

Anxiety spiking in new environment

Mental health needs adapting during crisis

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The toll of living through a pandemic has begun to catch up to the Gunnison community, as Gunnison Valley Health (GVH) Peer Support Specialist Joe Petersen has experienced.

As a peer specialist, Petersen serves as a mentor to individuals struggling with things like addiction or mental illness as they seek recovery. He also responds to emergency situations at GVH as well.

According to Petersen, GVH saw a “surge” in people going into the Emergency Room

this past weekend. Some were suffering from panic attacks — which can feel like a heart attack to those who have not experienced them. Some, he said, were reeling from alcohol withdrawals, one individual experienced a heroin overdose. The causes behind them “without fail” were related to COVID-19, Petersen said.

Due to his position, the GVH peer specialist has been able to keep a finger on the pulse of the many different aftereffects the virus has caused. Chief among them, Petersen said, is an increase in anxiety.

Center for Mental Health (CMH) Regional Director Kimberly Behounek explained that the Gunnison CMH office received an uptick in calls when the virus first began to spread.

In the uncharted terri-

tory some are experiencing, Petersen, Behounek and other mental health professionals encourage individuals to create a support system.

“Reach out to someone ahead of time, before it gets to be a serious problem,” Petersen said.

Katie Hunt, CMH’s assistant regional director for Gunnison and Crested Butte, suggests her clients get creative when practicing different coping mechanisms, to remember to keep in touch with family and friends and to get outside.

Behounek offers others to focus on what is controllable in their life and to make sure one’s needs are still being met, even in turbulent times.

“You have to realize what you can control and what you can’t,” Behounek said. “You have to have acceptance of the

fact that there’s not a lot you can do while creating some sort of normalcy.”

As mental health professionals, Hunt and Behounek have also had to adjust to a new environment amid the COVID-19 crisis, as CMH has moved to offering their services remotely through teletherapy.

The therapists have found that, for the most part, the new medium has not changed their practices.

“I think a lot of people have ideas that it might be weird, that you don’t connect as well, but I haven’t found that to be true,” Hunt said.

Behounek echoed the thought, explaining that she is still able to pick up on physical or vocal cues over video chat or phone call as opposed to doing them in person.

She added that she has seen a variety of clients who have found themselves coping well in the environment.

“For someone who’s already been in treatment and working on bettering their mental health, a lot of them feel like, ‘I got this,’” she said. “However, do still discuss coping mechanisms with others.”

For those who have struggled with anxiety and have recently seen a spike in it, Behounek’s message stays the same.

“You do the best you can,” she said.

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