

# If change must come, what does that mean for our mental health?

Brittany Ganguly



As most of the world resides in lockdown, [pollution in many cities has decreased](#), [overall emissions are falling for the first time since WW2](#) and many people are picking up engaging, sustainable habits, such as gardening. If we're living 'sustainably' during lockdown, what would our mental health look like in the long run if living within our means meant living similarly to lockdown conditions, always?

COVID-19 and the changes it has caused in our daily life are affecting everyone differently, but one thing I would argue we all have in common is COVID-19 is having an impact on our mental health. It is not living in normal conditions for many of us to be unable to plan the next time we'll see our families or visit a favorite park. As social creatures, humans not only crave social interactions, they are what make us thrive. Being asked to eliminate them will take its toll. It is not only the lack of social interactions that affect our mental wellbeing but the increased stress and uncertainty fueled by a cracking system that has an impact on our overall wellness.

Addressing our mental health needs during COVID is essential and fortunately many of us are finding creative, new ways to cope with the increased stress. Zoom happy hours, virtual Easter egg hunts with family spread across the county, and virtual walks with friends are all helping us cope with the changes occurring across our systems. Unfortunately, the existential threats humans are faced with will not be overcome without simplifying our way of living permanently. The social and behavioral changes happening as a response to COVID are perhaps a glimpse into how society may be forced to scale back to live within our means forever. If this is true, would our mental health stay intact? Would yours?

To address this, we have to improve our mental health system of care. Rapid responses are needed now to prevent the spread of the coronavirus but once this is managed, a behavioral health crisis awaits as our county (and all countries) face the aftermath of economic and social fallouts caused by COVID. Much like the U.S. health care system was not prepared to handle

hundreds of thousands of cases of coronavirus, our behavioral health system is ill equipped to deal with millions of people stressed from losing jobs, personal and social support systems and a way of life they thought was unbreakable. Overhauling behavioral health care can be a topic for a future blog post though.....

While we wait and assume the subject matter experts will improve our systems of care (they may not succeed, there are many challenges), I want to focus on the personal aspects of adjusting to what is now a 'COVID lifestyle' but in the near future could be (and should be) a simplification in our lives (our hands forced by human induced impacts on our global system: climate change, loss of biodiversity, overpopulations to name a few). A shift to living within our means has to acknowledge the PROCESS each of us will go through to adapt to the new changes. I would guess we've all been through some or all of the stages of grief during this COVID transition. But what if COVID restrictions never ended?

Reaching a sustainable way of living does not allow time for 7.8 billion people to 'process' what is going on around them. Recognizing signs of distress, stress, anxiety and depression is the first step in the process. We are living in a moment of opportunity (amiss all the chaos) to understand ourselves better so that we can begin to build skills we'll need for the long run.

Have you noticed yourself working more than usual? Can't seem to turn your brain off? Or, have you wanted to avoid everything, the news, work, cooking, anything? These are all signs of stress, it does not always manifest itself as a chip eating couch potato. For many reading this blog you may be like me, glued to our computer screens for most of the day, finding it difficult to strike a balance between 'doing good work' and taking care of ourselves.

So try this. Imagine your current COVID shelter in place situation is the new norm, or is the norm 80% of the time. Dinners out are limited to 1x every 2 months and you go into the office once every other week, not 5 times a week. Simply as measures to cut back on our energy use, consumption, emissions. What parts of your support system would need to change for you to feel happy, engaged, motivated and empowered by your new way of being? What parts of this would be most difficult to permanently adapt to?

If we are to successfully navigate a sustainable future, we can't forget to take into account our mental health needs and the personal changes we all must embrace. Most importantly, responding to the human predicament will not come lightly, understand yourself and be kind to yourself so that we can continue to show up each day to participate in change.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month! If you're interested in learning more or are looking for specific resources, [search here](#) or [here](#).

If you live in California the easiest way to find mental health and many other resources in your area is by calling 2-1-1

If you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis, call 9-1-1 or 1-800-273-8255

Brittany Ganguly is the MAHB Communications Director and also works in California statewide mental health care programs. She has Masters degrees in Public Health and Social Work and is passionate about developing public health responses to the mental health crisis caused by human induced climate change and other existential threats and more adequately addressing women's health needs across the world.