



Lewis County Public Health & Social Services

# Health Beat

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## **Suicide Prevention in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

*by Rachel Wood, M.D., MPH, Lewis County Health Officer*

Every day researchers learn more about how COVID-19 affects us physically. However, we still have very little evidence to describe its short-term and longer term psychological and sociological effects on people. However, as a new study released the first week of September warns, nearly a quarter of the people in the United States are experiencing symptoms of depression. The study says that is nearly three times the pre-pandemic level, and higher than after September 11 and Hurricane Katrina.

Combining this new study with evidence from past events, experts fear this virus just may create what the JAMA Psychiatry journal referred to as “a perfect storm” for suicide mortality.

This potential storm is made up of chronic illness, physical distancing, economic stress, barriers to mental health treatment, pervasive national anxiety, and a spike in gun sales. The pandemic’s effects lingering for months with no end in sight increases anxiety much more than a single event like a storm or earthquake.

Everyone’s anxiety levels are up. At the same time, normal coping mechanisms such as reaching out to your contacts or getting professional care may not be available. As the pandemic storm spreads and lingers, the longer-term effects on all segments of our population may give rise to more suicides.

About one in eight emergency room visits in the U.S. is for a mental health or substance use disorder. We have seen reduced use of hospital emergency rooms for acute medical conditions due to fear over possibly catching COVID-19 there. What will happen to people experiencing mental health or substance crises if they also stop seeking emergency help?

Increased risk of suicide during major health crises is not new. There is evidence of increased deaths by suicides both after the 1918 flu pandemic and the 2003 SARS outbreak. Economic downturns are also associated with higher suicide rates when compared to prosperous periods.

Most often, suicidal thoughts come from feeling like you can't cope with an overwhelming life situation. With COVID-19's issues, managing stress can reduce the chances of being overwhelmed. Consider these suggestions:

- Take breaks from the news
- Make time to unwind
- Set goals and priorities
- Take care of your body
- Laugh – read a funny story or a comic strip.
- Connect with others
- Focus on the facts
- Access behavioral health services

Remember, it's okay to ask for help. Our normal daily lives have changed so much that even simple things like wearing a mask or waiting in longer lines at the grocery store can make us tense.

For a comprehensive list of professional mental health and behavioral health providers in Lewis County, go to <http://bit.ly/LCbhealth>. Lewis County resources are listed on pages 115 – 119.

Veterans can also access providers at the South Sound VA Clinic in Chehalis, or by contacting the Lewis County Veterans Relief Fund at 360-740-1417.

Experts estimate it will be at least two years before COVID-19's actual impact on the national suicide rate is known. In the meantime, let's do all we can to support ourselves and each other to minimize that impact.

Crisis support is available 24/7 by phone or online:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255  
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- Veterans Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 or text to 838255  
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/talk-to-someone-now/>
- Lifeline Crisis Chat  
[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/gethelp/lifelinechat.aspx](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/gethelp/lifelinechat.aspx)
- Crisis Text Line at 741741. <https://www.crisistextline.org/>
- Lewis County 24-hour Crisis Line 800-803-8833

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