

**THE MOVING FORWARD  
TOGETHER PODCAST:**

# The Long-Term Emotional and Behavioral Effects of COVID-19



**DR. DYLAN ROSS**



**DR. BEN MILLER**

On the third episode of the Optum Moving Forward Together podcast, Dr. Dylan Ross spoke to Dr. Ben Miller.

Dr. Miller is a clinical psychologist and chief strategy officer for Well Being Trust, an organization dedicated to advancing the mental, social and spiritual health of the U.S. They discussed Well Being Trust's recent report on "deaths of despair" as a result of COVID-19.

"Deaths of despair" refers to deaths due to drug use, alcohol use and suicide. There were around 150,000 deaths of despair between 2017 and 2018. COVID-19 could significantly increase these, given the economic downturn, rise in unemployment and impact of social disconnectedness. But, as Dr. Ross and Dr. Miller discuss, the moment also poses an opportunity to care for one another in new ways:

### **Reach Out**

- Look for signs that loved ones are changing their patterns. Of course we've all had to change our habits as a result of COVID-19. But have they stopped doing things that normally bring them happiness or relaxation such as reading or taking walks? If so, check in.
- Ask how someone is doing, and be ready to listen. If someone isn't doing well, the answer might be hard to hear. Know that just hearing them is key. Respond with empathy, not judgment or shaming. Let the person know that you're there for them. If someone needs more help than you're able to provide, there are resources like crisis hotlines and mental health professionals that you can encourage them to reach out to.\*

## Recognize Inequities

- If you're experiencing new feelings of isolation and disconnectedness, know that for others — such as those living with chronic disease or certain mental health concerns — this may already be normal. Think about how you can carry empathy for others who may feel alone even in more ordinary times.
- We know that structural racism is a determinant of mental health. Structural solutions are required: not just increasing access to care but addressing disparities in employment, education, housing and more. Mental health cannot be addressed without acknowledging the sources of pain for many.

## Support Solutions at Every Level

- At the policy level, Dr. Miller calls for radical change and broader investment in the mental health care system. Employers can also play a role by choosing comprehensive coverage that ensures their employees have access to mental health care when they need it.
- There are solutions at a smaller scale too. As families, we can have more awkward conversations. For example, we can ask around the dinner table about how people are really feeling. And as individuals, we can remember to take care of our minds as much as our bodies. We can have compassion for one another as we go through this unprecedented time together.

\* If you're having thoughts of suicide, please know that you're not alone. For support and resources, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, or text 741741 for the Crisis Text Line.

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