

People Are Literally Dying From Stress in 2020

If you are in crisis, please call 1-800-273-8255 or visit . You are not alone.

2020 has been a bad year for so many people. Some have lost jobs. Families have been separated from loved ones in nursing homes. Health care workers have endured daily trauma, wondering if they might get infected with COVID-19. Parents are trying to teach their kids at home when classroom technology doesn't always work. And the media reminds us every day that more than 200,000 Americans have died from the virus.

What we don't hear much about is the alarming number of people who are committing suicide because of the stress of 2020. We've been so focused on the virus that we forgot about the invisible effects of this health crisis.

Paul Gionfriddo, president of Mental Health America, said of the pandemic's emotional effect: "If we don't do something about it now, people are going to be suffering from these mental health impacts for years to come."

The *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* announced in August that the number of people contemplating suicide jumped from 4% in 2018 to 11% in July 2020. And a federal agency that operates a hotline for people in emotional distress said it registered a 1,000% increase in the number of calls compared to the same time last year.

Americans are freaking out, and it's not just because of the pandemic. Our nation is in a divisive season. We are so polarized that married couples are divorcing because of politics, and friendships have ended. Some protesters are looting businesses and burning buildings to show their outrage about police brutality—while others are just screaming at each

other about Trump, Biden, racism, abortion, immigration and whether we should wear masks.

This mental health crisis became very personal for me recently when a Christian I know killed himself. I don't know what was going on in his mind. I don't know if he reached out to anyone for help. I just know that his death could have been prevented.

If you have been feeling overwhelmed by the stress of 2020, if you are sinking into depression, or if you have thought about suicide, please consider these steps:

1. **Stay connected to friends and family.** God called us to live in community, but the devil isolates people. When we are emotionally down, we tend to hide—and then the loneliness makes our depressive thoughts darker. Masks, social distancing and the closing of churches has made this worse. If you can't visit people in person at this time, call or text your friends and let them know you need their support. Come out of hiding!
2. **Tune out negative voices.** I honestly believe some media organizations are criminally liable for spreading fear during this crisis. I'm not going to hold my breath until journalists are held accountable for their lies, exaggeration and manipulation of news. Meanwhile, limit your intake of toxic media—and that includes social media posts. The vindictiveness, profanity and bitterness being spewed all over Facebook and Twitter is enough to trigger high blood pressure.
3. **Keep your mind focused on the Lord and His goodness.** It's amazing how much peace I experience when I start my day with prayer and Bible study. I learned this habit when I was a teenager, and now my daily "quiet time" is not an option if I want to manage my stress. In this crazy season, we must learn to "fix our eyes on Jesus,"

as it says in Hebrews 12:2 (NIV). The Psalms are especially helpful if you need to calm your soul. And there are 150 of them!

4. **Don't let anxiety control you.** Worry can make you sick. When we are stressed, we tend to overeat, our blood pressure goes up and our immune systems are weakened. Worrying about COVID-19 could actually make you more susceptible to getting it! You must get a grip. Put your faith in Jesus, knowing that He cares about every single detail of your life. Isaiah 41:10 says: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

5. **Don't medicate your stress.** Mental health professionals say many people are abusing opioids or other medications to find an escape from the stress of 2020. Others are turning to alcohol, marijuana, junk food or other substances—and their bodies are paying a high price. It really isn't possible to "escape" from the realities of life—you must face them. If you are becoming addicted to something unhealthy during this crisis, reach out to a mature friend, a pastor or a counselor now.

If you are drowning in stress, don't wait until your head is underwater to scream for help. God has put the right people around you. Let them see you, and let them throw you a lifeline.

(And if someone you know is struggling with anxiety or stress-related depression, please forward this article to them.)
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