

## **Expert says mental health challenges remain as lockdown lifts**

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The lifting of stay-at-home orders won't automatically erase the mental health challenges of stress and depression, according to experts at the Tulane School of Social Work.

As communities around the world begin lifting public health precautions amid the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges will likely remain, says Tonya Hansel, Phd, of the Tulane University School of Social Work.

Hansel and other experts from the Tulane School of Social Work are drawing on research following previous disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, to illuminate what pandemic recovery might look like.

“This is technically a biological disaster, and we know disasters affect people’s mental health,” Hansel said. “Our bodies are amazing at handling stress, but when it compounds over a long time, it can be too much.”

Some people may be depressed over ongoing financial problems. Others, particularly those with underlying health conditions, may be fearful of going out and concerned that so many people are not wearing masks or practicing social distancing.

Parents may be worried about the upcoming school year, and with many camps closed, anxious over having children in the house all summer. Those in coastal communities have the added burden of preparing for hurricane season, which begins June 1.

Hansel describes the stress like boiling water in a pot. If the heat isn’t reduced, the water can boil over.

“Too much stress can result in both physical and mental health problems,” she said. “An important thing to watch for is a lack of interest or ability to do ‘normal’ things or finding little to no joy in things that you used to do.”

She recommended focusing on things that are controllable, including the following:

- Continue to practice social distancing and mask wearing.
- Reduce exposure to news coverage.
- Consider holding a small outdoor dinner party or bunch or meet up with friends at a park.
- Continue to support friends who may be fearful of going out. Offer to do their shopping or errands, check in with them by phone or internet and try to include them remotely when possible.
- Continue to support front-line workers by providing meals to them or sending cards or emails to let them know you’re thinking of them.

As communities experience additional phases of recovery, people will go through corresponding emotional phases, Hansel said. “This disaster is tricky. The phases are

not as clear; however, it is likely to follow typical patterns of disaster response. Given the staggering loss of life and prolonged grieving, it may take longer than a year to reach our new normal.”

The Tulane School of Social Work has developed a [self-care website](#), which features guided meditation videos, online yoga videos, tips for indulging yourself, resources for children and mental health hotlines.

“We still need to be cautious and not overconfident. Over the peak does not mean zero transmission.”

Tonya Hansel of the Tulane School of Social Work