

Zach Dimmitt, Kian Salem, and Claire Stevens
Mental Health in Pandemic
Mental health problems surge in midst of pandemic
11/12/2020

Budget line:

The pandemic has led to a mental health crisis that mental health professionals are struggling to address

Interviewed Sources:

- Olga Alvarado— wellness counselor at LASA high school
 - Phone: (512) 414-6051
 - Email: olga.alvarado@austinisd.org
 - Date(s) contacted: by Claire on email 11/4, on Zoom 11/11
 - Info: Discussed her role as a wellness counselor and her experiences during the pandemic
- Sara Bawany - Licensed Clinical Social Worker and counselor
 - Phone: (469) 268-5632
 - Email: sarabawany@live.com
 - Date contacted: by Kian 11/10 via email
 - Info: Told me about how the pandemic has affected her work as a counselor and with a nonprofit
- Anita Lane - Life coach
 - Phone: (512) 632-2960
 - Email: anita@anitacoaching.com
 - Date contacted: by Zach 11/7 via phone interview
 - Info: Discussed her job as a life coach and how her work is affected by the pandemic

Background sources/websites used:

- CDC Report on mental health
URL: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_x#T1_dow
(used to provide national statistics about the increase in mental health problems during the pandemic)
- National Council on Behavioral Health report on demand and availability of mental health services
URL: <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/>
(used to provide data about demand for mental health care)

Here are the attempts I made and criteria I used to diversify my sources:

We each agreed upon a type of person who would bring a different perspective to our story to interview, and then we sought out individuals who fit what each of us were looking for.

While reporting this story, this is how I worked to enhance my credibility:

We identified ourselves to sources as journalists and explained the story we were writing to them.

Mental health problems surge in midst of pandemic

By Zach Dimmitt, Kian Salem and Claire Stevens

The coronavirus pandemic has brought isolation, stress and financial instability — all factors that negatively impact mental health.

The number of Americans experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression rose sharply in the first months of the pandemic, with nearly one-third of those surveyed reporting such symptoms, an August report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found. The report also found an increase in suicidal thoughts and substance abuse to cope with the pandemic.

Demand for mental health care is also up, according to the National Council for Behavioral Health. In a survey, it found that 52% of mental health care providers had seen an increase in demand for their services and that many were struggling to meet that demand.

As the pandemic wears on, mental health professionals have had to adapt new strategies and methods to provide the support that people now need.

Olga Alvarado, high school wellness counselor

As a high school counselor, Olga Alvarado has seen first-hand the toll the pandemic has taken on students, who are coming to her feeling anxious, depressed and overwhelmed. “We’re all feeling it,” Alvarado said.

At the same time, she said she’s finding it harder to connect with students through the computer screen.

“There’s been a huge shift because kids can hide behind their cameras,” Alvarado said. “When they can just turn us off, they turn us off.”

Alvarado is a wellness counselor at the Liberal Arts and Sciences Academy, a high school in northeast Austin. Unlike the high school’s academic and college counselors, Alvarado is a social worker and focuses on helping students deal with emotional problems.

“A lot of the work that [I] do, it’s emotional, it takes a lot of toll on the students,” she said.

Despite the challenges of online counseling, Alvarado continues to reach out to students.

Alvarado can no longer pop in and out of classrooms, pulling students into Room 267 to talk. Now she finds herself calling parents, looking for students and begging them to get on Zoom.

“I’m worried,” Alvarado said.

She said she calls home to students who haven't been responding, asking, “Can you please get them on the phone or get them on Zoom?”

The school now allows students to come to campus, and Alvarado meets with a few of her students in her office each week. Still, Alvarado said the halls remain empty, with most students still learning remotely and classrooms having as few as two students.

In addition to making it harder to connect with students, Alvarado said the types of problems students face have changed in the pandemic. She said she sees students that have never come to her before who feel overwhelmed by the challenges of virtual school.

“I have to shift my way of thinking and approaching students by meeting them where they’re at,” Alvarado said.

She said her first steps are often helping students create a schedule or routine that restores a sense of normalcy.

“Let’s fix the foundation first,” she said. “Once we get you down to the core ... that’s going to reduce some of what you’re feeling.”

Another strategy Alvarado uses to help students who are struggling is to reframe their experience.

