

## **New study reveals depths of our COVID-19 despair. Experts fear unrest makes it worse**

**[BY LISA GUTIERREZ](#)**

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Protesters in Kansas City chanted while blocking an intersection in the Country Club Plaza Thursday night. BY [SHELLY YANG](#) | [KYLIE GRAHAM](#) | [SARAH RITTER](#)

In the 90-degree Midwestern spring day, with young protesters around her shouting “black lives matter,” Bertha Packnett, the 65-year-old wife of a Kansas City pastor, stood under a tree in Mill Creek Park and spoke of a night more than a decade ago that stole her dignity.

How she and her daughter were driving home from a religious event at the Sprint Center. How minutes later a Kansas City police officer pulled her over because two quick lane changes — she said she used her turn signal — made him suspect she was driving drunk.

How she told the officer she doesn’t even drink as he ordered her to walk a straight line on the side of the road. How scared she was of big trucks whizzing by in the dark and how unsteady she was because she’d had knee surgery.

How minutes later she was sitting in the back of a cop car — in handcuffs.

That memory carried her to the park. She feels linked to George Floyd, the black man who died with the knee of a white cop on his neck, whose killing brought her to the Country Club Plaza to demonstrate.

“When I woke up this morning that all flooded my mind,” Packnett said on the sixth day of demonstrations on the Plaza. “Because every time I see a police car now, or anybody getting injustice, I think about my own ...”

The coronavirus pandemic had already pushed Americans into a troubled space full of depression, anxiety and, for some, suicidal thoughts. New data from [the nonprofit Mental Health America](#) put a number on it: In May, nearly 100,000 Americans who used the group’s online screening tools identified themselves as depressed or anxious, an emotional fallout of COVID-19.

Mental health experts worry that things will get worse as Floyd’s death sparks a nationwide wave of emotions.

“This is trauma on top of trauma,” said Paul Gionfriddo, president and CEO of Mental Health America. “We had been worried from the start with the pandemic, that what we would see is this first wave of mental health problems occurring based on the loneliness and isolation, and then anticipated there would be a second wave coming based on grieving (the dead) and financial problems.

“But those are now going to be a third wave ... later on in the summer and into the fall. What is happening in our communities right now is really a second wave of trauma on top of this first, and I think it hit at a time when people were just tired.”

Mental health professionals in Kansas City see it here, too, in increased cases of clinical depression and anxiety, in how some people aren't emotionally ready to return to work, and people asking their physicians for depression medication. Dawna Daigneault, a licensed professional counselor, said she's never seen anything like this “across the board.”

“I think after any major event like a hurricane, there is situational depression and anxiety around that. But somehow that's more understood,” she said. “It feels like the pandemic is like an invisible phenomenon, like everybody feels the weight of it, but it's intangible in a way, too.”

Anticipating busy days ahead, some local counselors plan to expand support groups and to continue using telehealth services they began with the pandemic.

“It's going to be even more important that we focus on the mental health of the population because of what people have been experiencing in viewing that killing, and then what people have been experiencing out on the streets since, and what people experience when peaceful protesters are turned away with tear gas and more, all the images on TV,” said Gionfriddo.

“For those of us who lived through Vietnam and saw images of that war on TV, we remember ... and I think we're witnessing something very similar.

“You experience the pandemic, put the experience of the late 1960s on top of that, the grieving, the financial worries ... we're looking at an epidemic of mental health crises.”

## **'CORONAVIRUS STRESS'**

The pandemic was “a big shock to the whole system,” said Kiersten Adkins, a licensed professional counselor and executive director of [Pathway to Hope in Olathe](#), a group that offers support to adults living with mental illness and their families.

Mental Health America quantified the impact.

In May, the group reached a milestone: [More than 5 million people have used its online mental health screening tools](#), which launched in 2014 to help people recognize signs of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and more.

Results of screenings done in May by more than 211,000 people revealed what Gionfriddo called the pandemic's “unprecedented impact” on the nation's mental health. The group found:

- 88,405 more instances of depression and anxiety over what had been expected for the month, based on averages from November 2019 through January 2020.
- People cited “loneliness and isolation” as causes for their depression and anxiety.
- Since late February, 54,093 more instances of moderate to severe depression, and 34,312 more moderate to severe anxiety.

- Daily screenings for anxiety were 370% higher in May than before “coronavirus stress” began in January. Screenings for depression also increased 394% from January to May.

Particularly alarming to the group: More than 21,000 people who took the depression screening last month reported thinking of suicide or self-harm on more than “half the days” of the week to nearly every day; nearly 12,000 people said they had those thoughts every day.

Seeing that many people thinking about suicide in May alone is a red flag, given that 45,000 to 50,000 Americans die by suicide every year, Gionfriddo said.

The data also revealed that the pandemic has had a more profound effect on the mental health of people under the age of 25.

“Young people are feeling it more deeply,” he said, noting that half of the young people who did the online screening in May said they had thoughts of suicide or self-harm at least half the days of the week.

