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Navigating the Behavioral Health Impacts of the Coronavirus

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There is no avoiding the concern over the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), or the extent to which it could impact the physical health of our communities, families and ourselves. As the disease spreads and confusion over this public health crisis grows, we must acknowledge that it also can have implications on our behavioral health. As such, it is vital that we make self-care a top priority.

"The coronavirus outbreak has created growing concern among practitioners and the general public. While there are still many unknowns, it's important to remember what we do know," National Council for Behavioral Health president and CEO Chuck Ingoglia said. "Secondary trauma is a very real concern, so we all must take precautions to address our mental health. Practicing self-care to treat symptoms – including anxiety, depression or sleep deprivation – to maintain our mental health is as vital as taking practical steps to ensure our physical health and wellness."

Information creates a unique challenge. The relentless wave of news about the disease can exacerbate symptoms of depression, PTSD and trauma, for example, impacting the ability to function. While the news is intended to inform, it is easy to conclude that we are in more immediate danger than we really are. It's important to remember that this coverage is representative of the concern over – and potential problems caused by – the pandemic, and that it can be out of proportion to the actual scale of the danger.

But staying informed is vital. Contact your local public health authority, which will have up-to-date information on the situation in your area; reach out to the mental health providers in your community to learn more about available services; or get breaking news on prevention and treatment efforts by visiting the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention or World Health Organization websites. There are also some simple hygiene tips you can follow to deter illness:

- If you feel like you're getting sick, seek medical care early.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home if you're feeling sick.
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue, and then promptly throw the tissue in the trash.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth, especially with unwashed hands.
- Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; if soap and water are unavailable, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Frequently clean and disinfect commonly touched objects and surfaces.
- Try not to shake hands when possible.

Even if there were no coronavirus, we would still be in flu season. That means fever and respiratory problems – even pneumonia – are more common than at other times of the year. Many people over the next few months who develop fever and respiratory symptoms will have it due to some other virus than the coronavirus. People should certainly seek out medical evaluation and care, but remember that until confirmed by testing, there's a very good possibility that whatever they have is not the coronavirus.

A path toward sustained and holistic health and wellness starts with knowledge and self-care. We encourage you to follow CDC guidelines, exercise healthy behavior and ask for support when needed. As our understanding of the coronavirus evolves, being mindful of the physiological, psychological and behavioral toll it can have on us – from amplifying the symptoms of existing mental illness, to putting excessive stress on the body – is an essential step in being prepared.