

Coronavirus, Mental Health and African Americans



The coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic are causing stress across the United States, and communities of color are being heavily impacted—physically, mentally, and financially.

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of how the novel coronavirus is affecting African Americans. It also offers tips on how African Americans can manage the stress and mental health issues that might occur during this difficult time.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a disease that affects the lungs and airways that is caused by a novel coronavirus. Symptoms of COVID-19 can be mild or severe and can appear 2 to 14 days after exposure to the virus. Some people have no symptoms from the illness and are unaware that they have COVID-19, while others have severe symptoms that could result in death from the disease.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Sore throat
- Loss of taste and smell,
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea (a feeling of sickness with an inclination to vomit), and
- Diarrhea.

Although older people and people with underlying conditions (such as diabetes, asthma, or liver disease) are most at risk for severe symptoms, people of any age can get COVID-19, including children and young adults.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19 the following steps are recommended by the [Centers of Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC):

- Maintain “social distance” or staying about 6 feet or two arm lengths away from other people
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, countertops, handles, or other items shared with other people
- Wear a mask that covers your nose and mouth when you are out in public places

You should follow these precautions even if you do not have symptoms of the disease.

How is COVID-19 affecting African Americans?

Although African Americans make up roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population, they account for one in three people who have been hospitalized with COVID-19 and 3.7 times more likely to succumb to COVID-related deaths **than Whites**. The CDC reports that African Americans are dying at more than twice the rate of other races.

For many reasons, African Americans are at an elevated risk of COVID-19 exposure and related hospitalization and death. These may include:

- **Inability to fully adhere to stay-at-home recommendations due to job.** Many African Americans work essential jobs in grocery stores, transportation, health care, and manufacturing that may increase their risk of exposure to COVID-19. [The U.S. Department of Labor](#) reports that only 18% African Americans have jobs that allow telework, compared with 26% and 32% for Whites and Asian Americans, respectively.

African Americans are likely to have jobs that do not offer paid sick leave or family leave. They may have to continue working to support their families.

- **Lack of adequate practice of social distancing due to living situations.** African Americans are more likely than White people to live in cities and in close quarters, where COVID-19 spreads more easily. In addition, African Americans are disproportionately represented in jails, prisons, and detention centers, where the disease can also spread rapidly.
- **Disparities in health care, ranging from underlying medical conditions to health insurance.** African Americans have higher rates of chronic diseases and health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, and obesity. These conditions are linked to more severe disease, complications, and death from COVID-19. In addition, African Americans are twice as likely as Whites to have no insurance. They may worry about the cost of care and avoid seeking health care when sick.

These socio-economic pressures and health risks can put African Americans at greater risk for trauma, grief, and other mental health issues.

What is the link between COVID-19 and Mental Health in African Americans?

African Americans are experiencing trauma and mental health issues for many different reasons during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include:

- Anxiety from not being able to follow stay-at-home recommendations to protect themselves from COVID-19 due to their job situation
- Separation from friends and family, especially those who are sick or in the hospital
- Grief over the loss of friends and family members
- Emotional stress of close living situations and finding care for children out of school
- Financial stress of health care costs, job loss, and more
- Ongoing difficulties accessing health care services

What are the signs of stress and mental health issues?

- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Feeling unsafe or anxious
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other substances
- Strained relationships with family members
- Irritability and blaming others
- Lack of energy
- Unexplained aches and pains

What can you do to manage your stress and mental health issues cause by COVID-19?

- Follow “social distancing” and other steps to prevent COVID-19 as best you can in your situation
- Take a break from watching, reading or listening to the news. Make sure you’re getting your information from trusted sources, such as the [Centers for Disease Control](#).
- Stay in touch with friends and family by phone, video calls or other technology.
- Reach out to churches and other community organizations as many offer online and other virtual opportunities for connection.
- Try to maintain a healthy diet, exercise and sleep routine.
- Obtain or contribute food to local food banks. Some neighborhoods are creating their own food pantries.
- Do not put off urgent and emergency health care for new or chronic illnesses.
- If you cannot work, apply for unemployment insurance in your state. During the pandemic, the rules for who can apply have been loosened.
- Use prayer, meditation or other spiritual practices to find peace in difficult times.
- Share stories of resilience and survival from your past or your cultural heritage.
- Connect to cultural traditions and heritage as they can provide strength in difficult times.
- Use hotlines and other resources when needed.

This resource was prepared by the APA's Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities and the Division of Diversity and Health Equity. It was authored by Emily Paulsen and reviewed by Vabren Watts, Ph.D and Eric Yarbrough, M.D.

Hotlines

If you or someone you know are in distress, free counseling services are available by phone, text, or online chat. Most are available 24/7.

Disaster Distress Helpline

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746
24/7 crisis counseling for people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters ([SAMHSA](#))

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call 800-273-8255 or [Chat with Lifeline](#)
24/7 free and confidential support for people in distress and prevention and crisis resources for you and loved ones. ([Link](#))

Suicide Prevention for Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Call 800-799-4889 or Chat with Lifeline
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>

Crisis Textline Text TALK to 741741

A live, trained Crisis Counselor will respond by text. ([Link](#))

National Helpline Call 800-662-4357

Confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals

to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free publications and other information. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>
Confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the United States or U.S. Territories for substance use/addiction and/or mental health problems.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

800-799-7233(English and Spanish)
800-787-3224 (TTY) or
Text LOVEIS to 866-331-9474
<https://www.thehotline.org/>
Support for anyone affected by abuse

Veterans Crisis Line

Call 800-273-8255 or text 838255 or [live chat](#)
Connect with the Veterans Crisis Line to reach caring, qualified responders with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Many of them are Veterans themselves. ([VA](#))

Resources for Coping with COVID-19

American Psychiatry Association: Coronavirus and Mental Health: Taking Care of Ourselves During Infectious Disease Outbreaks
<https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/apa-blog/2020/02/coronavirus-and-mental-health-taking-care-of-ourselves-during-infectious-disease-outbreaks>

National Medical Association: COVID-19 Resources
<https://www.nmanet.org/page/COVID-19-Resources>

NAACP Coronavirus Resources: Report discrimination, tell your story, submit a question, and other resources
<https://naacp.org/coronavirus/coronavirus-resources/>

ESSENCE Wellness House Virtual Summit: Videos about COVID-19 and how to stay well, including a video with Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, psychiatrist and President of the American Medical Association:

- <https://wellnesshouse.essencestudios.com/>
- <https://wellnesshouse.essencestudios.com/session/a-look-inside-covid-19>

Crisis Text Line: How to Handle Coronavirus
<https://www.crisistextline.org/topics/get-help-coronavirus/#dealing-with-coronavirus-1>

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Emotional Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Outbreak <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/current-events/supporting-your-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

World Health Organization: Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>