

The Psychology of COVID

DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF LOCKDOWN

BY KATRINA DANIEL



DR. ILSA KAUFMAN, A GABLES PSYCHOLOGIST WHO SPECIALIZES IN OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDERS (OCD).

SAYS KAUFMAN, "I RECOMMEND FOR PEOPLE TO GO OUT, TO GET THEIR NAILS DONE, GET THEIR HAIR DONE. YOU HAVE TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO LIVE."

With all eyes on the economic impact of the pandemic, a bigger issue may turn out to be the emotional stress.

After months of staying at home and disengaging from the world, say local experts, damage is definitely being done.

"To get people back out is going to come down to psychology. Mental health will be the determining factor," says Dr. Ilsa Kaufman, a Gables psychologist who specializes in obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Kaufman says she is seeing more patients than ever. "I don't think people realized it would cause such a great deal of [psychological] trouble."

Coral Gables Marriage and Family Therapist Gabriela Reyes says her business is also booming. "I am seeing a lot of heightened anxiety, fear and depression, and issues within [my patients'] relationships. We need human connection. It's really essential for our mental health. Especially in Coral Gables, where there is a big Latin community."

"I'm watching a lot of the world go OCD," says Dr. Kaufman. "The way it works is you are obsessed with something and you do a compulsion to protect yourself from it... As the world opens you are supposed to go to Target with a mask, but some are still wiping down groceries and refusing to leave their homes. Every time you do the compulsion you make the obsession worse."

For therapist Reyes, it comes down to fear. "The fear of the unknown is a big factor for my patients," she says. "A lack of control such as this [pandemic] can cause a tremendous amount of anxiety."

That's what happened to Teri Seier Moore, a professional dancer, choreographer and local Pilates instructor. "On my birthday, March 19, 2020, I found myself in prison, in a life

that was looking bleak," she says. "What was I going to do with myself? We were trapped."

Gables resident Shannon Ashwood agrees. "During this pandemic, the influx of emotions has been at times quite paralyzing," says Ashwood, who went into lockdown with her husband. When he decided to travel a short distance, including an overnight stay, Ashwood refused to join him. "My partner became a 'potential virus.' Scared, I went on lockdown in another part of the house for two weeks," she says.

During those two weeks, Ashwood decided to act. "I chose to focus on what I could get done around the house. I began organizing every drawer, closet, donating anything and everything, selling items on re-sale apps. I did yoga in early mornings, I streamed shows."

Moore also started taking steps to increase the size of her "prison" cell. "I participated in a 21-day meditation, I started growing tomatoes and a basil plant that's now a bush, along with other garden plants. I would walk four to five miles daily. I started to knit."

Reyes says these women did exactly what she recommends: instead of succumbing to anxiety, they've taken control. "Plan your days the way you would if things were back to normal. If you're working from home, set up a 'work area' away from your bed," she says. "Change out of your PJs. Take walks! I can't stress that one enough."

"I recommend for people to go out, to get their nails done, get their hair done. You have to figure out a way to live," says Kaufman, whose new slew of patients include many who are terrified to return to work. "You may need to take gradual steps, but you need to keep up with the world," she says. ■