Opinion
NCR Voices



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The last few years have been hard for everybody, but the pandemic and its consequences have been especially difficult for certain populations. Earlier this month the U.S. surgeon general, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy issued a public health advisory about the devastating mental health impacts the pandemic is having on young people in this country.

Adolescents appear to be hit the hardest by the mental health crisis unfolding in our midst. Among the many startling statistics in the report is the fact that "emergency room visits for suicide attempts rose 51 percent for adolescent girls in early 2021 as compared to the same period in 2019."

The surgeon general's report is only the most recent call for the public to pay greater attention to the frightening effects the pandemic is having on the mental health of children and young adults. In October the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association issued an unusual joint statement declaring a "national emergency in child and adolescent mental health."

The joint declaration also noted that the "inequities that result from structural racism have contributed to disproportionate impacts on children from communities of color." The statement added, "This worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020."

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Other populations are also at higher risk of mental health challenges during these times, the surgeon general's report notes. In addition to communities of color, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas and those in immigrant households, among others, are particularly vulnerable.

For many of us, the holiday season of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years can be a time of joy and celebration, an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends. And yet, long before the pandemic, the holiday season has been historically one of the most stressful times for a significant percentage of the population.

In an article for the Cleveland Clinic, psychologist Dawn Potter noted that a number of converging factors add to holiday stress, anxiety and depression, including hectic schedules, separation from loved ones, loneliness, complex or dysfunctional family dynamics and seasonal depression, among others.

As this year's Christmas and New Year season gets underway this weekend, it is important for us to be attentive to these underlying dynamics and trends — both for ourselves and for those around us.

Those who act responsibly will already be mindful of the precautions and adaptations that are necessary to gather together and celebrate safely as the pandemic continues — soon into its third year — especially with the onset of the omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus. We should, as Dr. Murthy reminds us, also not lose sight of this mental health crisis concurrently threatening the well-being of many people, especially children and teenagers.

The surgeon general makes a powerful claim about our individual and collective duty to respond to this disturbing trend in his introduction to the report, noting that our "obligation to act is not just medical — it’s moral."

As people of faith who are preparing this week to celebrate the incarnation of the Word, recognizing that God took on the full embodied experience of human existence that we live with every day, it behooves us to be mindful that not all members of the Body of Christ are coping with personal and collective challenges equally. The moral obligation before us is to call to mind that suffering exists in many forms and recognize that we can all do something to support each other and ourselves.

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One way we can be there for one another in the spirit of Christmas is to learn about what we can do in response. Here are just a few suggestions that surface from this report.

First, for those who are sufferers of anxiety and depression as well as those who want to support others, a key element is to work toward de-stigmatizing mental health challenges. As the surgeon general's report reminds us, "mental health challenges are real, common, and treatable." The cycle of stigma and shame contributes to the silencing and erasure of the very real suffering that millions of women, men and children experience. It also fosters a context in which those who may be struggling find it difficult to ask for help.

Talking without fear or shame about one's own mental health challenges or demonstrating your comfort with such conversations can be a notable means of support, particularly for young people in our families and communities.

Second, the report encourages everyone, especially youth, to "invest in healthy relationships." This is very important and yet is also very challenging, especially for those for whom family dynamics or other kinds of relationships feed anxiety and depression during the holidays. Setting boundaries, finding ways to volunteer or support others and being intentional about the use of social media platforms during the holiday season can contribute toward establishing healthier relationships. This is key for young people who predictably spend large amounts of time online.

Third, learning to manage stress and other "difficult emotions" can make a significant impact. The surgeon general's report offers a simple, yet impactful example: "If you find it stressful to look at COVID-related news, try to check the news less often, take a break for a day or a week at a time, keep notifications off throughout the day, and avoid looking at negative stories before bed."

I have found myself shifting which podcasts I prioritize and how often I read the news online throughout the day as a result of good advice like this. There's a big difference between willful ignorance and healthy curating of news and other media. What we talk about and how we talk about it during the holidays can also play an important role. It also models healthy behavior for young adults.

Finally, the report encourages us to take care of our bodies and minds, suggesting that we "stick to a schedule, eat well, stay physically active, get quality sleep, stay hydrated, and spend time outside" Understandably, those things can be challenging to embrace during the cold winter months of the Northern Hemisphere and in the midst of holiday meals and desserts, especially for U.S. essential workers. However, attending to how the presence or absence of certain elements like these can affect

the way we think and feel will assist in responding healthily to mental health challenges.

While the government report doesn't say this outright, another practice we can add to the list is prayer. We need to take care of our bodies and minds, but we must also attend to our spiritual health as well. Creating time for spiritually nourishing practices can also be a tremendous help, especially for those who are believers and during this liturgical season of celebration.

This Christmas, as we once again celebrate the divine humility and love that led to God's free decision to become fully human, let us not neglect our own full humanity, including our mental health and that of our loved ones and neighbors, especially children and young adults who are facing unprecedented mental health challenges today.