

# Focus on mental health during COVID-19

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2020 is turning out to be a bummer—and acknowledging this fact is A-OK. That's a recommendation from Dr. Amy Dawel, a clinical and cognitive psychologist in the Research School of Psychology at ANU.

"Sometimes things are just rotten," Dr. Dawel says. "It's normal to feel rotten in response. Learning to sit with and accept uncomfortable emotions can help us to move through difficult situations—like 2020—more effectively."

Dr. Dawel's research focuses on understanding how people perceive and use emotions every day. In 2020, she has been leading a [national mental health survey](#) that follows the impacts of COVID-19 on Australian communities.

"The [pandemic](#) seems to have escalated many people's experience of anxiety," she says. "For instance, our research shows a strong link between financial distress caused by the pandemic and anxiety. But there may also be some people who feel less anxious—for example, people who are socially anxious or introverted might have found that changes to working arrangements reduce their stress. There are going to be large individual

differences in how people feel and why. The important thing is to pay attention to any feelings of anxiety and acknowledge this is a normal response to stressful and uncertain times."

Dr. Dawel believes the pandemic is exacerbating a pre-existing global mental health crisis, while also giving people renewed permission to speak up.

"Data from Australian mental health services like Lifeline and Beyond Blue show that people are reaching out for help more than before the pandemic. I'm also seeing people put many mental health strategies into action for themselves. People are realizing there is a lot of overlap between what we need to do to stay physically healthy and what keeps us mentally healthy. Maintaining a routine that helps you to get enough sleep. Eating well. Exercising regularly. Being kind to yourself and others. Kindness is a two-for-one—it benefits the giver as well as the receiver."

Staying connected with our family, friends and communities is also vital to maintaining mental [health](#), Dr. Dawel says. As an example, she points to a Facebook group created in her own community to connect people who may feel isolated or in need of support.

"Humans are social beings by nature. Connecting with others helps us to manage our emotions. Talking about our feelings of anxiety can also help normalize them. This is important because, while we can't stop the original feelings of anxiety, knowing that [anxiety](#) is normal can help stop us worrying about our worries. Learning to embrace the full rainbow of our emotions is important for mental and physical wellbeing."

Here at ANU, Dr. Dawel recognizes our community has experienced a series of challenges in 2020, including the bushfires, hailstorm, continuing pandemic and associated financial impacts.

"It can be difficult to stay positive and connected across long periods marked by blow after blow,"

she says. "But it's important we keep checking in on those around us and ourselves. We often remember to do this when things are acutely bad but may forget as a crisis tapers off. A bit of extra kindness and self-compassion can go a long way."

Provided by Australian National University

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