

# Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



ESTHER BUSH

## Stress and COVID 19

This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page discusses stress and how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated its heavy burden. Stress is a state of mental and/or emotional strain. Stress can affect the immune, central nervous and digestive systems and overall health. The year 2020 has been a year of unforeseen challenges that surpass many of our wildest imaginations. The additional amount of stress that has weighed on so many of our shoulders for the past seven months has been almost unbearable. The COVID-19 global pandemic, murders of Black citizens by police, politics, economic losses and everyday stressors have affected our mental health. I write this Courier piece both in solidarity and with hope.

Recognizing the long-term effects the pandemic could have on Black and Brown communities, researchers like Nadine M. Melhem, PhD, MPH, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, have responded to rapidly address this crisis. A National Institutes of Health series of reports titled "Understanding Racial and Ethnic Differences in Health in Late Life" notes Black people not only have a greater number of stressful events in their lifetime compared with their white counterparts, the reactions to those stressors have a deeper psychological effect. Locally, we are witnessing how those stressors negatively affect Black and Brown communities. Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission's "Pittsburgh's Inequality Across Gender and Race" report, published last fall, noted that health, education and employment opportunities and gaps, intersected with racism and sexism, contribute both to the stress and lack of coping mechanisms that lead to an overwhelmingly higher rate of disease and death for Black residents of the region.

Black and Brown communities' reluctance to seek mental health care is heartbreaking. Systemic barriers, like lack of access to health care, disproportionately affect the Black community, deterring us from seeking help. Five years ago, the Center on Race and Social Problems in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work noted that about half of the 14% of Black survey respondents sought help for the emotional distress and lack of emotional support they were experiencing. As highlighted during October's Mental Illness Awareness Week, finding ways to connect and lighten the load of stress is critical.

In our communities, resilience and collaboration have been key to surviving stressful situations. It is not uncommon to see the Pittsburgh community rallying together to fill in gaps in care. In response to March's stay-at-home order, Steel Smiling, a Pittsburgh-based mental health advocacy group, launched a free weekly mental health and wellness program. This program was developed to ensure that Pittsburghers could get the support they need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While COVID-19 isolation has restricted traditional avenues of stress relief, these limitations have sparked ingenuity, and folks have responded with interactive ways to continue to engage with families and friends. Now is the time to discover new ways to release stress, as well. Activities like meditation, reducing screen time and aiming for a healthy work-life balance are just a few of the ways I practice self-care.

Stress is a normal part of life, but it's important to know when to Take Charge of Your Health and seek help. Be sure to tune in next month as we will discuss local resilience efforts in the Pittsburgh region.

Take Charge, and take care; yours in the movement,

Esther L. Bush, President and CEO  
Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

## What level of stress is normal during a global pandemic?

The year 2020 has been difficult for most people in the United States. The stressors have been both universal and personal, yet heartbreaking and confusing. The COVID-19 global pandemic, the especially high mortality rate in the US, economic losses and individual everyday stressors could affect people's mental health. No matter how people experience stress, it has been persistent and at unprecedented levels this year. Amid this mental health turmoil, helpers have emerged, including researchers.

To understand how best to help people who are experiencing high levels of stress and mental health problems, researchers must first be able to define and characterize them. What level of stress is normal during a global pandemic? Nadine M. Melhem, PhD, MPH, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, studies stress responses.

"From previous studies, we know that natural and human-made disasters are associated with increased risks for depression, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and prolonged grief reactions," she says. "Given the pandemic and the different ways that people are affected by it, we wanted to study how people are responding to this stress. Is it an acute, short-lived stressor? Or is it an event that will have long-term mental health consequences?"

Dr. Melhem and colleagues designed the "COVID-19 Stress Response Study"—an online survey—to examine the effects of COVID-19 related stress on teenagers, adults and health care workers. The survey includes well-validated measures that screen for depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms, grief reactions, suicidal ideation and behavior and sleep problems—all in order to assess clinically significant symptoms.

