

# Protect your mental health

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The Suicide Prevention Lifeline says that this outbreak can cause emotional distress and anxiety. As we all strive to fight the pandemic Covid-19 crisis, everyone becomes vulnerable to emotional distress. In the context of these challenges, Manila Bulletin Lifestyle consults mental health advocate doctor Ma. Gia Grace “Gia” Sison on how everyone, particularly the youth, can protect themselves from distress these days.

## Everyone is at risk

“Everyone is experiencing the same, the only difference is the level. But one common factor is the level of uncertainty, anxiety, and heightened emotions because those are common concerns in terms of mental health in a pandemic,” explains the occupational medicine specialist, who graduated from the University of Illinois, Chicago School of Public Health and Hygiene. “To date, we don’t know what after April 30 will bring but definitely one factor is the youth has their academics to deal with. How they will go about it, the new normal of schools? Uncertainty about the future is very common, one common concern.”

Now when can you say you’re already in a serious phase or level of emotional problem? According to Doc Gia, at this rate, everyone is on the same page, but you must look at how these emotions affect your personal life. “The first thing we should all look at is if it already affects the quality of your everyday life. Am I still able to function?” she says. “Distress is the first symptom that signals that you may already need professional support—it is the first thing one needs to look out for.”

This national adviser of the Youth for Mental Health Coalition acknowledges that, as professionals, they are also looking after the welfare of the population of individuals who are clinically diagnosed before the pandemic happened. “What we are looking at is the vulnerable populations. Those who are already diagnosed clinically with depression, anxiety, with bipolar disorder, individuals who are currently taking medications.”

## Pro tips

She gives tips on how young people can start looking after their mental health amid this Covid-19 crisis we are in.

**1. Have a routine.**

She encourages everyone to set a routine and make a list of tasks they have to accomplish daily. “Most of us now are staying at home. You may want to paste on the wall the schedule you have to follow, so when you wake up in the morning you can see it,” she says.

“There are studies that show that during traumatic events, having a routine can help individuals to deal with the trauma. It is good to have something you’re looking forward to. We are all at home, but it doesn’t mean we won’t have a routine.”

**2. Never disregard physical activities.**

Doc Gia emphasized the importance of having an active lifestyle even while on lockdown. “Physical activity is good for your whole metabolism, it will keep your blood flowing, circulating, not stagnant.”

**3. Enjoy fresh air.**

If your situation permits, she recommends going out to have a bit of sun exposure and to breathe fresh air. “If you’re in a place that’s not crowded, you may want to get out to get fresh air. Besides, Covid-19 is not airborne,” she says.

**4. Keep yourself busy.**

“Youth may want to take this time and opportunity to declutter their cabinets, fix their study tables, or rearrange the kitchen,” she adds. “Do things like these— Something that would make you feel productive.”

**5. Establish your own support group.**

In keeping a healthy mental disposition, Doc Gia says it is important to be connected. With the imposed social distancing, she says that the youth can take advantage of technology to build a support system they can rely on.

“Right now we have social distancing but it doesn’t mean you should isolate yourself from the whole world, especially on the days that you need someone to talk to about your feelings,” she says. “It is important to build your own support system, people you can run to or maybe talk to.”

If you feel that these are not enough, there are hotlines you can call to seek professional help. “When you feel the urge to hurt yourself or do something that’s not good, call the hotline for support,” says Doc Gia.

Here are some hotlines to mental health organizations.

New National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) Crisis Hotlines: (+639) 17899 8727 (USAP) and 2 989 8727 (USAP)

Natasha Goulbourn Foundation (NGF) : (28) 804 HOPE(4673), (639) 17558 HOPE(4673) or 2919 (toll-free for GLOBE and TM subscribers)

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