

# May is Mental Health Awareness Month

By Lisa Young  
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The Center for Mental Health offers a number of services to help community members find ways to cope with COVID-19 stressors.

Lisa Young/Delta County Independent

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Mental Health Awareness month has been recognized in the United States every May since 1949. The main focus during the month is to raise awareness about mental health issues and help stop the stigma associated with it.

“We have to take care of our mental health as much as we would take care of our physical health. We do live in a very stressful world ordinarily and covid is just adding to that currently, getting the help that people need and reaching out to get the support is an important part of overall wellness and decreasing the stigma,” said Sara Palmer, Center for Mental Health.

The Center for Mental Health in Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray, and San Miguel counties offers a number of services to help community members, families and individuals find meaningful ways to cope in today's world. The center offers "same day" access and is open to new clients.

With the added stress of COVID-19 the center has put together a number of helpful client services according to Kristen Mau, director of marketing and communications.

"Our goal is to be a resource for people so that they can get the behavioral health care that they need. Obviously covid has shifted the way we're doing that because we can't meet in person the way we traditionally have been," Mau said.

During the stay-at-home and safer-at-home orders the center has moved to providing services remotely either by telephone or by video teletherapy. While the facilities are open, many clients are accessing the new technology.

Twenty-five percent of clients opted for video teletherapy sessions from April 1 to April 18. In February the number was at 3%, and the numbers are expected to increase as the clients become more accustomed to video therapy sessions.

"It has been embraced quite well. Our teletherapy sessions are locked to ensure security. We are open in person at our Delta, Montrose, Ridgway locations; however, we have seen a reduction in people coming in due to COVID-19 so having the teletherapy and telephone option has allowed people who may have had barriers in the past access our services," Palmer said.

Clients and non-clients can also access The Center Support Line open 24/7. Mau said the service is a way for people who are feeling stressed, anxious, or just need to speak with a trained staff person. The local support line began in response to the coronavirus pandemic as an extension of the original crisis line.

"We did a lot of training with our staff to be able to offer expanded information and kind of triage people calling in so they have a place to call somebody who is trained in helping with coping skills... and we've had a lot of positive feedback so, it's a great resource for us to offer," she said.

The week of April 19 to April 25, calls from the Center Support Line were up 27%. Mau said their support line will also help families who are food insecure or have other needs find resources. Anyone in the community can call 970-252-6220 and speak with a trained mental health staff member.

Another vital resource to help people cope during times of isolation is the center's Facebook live "Coping with COVID" chats every Tuesday at noon. The chats began about a month ago, according to Mau who said one benefit to the platform is the rebroadcast.

"We're getting a lot of viewership especially after, because the time may or may not be convenient for people. So, someone may have time in the evening to go back and watch it. We've been pretty pleased with the response," Mau said.

The weekly chat features two clinicians who have a passion for communicating via Facebook and differs from the traditional formal webinar. Audience participation is encouraged by sending in email questions prior to the show or during the chat.

Another tool offered by the center during the COVID-19 crisis is the myStrength.com online wellness resource. The free tool can be accessed by anyone by using the code CMHSupport.

“It has all sorts of coping strategies, a coaching tool and a variety of mental health topics such as coping with anxiety, depression and covid. It’s a really great application that people can access from their home 24 hours a day,” Palmer said.

One change mental health professionals would like to change is the “social distancing” message to “physical distancing.”

“People are so separated from friends and family and support systems, so it’s important to maintain social connectedness. It’s really important to stay socially connected via Zoom, by phone or by whatever means is safe. Maintaining those relationships is more important now than ever so, please follow the physical distancing guidelines but find ways to stay socially connected to your support system,” Mau said.

Mental Health Awareness month will continue to be an important focus for the center during the rest of May.

“That’s the power of it being a nationwide month. Because you can’t just break down the stigma in one place. It’s a societal stigma, so for us we try to do a lot of outreach during the month. We can talk about mental health, we can be open about mental health, there’s nothing wrong with getting help. We’re all in this together and whatever you need to be a whole person is really important and we should be able to talk about it,” said Mau.

Moving ahead, the center is looking to provide mental health services designed especially for healthcare and frontline workers dealing directly with the fallout from COVID-19.

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