This past summer, Dr. Melhem analyzed the results at that point from 7,353 participants. Though she says it is not a nationally representative sample, she says the results present a quick look during a pandemic so that public health strategies and interventions can be mobilized. The survey results indicate that, for perceived stress, almost everyone confirmed that they feel stressed. However, Dr. Melhem found high rates of clinically significant symptoms in the overall sample.

"At this point in the study, 18% of respondents reported suicidal ideation and 55% of those who lost loved ones had intense grief reactions," she says. "The rate of clinically significant symptoms of depression,



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anxiety, PTSD, and sleep problems ranged between 31% and 58%. These are high rates; I didn't expect them to be this high."

Dr. Melhem reports that adolescents in the sample had even higher rates than adults. Adolescence is a time for brain and physiological development and is a devel-



**ACTRESS TARAJI P. HENSON** has started a campaign to help African Americans, who are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, access free therapy during the outbreak. Henson is operating the campaign through The Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation, which she founded in 2018. It's named in honor of her father, who suffered from mental health challenges after serving in the Vietnam War. (Photo: Screen capture from Instagram)

opmentally sensitive period for the negative effects of stress; which could be intensified by the social distancing measures of a global pandemic.

In the sample, race and ethnicity were not predictors of stress on their own, but they do enter into the analysis. For ex-

ample, white adults were more likely to report depression symptoms. PTSD was more likely to be reported in African American and Latinx adults.

"We need to keep in mind that we still don't know whether these symptoms are intense now but will decrease over time or whether they'll be long lasting," says Dr. Melhem. "The pandemic affects people differently; some people have lost loved ones, and some have lost jobs, so it's going to vary. It also depends on how long the pandemic lasts and what comes next." It is also important to note that mental health diagnoses include a constellation of symptoms. Thus, different people with the same mental health diagnosis can have different symptoms.

In these unprecedented times, Dr. Melhem reminds readers that while people cope differently, it is important for people to mobilize their support systems to help them cope with their individual stressors.

"Stress is a natural response to a lack of normalcy. We're all trying to adapt to something we've never experienced before." However, "If people are struggling with symptoms that are affecting their daily lives, they need to discuss their symptoms with a health care professional," she says.

The study is ongoing. Dr. Melhem says that participation in the study is not just for people who think they are stressed; it is for anyone. For information on how to participate in the study, call 412-246-6517, or the following links will provide more information:

**Adults:** <https://pittplusme.org/studyarms/publicdetails?Guid=3f174f8d-aba6-4bfb-ba69-f539f804f1d7>

**Adolescents (ages 13-17):**

<https://pittplusme.org/studyarms/publicdetails?Guid=30ce769e-538f-44f6-9cb9-0859cbfc9eda>

**UPMC health care workers:**

<https://pittplusme.org/studyarms/publicdetails?Guid=f87bf90b-a269-4433-a167-ab6679b38985>

**National Suicide Prevention Hotline (available 24/7):**

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> (has a chat feature) **resolve Crisis Services (24/7, free to residents of Allegheny County):**

1-888-7-YOU-CAN (796-8226)

walk-in crisis center 333 N. Braddock Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15208

[upmc.com/services/behavioral-health/resolve-crisis-services](http://upmc.com/services/behavioral-health/resolve-crisis-services)

## Flu shots available for Allegheny County county residents

The Allegheny County Health Department and partner organizations are working to ensure access to influenza (flu) vaccines.

The flu vaccine can protect you from getting the flu and help stop it from being spread to your friends, family and neighbors. And, if you do get the flu, the vaccine reduces the risk of serious illness – such as hospitalizations and the need for intensive care.

The COVID-19 pandemic makes it even

more important for residents to protect themselves by getting vaccinated because:

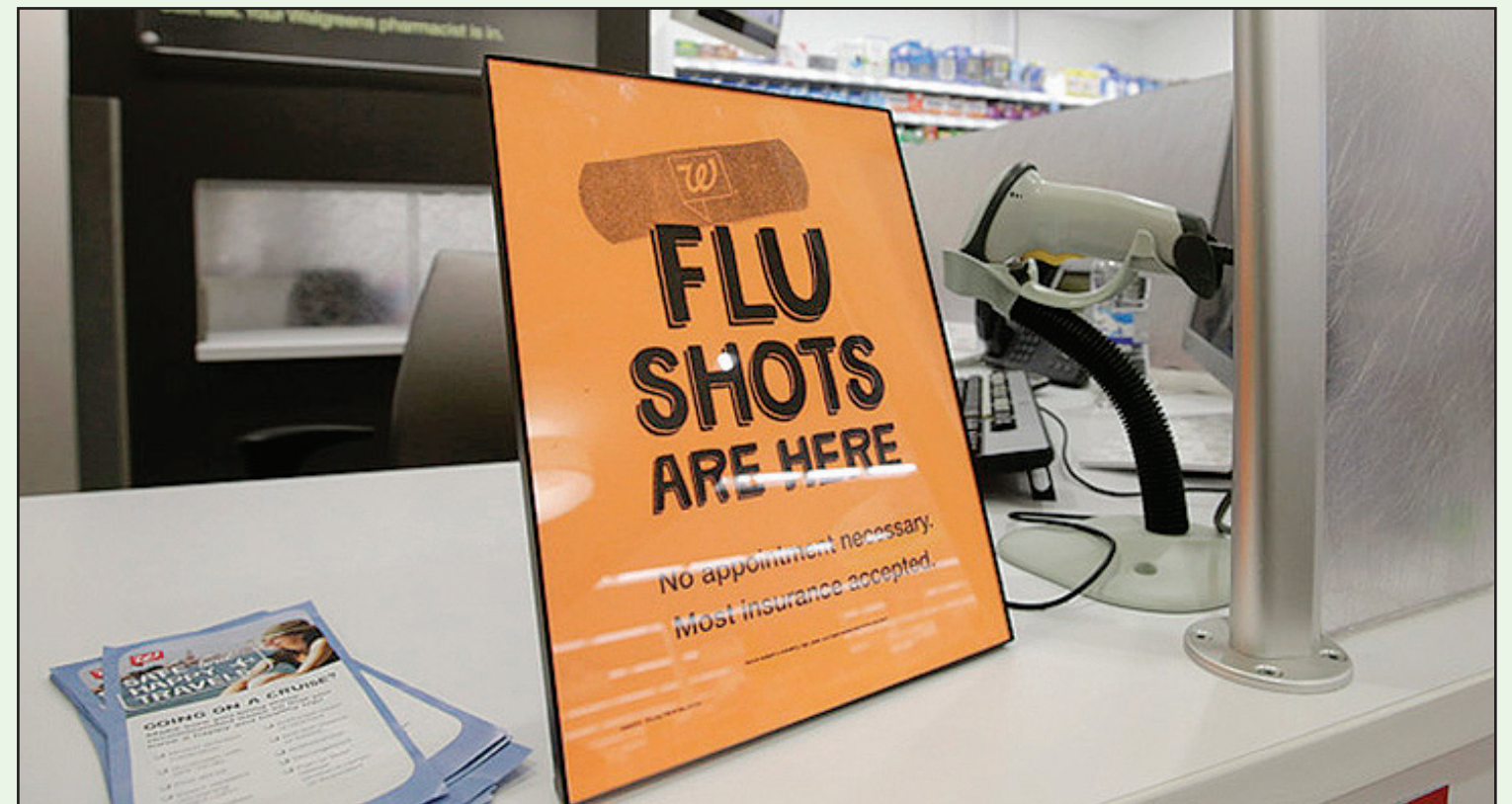
Symptoms of seasonal flu and COVID-19 are similar

The flu accounts for many fall and winter hospitalizations each year. Keeping individuals out of the hospital because of the flu means that hospital staff can focus on patients with COVID-19

Where Can You Get a Flu Shot?

In addition to your primary care provid-

er, flu shots are available at local pharmacies, drugstores, community health clinics and at pop-up events. The Health Department has put together a flu map that shows locations and events where you can get a flu shot. Start by searching for your address or current location. The map is available at [www.alleghenycounty.us/flumap](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/flumap). More information on influenza is available at [www.alleghenycounty.us/influenza](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/influenza).



A SIGN lets customers know they can get a flu shot in a Walgreen store. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings/File)