“It’s no surprise that young people are more distressed by what’s been going on than older people. It’s no surprise that younger people would be expressing their distress ... just as we did in the ’60s.”

## **POWERING UP?**

During the first two weeks of the pandemic in March, “there was a resilience that was present in a lot of people, and this just isn’t in my client base but people in my life,” said Daigneault, who recently [released a free self-worth app called So Worthy](#).

“And then it seemed like after the first two weeks there was an eroding of normal defense mechanisms. The ways that a person usually manages the stress in their life wasn’t working to manage this, and it wasn’t going away.

“What I was hearing was references to the frequency of things making them afraid, like watching the news, learning about how many people died, then also seeing some of the reactivity to that. Some people believed (in the virus), some people don’t believe.

“I would say as the frequency of negativity was experienced, and the magnitude of that negativity increased, I was hearing more fear-based statements. And that descended into what I would say were more statements of feeling helpless.”

A statistic about national suicide hotlines stuck with her, that some have seen calls increase as much as 800% during the pandemic. “Even though I hate that people are in pain, I’m so glad that they’re reaching out,” Daigneault said.

“I think that’s the most important message that we can send and I think that’s us being responsible that we say, ‘Yeah, you’re going to feel the weight of this pandemic, and none of us were trained or prepared to have the right coping mechanisms in place to manage this well. So you’re going to feel heavier feelings. Reach out.’”

Johnson County, for instance, runs a 24-hour mental health crisis line — 913-268-0156 — answered by local mental health professionals.

“When stress isn’t managed well, some signs show up,” Daigneault said. “Increased sadness, increased irritability, a lack of concentration. If you feel like your moods are swinging, if you’re noticing behavior changes, like ‘I don’t do that, I haven’t done that in a long time,’ or ‘I’m doing that a lot more now than I ever used to,’ that’s telling.

“If a person is overthinking things on a daily basis, that’s a sign of anxiety.”

Adkins uses a [suicide prevention app called My3](#) with some of her clients. “It sort of forces us to think about options” other than suicide, she said.

The mental health app Daigneault spent more than two years creating debuted in May during Mental Health Awareness Month. She hadn’t anticipated launching it during the stress of a pandemic.

“There actually are some really simple steps for managing anger, addressing stress,” in the app, she said. “But my favorite thing about the app is that sometimes we feel really afraid to ask someone if we’re OK in a certain way. We don’t want someone to (think) that we’re deficient in our thinking or our feelings. What the app provides is privacy.”

Kamichia Rogers, or for that matter many of her fellow protesters who have been on the Country Club Plaza over the last week, isn’t keeping her feelings private. Frustration and anger led the 27-year-old certified nursing assistant from her home in Raytown to demonstrate.

Asked about her own mental health, she said “I’m OK, I’m OK,” but she worries constantly about the safety of her father, who is 59, black and deaf.

Like Packnett, a story simmers in her mind that boiled over when she said it out loud. One day, before she was even born, her father was walking home and was stopped by police officers who mistook him for someone they were looking for. Her father didn’t understand what the police were asking him, Rogers said.

Thinking about what could have happened in what she described as tense moments, given how she’s seen police treat other black men like George Floyd her whole life, made Rogers visibly upset.

“What if they actually did pull out a gun and shoot him because of how he reacted? He is a black deaf man! A black deaf man!” she shouted.

Her words rushed out as she said that “yes, yes,” anxiety is high for black people right now. “Because for years, for years and years and years, we have been lynched. We have been beaten. We have been raped, both genders,” she said, launching into a passionate litany of grievances.

“We have been tortured for centuries, for centuries. We are fed up now. This has got to end. This is sickening. We have our own people taking their own lives because they’re getting so depressed. This is sickening. So sickening. This is not right.”

Daigneault said everyone has felt disempowered during the pandemic but that now, as thousands galvanize around longstanding issues of racial injustice, some people might be powering up.

“Maybe all of us having a recent disempowerment of our routine, of not being able to live the lives we had built, maybe it made us understand disempowerment a little bit better,” Daigneault said.

“Maybe we got a little step closer to what a group of people have been telling us for 400 years.

“It’s a guess.”

## TO GET HELP

- **Mental Health America:** Take a mental health test. [mhanational.org](https://mhanational.org). Click “Take A Screen.”
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 800-273-TALK (8255). [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- **Crisis Text Line:** 24/7 access to a crisis counselor. Text “home” to 741741. [crisistextline.org](https://crisistextline.org)
- **Pathway to Hope:** Olathe support for people living with a severe or persistent mental illness. [Facebook.com/PathwayToHope](https://Facebook.com/PathwayToHope)
- **Zero Reasons Why:** Teen suicide prevention project in Johnson County. [Facebook.com/zeroreasonswhy](https://Facebook.com/zeroreasonswhy)
- **The Trevor Project hot line:** 24/7 suicide prevention help for LGBTQ youth. 866-488-7386. [thetrevorproject.org](https://thetrevorproject.org)