“I bring up that everyone’s going through what you’re going through, but they’re going through it differently,” she said.

Alvarado continues to do most of her counseling on Zoom with students who remain at home. She says the “honey-moon” stage when kids were excited to have no school is gone, and now they miss their friends and the chance to leave the house.

“When they were able to escape from home and come to school, it was kind of their normalcy,” she said. “They no longer have that.”

Sara Bawany, social worker and counselor

Sara Bawany, 26, saw her budding career in performance poetry and public speaking fizzle after the pandemic hit, but her other career as a licensed social worker has exploded.

“The number of requests I received for counseling skyrocketed,” said Bawany. “Even if I had my profile set to where I was not accepting clients anymore.”

After completing a master's in social work from The University of Texas and a double bachelor's in biology and Islamic studies, Bawany went on to work for a Muslim nonprofit in Fort Worth, Texas, providing full-time counseling and some case management to indigent populations.

She now works for a nonprofit called Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE), whose mission is to create safe environments by holding leaders in religious and community spaces accountable. This includes various things including sexual exploitation, clergy misconduct and misappropriation of funds, and has been negatively impacted since the pandemic started last March.

FACE investigations provide thorough reports which could be used in a court of law, or simply to delegitimize a community leader. Bawany mentioned that a trend that the organization has seen on the rise is the physical abuse of children in Islamic schools— something that she, as a Muslim, hates to see associated with her religion.

At FACE, Bawany's primary role is the case manager, so she is the first point of contact for new allegation reports and she also conducts the initial intake of clients. Oftentimes, she is the one to refer clients to mental health services after doing a second intake for them following the initial one.

Because of the primarily religious nature of her work with FACE, Bawany largely works with women who have been victims of abuse by religious clergy. Taking care of clients, a lot of which have gone through traumatic experiences, can be very sensitive, and requires a certain level of expertise to render the clients comfortable enough to openly speak of the abuse they have experienced.

Though Bawany's pay with FACE has been cut in half and the events she frequently spoke at have nearly all become unpaid, she at least has found working from home easier.

"I have been enjoying the online switch especially with telehealth and counseling and it is much more convenient than would be otherwise," Bawany said. "But it is undeniable that my pay and work have been affected on a number of levels."

"It seems that many communities and individuals have had a lot of feelings and difficulties brought to the surface as a result of this pandemic," she said.

Anita Lane, life coach

Anita Lane's journey has had its own share of challenges. From fighting cancer to losing her husband, Lane's experiences have shaped the way she pushes through difficult times, a practice she relays to her clients as a life coach in Austin.

"These hardships are a pathway to freedom because your mind can look back and say 'I got

through it,” she said.

The pandemic has added additional stress for Lane and her clients. As a certified mental health professional, she aims to tap into the unconscious mind of her patients in order to “program” the mind to feel less threatened and reduce anxiety. Lane said such anxieties can take a major toll, especially during a pandemic.

“I deal with a lot of people that have anxiety, so this is all just one more thing to add to their anxiety,” she said. “If you have an anxious mind, it’s always scanning the horizon looking for what it can be worried about.”

Lane’s offices were shut down for the first three months of the pandemic. Since reopening to in-person visits in June, she said her clientele has mushroomed. While she realizes the social isolation was necessary for people’s health, her concern for her clients was at an all time high.

“My biggest concern are people that are isolated,” Lane said. “There’s a danger of a loss of connection if you’re not engaging with people.”

Lane said these obstacles are a chance for people to find out how strong their mind really is.

“I think that whenever we go through hard times, it’s an opportunity for us to dig deep and dig deeper,” she said. “It allows us to find strength, resiliency and a faith in ourselves.”

Lane said she has found this strength for herself by fighting through the difficult experiences life has thrown her way.

“There have been things in my life that were really hard,” she said. “I went through cancer and lost a husband. But these things have made me more fearless.”

Through her resiliency, Lane said she has proven to herself that she can get through anything.

“Cancer couldn’t take me down and being widowed couldn’t take me down,” she said.

As a life coach, Lane has used these experiences to help her clients learn how to free their own minds.

“One of the philosophies I’ve told people is that your mind is tricking you,” she said. “In reality, you’re on the right path but your mind is wired to be protective.”

“We need to ask ourselves, ‘who can we become on the other side of this?’” she said.