maybe alternate options that can be found? Is there any kind of middle ground of being open to that, whether it be doing some of this virtually, or maybe during a time when there's not as many folks getting together with a smaller group who are more vaccinated? Or can you do the drive by Thanksgiving, where you chat

out on the driveway where it's more ventilated and other things. So, there are some flexibility and ways maybe that we can approach it. But trying to approach the situation with sensitivity and compassion, but remember, it's not a debate. If, you know, it's consistent with your values, this is what you need to do, then just couch it in that manner.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 15:11

Thank you for that, Craig. That's always difficult, and I think the pandemic has in some ways really polarized things a bit for four folks.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 17:10

Right, and we're craving so much to get back together again. So, as the calendar comes right back around again, it's like we were dealing with this stuff in 2020, and we thought for sure by 2021, it was going to be the best Thanksgiving and the best Christmas ever. And now we're looking down the barrel of, okay, well, we've kind of had some practice, you know, with this. So, again it's acknowledging that it's been really, really tough, and we desperately want to get back together. But the best way that will get us out of this pandemic is if we continue to take all those good public health measures.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 17:56

Thank you so much, Craig. Any last words of wisdom for our listeners today?

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 18:01

Yeah, just continuing to stay optimistic about things. I know things are going to get better. They will. And we've made already tremendous progress. When we consider where we actually were at this time last year, we now have, you know, vaccines. Our therapeutics are getting better. The boosters are here and almost here for other parts of the population as well, too. So, we'll eventually get to the other side of this. We just got to continue to work on our own patience and continuing to treat other people you know, with patience and kindness as well.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:32

I like that. And I love that you mentioned silver linings about COVID. I love to think about the silver linings because I think it's part of that remaining optimistic.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 18:42

Well, you got 15 minutes at the start of every day on your drive into focus on silver linings. Just make sure you're also paying attention to the road while you're driving in too.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:50

Thank you so much for being here today, Craig.

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Dr. Craig Sawchuk 18:53

Great. Thanks for having me.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:55

Our thanks to Mayo Clinic psychologist Dr. Craig Sawchuk for being here today to talk to us about COVID-19 and mental health. I hope that you learned something. I know that I did. We wish each of you a wonderful day.

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Narrator 19:08

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