



After the Fact | Mental Health in America: Connecting Physical and Mental Health

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. The national conversation on mental health is evolving. And the pandemic has played a large part in that. The Pew Research Center began monitoring American public opinion about COVID-19 at the outset of the pandemic. And the research revealed some startling trends, bringing Americans’ mental health into the spotlight. Last year, the Center’s research found about 21% of U.S. adults, about a fifth of the population, were experiencing high levels of psychological distress. And nearly 28% said the outbreak changed their lives in “a major way.” Those findings are our data points for this episode. The Pew Research Center’s Alec Tyson joins us to explain those findings.

Dan LeDuc: Of course, we want to talk about the pandemic. We want to talk about mental health and what’s happening in America today. So, let’s talk about how the Pew Research Center has been tracking American attitudes about, really, the amazing things we’ve all been living through over these last two and a half years. What are the things that you found important to track and what have you learned?

Alec Tyson, associate director, Pew Research Center: It was important for us to try and make a contribution by measuring and assessing Americans’ mental health throughout this pandemic. And then what we did from there is work with public health experts at Johns Hopkins University to develop a set of questions, five questions that measured anxiety, depression, loneliness, and that allowed us to create a scale where we could assess if people feel at a high level of psychological distress, a medium level, or a low level.

And then once we have those questions, we can just start to work them into our typical surveys that we run quite often at the Pew Research Center. And that’s what we’ve used to monitor or track people throughout this outbreak.

In our most recent survey, we find that 21% of Americans fall into this category of high psychological distress; about a quarter in the middle there, in this, is medium level; and then about half of Americans are in this low category of psychological distress. And then the exploration becomes the data analysis. What are the correlates of these indicators of



psychological distress? How do they differ across different groups among the public? Our surveys have documented just how widespread the impacts of the coronavirus have been on Americans, from economic impacts to concern about personal health and the disruption of social life. Taken together, it's been a really difficult time for Americans, and we know it's something that's put pressure on mental health.

Dan LeDuc: As more Americans experience psychological distress, and seek options for mental health care, different approaches to therapy and wellness are gaining popularity. One of those practices is ecotherapy. I spoke to ecotherapist and licensed clinician Laura Marques Brown in Annapolis, Maryland, about how her approach is diversifying the field of therapy and breaking down stigma.

Laura Marques Brown, ecotherapist, LCPC, Anchored Hope Therapy: People were often, you know, suffering from lots of daily, relational, job-oriented, family-oriented issues. And so, when the pandemic hit, it was like anyone who had cracks in their foundation or a sense of vulnerability, whether that's because of an emotional state or because of a racial identity or because of socioeconomic state, that all just got completely brought to the surface. In March 2020, we were 11 therapists; now we have 27. Our waitlist now is consistently two to six months, depending on the need.

Dan LeDuc: Laura, you're an ecotherapist, and on the front lines of what's going on in mental health today. Tell us what ecotherapy or ecopsychology is and what it means.

Laura Marques Brown: Most of the beliefs coming from the field of ecopsychology are rooted in Indigenous tradition. Our bodies were evolved to live outside. It's only in the last 200 years since industrialization that we've now become indoors. I believe the statistic is somewhere between 80% and 90% of our time is spent indoors. There is the Western approach to ecopsychology—there's this false sense of separation from the natural world that creates deep psychological suffering. My work now has become a bit more nuanced with people. Let's build daily ritual and connection in simple ways with the natural world. So, whether that was going outside once a day and sitting under the backyard tree or just literally having your cup of coffee outside versus on your commute. Or, if you don't have access to safe outdoor space, let's face a window for 5 minutes a day, let's open a window for 5 minutes a day, let's be near that houseplant that we love, or let's sit with a nature object of significance. And then to tend to that disconnection piece from human to human, let's find community. Let's find community that we can do these ritualistic activities with and that we can take care of ourselves with.

Dan LeDuc: Ecotherapy acknowledges the important role that nature plays with our mental health, and the need to cultivate that relationship to decrease stress and anxiety. And this approach is a longstanding pillar in native wellness practices.



Chelsey Luger, wellness advocate, author, co-founder of Well for Culture: In many Indigenous cultures, in my Lakota culture and Ojibwe cultures specifically, we understand that there is no hard separation between mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health. These are ancestral teachings that have been with Indigenous communities for millennia.

Dan LeDuc: That was Chelsey Luger. She's a wellness advocate and author of *The Seven Circles: Indigenous Teachings for Living Well*. My colleague and senior producer for "After the Fact," Sultana Ali, spoke with Chelsey about how she's incorporated ancestral knowledge into a guide for maintaining good mental health and overall wellness. Here's part of their conversation.

