

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

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The mental health fallout from COVID-19 is significant. Individuals who have not struggled much with mental health in the past may be experiencing symptoms now. Those with pre-existing conditions may experience an amplified intensity.

Over 50% of Americans will have a mental health condition during their lifetime but that stat needs some qualification. First, all stats like this are “pre-pandemic.” [Levels are clearly on the rise](#). Second, there is a spectrum of mental health (and there can be significant levels of unhealth or distress without an accompanying diagnosis). Third, mental health is dynamic, complex, and changing by the day—if not by the hour.

Consider this Metaphor....

As King County residents, we know more than we'd like to about traffic! Have you noticed that many traffic jams have no discernible cause? Sometimes there's a pile-up or stalled vehicle. But occasionally, due to the complexity of the system, there is a traffic jam for *no identifiable reason*.

The same is true with mental health. Our brains have hundreds of neurochemicals and neurotransmitters executing functions every second. As these levels fluctuate, so does our perceived mental state. Understanding the cause is sometimes impossible, but measuring our response to these states is what's most important.

What does mental *unhealth* feel like? It may feel like “traditional” stress, a mental “traffic jam,” emotional fragility, physical manifestations of anxiety, excessive tiredness, or other perceptions of experience spanning the full spectrum of mental health severity.

Let's Get Practical

Below are a few reminders of our human needs which, when neglected, can *sometimes* contribute to the traffic jam. In no way are these items meant to diminish the severity of legitimate biochemical imbalances. However, it is worth noting that each of these activities serves to actually adjust and calibrate the brain on a neuroendocrine and/or neurochemical level. So while we don't have unilateral control over our psychological state, we do have some agency to effect shifts, however small. Here are a few well-known environmental variables to inventory and potentially adjust in an effort to tip the scales in favor of health...

- Healthy, daily routines (to eliminate decision fatigue and prioritize your desires) interspersed with the spice of novelty (new skills, ideas, activities)
- A careful balance between media consumption and rejuvenating rest, time in prayer, play, meditation on God's Word, and creativity.
- Protective sleep hygiene and habits
- Sufficient macro- and micronutrient intake. Food is medicine, so if not much else is helping, consider speaking to someone with professional training in nutrition. If you don't know anyone like that, just [email me](#) :)
- Monitor your “state” and experiment with activities or spaces that shift your [state](#). “States” are what we describe as feelings, but in reality, are constructed from the entirety of our body's neurological processes which subsequently inform our physical sensations and emotions.
- Go outside and do just about anything! The effects are well-studied (see [The Nature Fix](#) by Florence Williams, if you are curious).
- Physical exercise. Different types of exercise have very different effects on our hormones. Single-modality sprints (e.g. run, row, bike, swim, etc) and weightlifting have the benefit of keeping cortisol much lower than endurance-based cardio.

This month—and in all months—may we notice our mental and emotional state. May we respond by slowing inching towards God, community, and wholeness.