

With COVID-19, it's not only about your physical health.

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk, produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from the studios at St. Barnabas Hospital. I'm Steven Clark.

From a mental health perspective, the pandemic continues to claim its share of victims. As things begin to open up, there is a desire to reengage and do what we once took for granted. With this many come anxiety, feelings of not having control over what the present looks like or what the future holds. With us today to discuss this is Jenna Cooper, a licensed clinical social worker and director of the child and adolescent program at SBH Behavioral Health Services. Welcome Jenna

Hi. Thank you for having me.

So in general, now that we are beginning to see some light at the end of the tunnel. Are you still seeing anxiety, depression and grief among your young patients?

I mean to be honest with you, we're seeing all of those symptoms among all of our patients. Influx with our intake department with new cases. At the start of the pandemic, we saw several new patients come in that were exhibiting symptoms directly related to COVID, and the trauma of being locked down in quarantine, losing family members, contracting COVID themselves, losing employment and then as COVID began to stabilize. I don't want to say stabilize completely. In the last month, we've seen a significant increase in patients who were again experiencing the symptoms of depression, anxiety and grief around COVID. Fear over what is going to happen. Is it safe? We're expecting to see more new patients as people begin to resume what we say is normal life. We've all been locked down for over a year. I think many people have adjusted to that to an extent, in the best way they possibly could. In terms of going back into the world is very overwhelming, especially that we know the pandemic is still going on, and there is new information coming out about protection all the time. I think we are going to see a continuation of this on mental health being related to COVID for many more months, probably in 2022.

Is this because change is difficult for people?

Yeah. The process to readjust. I think that quarantine itself, lock down itself, and was something very different for most people. Working from home, balancing work life, within the confines of your space. For New York City residents, our space is not huge. We see a lot of patients live in one bedroom apartments. Apartments with one bathroom. So, to have all of their children at home was a definite adjustment. Coming out of it is very difficult, I mean for kids, one example for kids is remote learning. It was not the daily school day, it was not 7:30am to 3:00pm. It was a few hours online, then hours of grade work. An hour of submitting school work and then being done, kids were given the ability to play video games more, television and social media a lot more than before, because they weren't in a set space for those hours every day. Going into September, we don't know what the department of education is doing, those decisions haven't been finalized yet. Seeing in person learning five days a week, that's going to be an adjustment for those children. For adults going back into the offices, fear of contracting COVID, adjustment of not having to commute every day. Having the hours you were

commuting to yourself, and losing that again is an adjustment, and just social interaction (team work) is an adjustment.

Do you think children are more adaptable than adults when it comes to adjusting like this?

Yeah, honestly, we do know that children are more resilient. Typically in most situations, but for all of us this is going to be very new territory. Children could receive direct services within school, which I think will be very helpful as long as schools will be able to provide the space. We don't know what is going to happen. We don't know if it's going to be blended learning or five days in person for everyone. With those questions up in the air, it is still very difficult for parents. Our adult population, relaxing period in some way, because we could eat outside. Without having the answer from the Department of Education, I think parents are still feeling up in the air, their hands are tied. What are we going to do in September with or children? On May 1st, 85,000 city employees went back to their offices. We're seeing that much more. I know from a professional standpoint, other adults with whom I communicate with are returning to their offices. What is that going to look like? How is that going to play out for our own mental health, and managing our lives? We learned to manage.

Right. Word that we're hearing more and more of. It was a New York Times article. It was the work languishing. Are you seeing that, and exactly what is it?

I think we definitely see it, especially around COVID and being locked down. Languishing is not the concept where you are not suffering from depression. You are in this state of thought. I saw this really great article from NPR a couple of days ago that talked about brain fog, and how the trauma of the pandemic has created for many people and professional as well. Yes, you wake up and get your work done, but you have no motivation, you have no interest in it. You might be getting seven or eight hours of sleep, but you are not getting quality sleep. You don't feel well rested in the morning. You're going about your daily life, but you don't feel happy today, you don't feel connected to it. I think it's this mix where we adjusted to this pandemic life. I think many people are healing, unsure if they really want to go back to what normal was. I think we see with adults especially, the many responsibilities adults have, the idea of having to go back and socialize and interact with people might not be of interest as much. What does that look like? How could we turn down requests for interaction without offending anyone? Also getting ourselves back to normal.

Are there clinical symptoms themselves indicating that someone is languishing?