Sultana Ali, senior producer, "After the Fact": Chelsey Luger, welcome.

Chelsey Luger: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Sultana Ali: So, you work in the wellness space. And there's a deep connection to mental health and wellness. What inspired you to start doing this work?

Chelsey Luger: I am originally from the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa, which is where I'm a member of that tribal nation. And I'm also a descendent of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. I was born and raised in North Dakota. I grew up seeing a lot of hardship in my community and on my reservations. And to be honest, I grew up seeing many of those same hardships for different reasons in any other community that I lived in or visited in.

One of the steps in my own wellness journey that was huge is about, nine years ago, when I was a graduate student at Columbia. I quit drinking. It didn't seem like a healthy pattern in my life. And I wanted to change that. I noticed I was spending a lot of time going to parties or happy hours and then not feeling my best the next day. And I thought, wow, that really adds up after a while. So I'm going to cut this substance out of my life.

And when I cut out all of that time where you spend socializing with alcohol, you realize you have a lot of time on your hands. And what I replaced that with was movement. I was living in New York City. I would go and I would try martial arts classes. I did kickboxing, Muay Thai. I tried yoga. I tried Pilates. And through that, I found community. I found incredible healing benefits of spending my time in that way and connecting to a movement practice in a way that worked for me. And after taking so many classes, I felt the empowerment of now I can create my own workouts. I have this incredible tool for mental health at my fingertips that I can now practice in my living room or in my bedroom. And that tool has followed me my entire life.

In Indigenous cultures we have a symbol called the medicine wheel that comes from Lakota culture—other tribes use it as well—it's a circle divided into four quadrants: mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health. And so, I've always understood, ever since childhood, that those are interconnected inextricably. There are so many tools within our culture that help anyone to



address mental health struggles. And so, I wanted to bridge that knowledge and to create space where Indigenous teachings can contribute to our own people's healing and also to the wellness world at large.

Sultana Ali: You and your husband founded Well for Culture, which is a wellness initiative that's bringing these Indigenous practices into the forefront for a larger society. You've just published a book that shares those practices, which you call the seven circles. Can you talk to us about those and how they're connected to mental health?

Chelsey Luger: The seven circles are food, sleep, movement, sacred space, connection to land, community, and ceremony. So those are seven areas of our life that we have identified that our ancestors thrived in and had very unique practices associated with. And they're all aspects of our health that remain relevant today. And they are all interconnected. Within each of these seven circles, there is a mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional component.

So, we almost say there's mini medicine wheels within each of these circles. And so, one of the things that we highlight in the book is the ways that not only is each circle interconnected, but there are those mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional benefits to putting effort and practice into each one of these areas of our lives.

Sultana Ali: There is a lot of data and research today that talks about the positive impact of physical health on mental health. Why is that physical health so important for people today in their struggles?

Chelsey Luger: What I love about this data and research that we see in so many of these different areas of wellness is that it's in line with our ancestral knowledge. And our ancestral teachings have always understood the importance of physical health. One thing that you will observe in Indigenous communities is almost every one of our ceremonies or our cultural gatherings involves some kind of dance, or a run, or some kind of movement.

And that's because—and these are thousands-of-years-old practices because our people have always understood that when you exert yourself physically, you find benefits mentally, as an individual and as a collective. The benefits of physical health, you can't even count them. It helps bring people together. You experience hormonal benefits where you release endorphins, and you feel an immediate sense of happiness.

Dan Drop-In: Well, similar to the advantages of movement and exercise, being outdoors in nature has also proven to show benefits to our mental health. Here's more from Laura Marques Brown.

Dan LeDuc: What are the mental health benefits of connecting with nature?



Laura Marques Brown: The mental health benefits are also spiritual, emotional, physical benefits of reconnecting to self. If our bodies were meant to live in the natural world, then when we step into the natural world, we are reconnecting to ourselves. If you think about the several crises we've been facing over the last few years, the natural world can really help us learn how to regulate ourselves.

Dan LeDuc: What does this practically mean for your patients and clients when they come to see you? I mean, we typically think of a therapy session as someone is on a chair, a couch, talking to someone. Do you get out of the office and, in fact, embrace nature as you've been talking about?

Laura Marques Brown: Yes. Absolutely. We have built a partnership with Maryland Therapeutic Riding, which is a therapeutic riding facility in the area. And they've been gracious enough to let me and my clients come and spend time on the land. There are horses around and there are goats and barn cats around, but the focus of our work isn't necessarily equine therapy. This type of therapy does differ from other forms of traditional therapy because when we're outside, it's like our bodies wake up. To some degree, we have to be more present because a sudden buzz of an animal, a bug on our foot, ah! Some people have that reaction to it. And so, it wakes the body up. Feeling the sun on your skin, the body has to register that heat.

Dan LeDuc: When you're with someone, can you start to see the impact?

Laura Marques Brown: Not only do I see it, I feel it. So, I'm thinking of two clients, both identify as BIPOC, so that means Black, Indigenous people of color. And, for example, one of them lives in this multiracial body and experience and always struggles with feelings of I don't belong anywhere, at work, at home, in intimate partnership, with family, with friends. And that has created an immense sense of self-doubt for this person in their capacity, in their ability, in their sense of wisdom.

And this person also has a deep love affair with gardening and being in their garden as often as possible. And so, there was one session in particular where they were deeply in this place of self-doubt and I just asked them, what about when your hands are in the soil? And it was just a cracking open. This client just began to weep.

And later, when I checked in about that, it was a gratitude to be reminded of times when they don't doubt themselves. And so, there's an example of the profound healing that nature can give us in that almost nonverbal way where the body just gets permission to be reminded of its goodness and its strength and its wisdom.

Dan LeDuc: There's sometimes a stigma that is associated with the need for therapy. Does it help relieve stigma for patients to work in nature or is this a way that just is more inviting to them?



It's an unfortunate fact that stigma exists, we've got to find ways to erase it, but I'm just wondering if this approach might be helpful.

Laura Marques Brown: It certainly exists. I think you're definitely pointing to something there. And I think it exists differently in different cultures, as well, so that's something to name. For some of my Black and Indigenous clients, there's a stigma of going to therapy when you can just go to church, or you can just go to your community elder and get what you need there. So, we have to validate that stigma first, especially if that client then has the courage to show up to a session. But I do think that ecotherapy offers an approachability and kind of takes down that intimidation factor a little bit, not only because, for some of us, being outside takes us back to, like, days of innocence and just being a kid. That is one of the benefits of being in the natural world; we are reminded of our place. And that can make healing just feel less intimidating and more just like a relational process.

Dan LeDuc: As the conversation about therapy continues to evolve, approaches to maintaining good mental health and wellness, or "self-care" tips, are also evolving and provide different tools to help meet people where they are. My colleague Sultana has more on that with Chelsey Luger.

Sultana Ali: There's this term self-care that can be taken in a range of different ways. What does self-care mean to you? And do you feel that self-care is connected enough in the mainstream to this larger issue of this mental health care crisis that we have in our country?

Chelsey Luger: There is a positive ripple effect. When we take care of ourselves, it's not selfish. When we take care of ourselves, we are taking care of those who we love. It's OK to set aside time, budget, whatever you need, to do self-care in a way that works for you. And that is going to be different for everybody. But I truly believe that self-care is community care. And if there's any flaw in the way that we communicate about self-care is that we forget to point that out.

Sultana Ali: Speaking of ripple effects, there have been ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. [The] Pew Research Center said about a fifth of Americans have experienced high levels of psychological distress over the last couple of years as a result of the pandemic. And that's changing the conversation in the country around mental health. What do you think is missing from this larger conversation?

Chelsey Luger: I think if there's anything missing from the conversation about mental health, it is that we continue to compartmentalize it. We continue to neglect to remind folks that there are tools for mental health that lie within the physical realm, the way that exercise and moving your body, getting outside for even five minutes a day, contributes to your mental health.

The Indigenous perspective on wellness is more about finding balance. And you have these seven circles of wellness that we've laid out. And you have the opportunity to return to balance



in any of those areas without judgment and on your own timeline and in a way that works for you. And so, I truly believe that wellness is about balance, not seeking perfection.

It's not a linear journey, it's a cycle, a lifelong cycle that we fall in and out of balance in all of these different areas, and that's OK. We are human. And we have the opportunity to return to balance whenever we feel ready.

Dan LeDuc: In our next episode, we explore new ways that local leaders and communities are helping people who are experiencing mental health and behavioral health emergencies.

Julie Wertheimer, project director, public safety performance & mental health and justice partnerships, The Pew Charitable Trusts: We know that over 2 million Americans with mental illness are arrested each year, usually for some low-level offense, misdemeanor level. So, it's been long overdue for a change.

Dan LeDuc: That was Julie Wertheimer, who leads Pew's public safety performance and mental health and justice work. We'll hear more from her and from experts working on the ground to improve mental health outcomes. Thanks for listening. I'm Dan LeDuc for The Pew Charitable Trusts, and this is "After the Fact."