The symptoms to look for are the symptoms similar to depression. No motivation, fatigue, lack of energy and anxiety about your everyday responsibilities, yet the ability to go through it all. I think that is what you would report. I think that's key to see if there is any depression and languishing. You are able to get out of bed every day, you are able to go to work, and make dinner. You still feel this overwhelming lack of interest and motivation with those abilities. Many people would say, I never feel like cleaning my house, you get up and do it, but you rather be looking at the ceiling.

Someone told me that for years she always looked forward to meeting her friends in the city. They would go out to dinner, go to see a show. She doesn't feel like doing it any more. Is that a sign of languishing?

I think it's a sign of languishing. I think it's a sign of what we are going to see is the commonality of coming out of COVID. The motivation to interact with other people, and the desire to be social is

something that we all lost. What are we going to do? We all have Zoom fatigue. How, am I going to react with another person at a table? Do I wear a mask? Do I not wear a mask? Yes, my friends are vaccinated, but I don't know about the four peoples sitting at the table next to me. With restrictions being lifted, I think this goes through a lot of fears. What's safe? Especially, we see patients who are dealing with mental illness and clinical diagnosis. So, we have an influx of patients coming in. We had patients before who really struggled with anxiety, and what COVID did, their anxiety was extremely exacerbated by COVID. Coming out of this, is it safe for me to go to the supermarket? Could I go to my doctor's appointment? With doctor's offices opening up. Could I go for my physical? Could I go to the dentist? I think these are all questions and concerns people are struggling with.

As a therapist, what could you do to assuage their fears and concerns? How do you do it?

I think it's all about normalizing their feeling to be honest, and helping them see that everything they experience is what we're all experiencing. This is an uncommon experience. This is what we're facing and it's new to all of us. Most people didn't live in 1918, we're all new to this. We're all new to such a global pandemic. We had other pandemics, but they weren't intent with our everyday population. I think it's normalizing their feelings I think it's helping them reengage slowly with activities. The fact that summer is coming and we could do more things outside. We did see in June, July and August of 2020, people were active outside. Even at the height of the pandemic in those months we saw people go outside. Going outside and reacclimatizing, being able to go to a park. Being able to walk down the street without a mask is now perceived, the CDC is telling us it is safe. Helping people to feel more comfortable and more normal with reopening. It's still going to be slow, I don't see it as a vast process. With all the news reports, I would encourage people with anxiety to stay away from the news. It seems like common sense, but people still want to see what's going on.

Could languishing be a precursor to depression and anxiety?

I think it definitely can be. You see a lot. We all struggle with emotions. Languishing is great word to use for people who don't have depression or anxiety. We all have feeling, we all have days when we don't want to do things. Periods of time we have a lack of interest. It could definitely lead to it, I don't have statistics, but from my professional opinion, is less common to lead to it. I think we'll see less people actually diagnosed with depression who are struggling with languishing, but that isn't to say that someone who is dealing with languishing shouldn't seek professional help. You don't have to be clinically depressed to seek a mental health provider. I would encourage people to seek help if they are experiencing lack of interest and motivation.

Let me ask you a final question, when do you think that decision, and you say to yourself a child or loved one, when is the time to seek professional help?

Honestly, I think the moment you start to feel, have different feelings. Ok, I felt good at my job for the last six months. Now, the last three months, I'm really curious every day. I don't want to do anything. I don't want to cook dinner. I want to just sit and do nothing after work. Those are signs. For kids, to be honest, just any child that is going to be transitioning into inpatient learning. It would be a good for people to seek out a school counselor, to start a conversation with a school counselor about those transitions. Professional help, I think if children's grades are suffering, having difficulty getting your child to engage in in person learning or remote learning. We've seen a lot of kids who refuse to sign on. At this point the school year is coming to an end. For a lot of kids, what's the point? I'm done. Those are

signs that would require professional help. As a mental health provider, I think most people should always be seeking professional help. I think their mental health is very important. If you're anxious about returning to work or just interacting with other people and socializing. I've seen those as signs to talk to someone.

Medication could be an option. Is that possible?

Definitely, I'm not a psychiatrist. I would say medication would be a good way to help alleviate symptoms more quickly. It could then help with the progress of therapy. Automatically, to give you a push to be motivated in therapy to really start to make the changes. Sometimes, it's really hard to put in the work to help ourselves.

Jenna, thank you for spending a few minutes with us today. This is very good information. For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.org. And thank you for joining us.