



## COVID-19 Teleconference Town Hall: Taking Care of Your Mental Health April 30, 2020

### Panelists:

- Dr. Don MacMannis, Ph.D. Clinical Director, Family Therapy Institute of Santa Barbara County
- Dr. Alice Gleghorn, PhD, Director County of Santa Barbara, Department of Behavioral Wellness
- Sevet Johnson, PsyD, MA, MFT, Ventura County Behavioral Health Department Director

### Abbreviations/Acronyms:

AA = Alcoholics Anonymous  
NA = Narcotics Anonymous  
SBC = Santa Barbara County  
VC = Ventura County

### Introductions

**Senator Jackson:** Thank you for joining us for our sixth Town Hall. We know that coping with the pandemic is very challenging for all of us, whether you live in isolation or you feel overwhelmed with more duties at home such as childcare, education, and other responsibilities, or feeling stressed because of the economic impacts. We know that Stay At Home orders have resulted in an increase of crimes at home of various kinds, which is great concern to us. Reduced contact with workers who are mandated to report such crimes when they hear of them means we must work together. Thanks to our panelists for sharing the resources available to us. We must continue helping our friends and family and taking care of ourselves.

**Assemblymember Limón:** We are in Week 6 of staying at home. We understand the feelings of anxiety and restlessness especially as we anticipate when things will go back to normal. We know that it's important for us to have a discussion about the elements at home and feelings we all juggle. This is an opportunity to hear from the experts in these areas, and perhaps give us a helpful toolkit. We are up and running and still working to help you. [Please feel free to follow up with my office via my website and click on the coronavirus link.](#)

**Congressman Carbajal:** Good evening everyone, thank you for joining us. Thank you to our SBC and VC mental health experts who are here to help us answer our questions related to our community's and individual mental health. It is a very challenging time for the state of our mental health. To date, at the Federal Level we have had 4 stimulus packages, including the recent \$2.2 trillion dollars CARES Act and recently on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the \$484 billion dollar Paycheck Protection Program and Healthcare Enhancement Act. The CARES Act which provides \$425 million dollars for substance abuse and health care services, to increase health services throughout the county including behavioral health clinics,



suicide prevention, and emergency response. \$45 million dollars were allocated for family violence prevention services and to prevent and respond to family and domestic violence, including childcare and supportive services.

### Speakers

#### **Don MacMannis, Ph.D. Clinical Director, Family Therapy Institute of Santa Barbara County**

- We not only have the threat of COVID, but also of immense financial difficulty. There is a lot to understand about stress and everyone responds to it differently. Some can feel anxious, depressed, angry, become withdrawn, and more. One of my specialties is to apply the latest brain research to parenting, to families, couples, individuals. There is two chemicals that are emitted with stress: cortisol and adrenaline.
- Here is a metaphor to give us some context: imagine our community has just recovered from the fire, and we see there is a warrior tribe just across the mountains. If this was 100,000 years ago, we would be mentally and physically preparing to fight. We can't do that, we have chemical backup in our brains as a function of being cooped up.
- Two forms of dealing with stress: 1) to express, which mean going out to exercise, talking or communicating it in constructive ways. There are funny videos out there that sum up our emotions. There's a part of us that feels mad about this attack, about what is happening right now. That is okay, because it's the difference of what we really want and what is. As we express some of that frustration, that's a very helpful thing. I really believe in the power and the benefit of expression in talking about how we can be there for each other.
- Relaxation. Most people are aware of mindfulness, meditation, breathing techniques, calming down. Ideally in terms of a sequence of how we deal with stress, we do things that are expressive, and then we try and find our center, then we plant a seed for positive thinking.
- Another thing about including brain research that informs us about this stuff is that feelings want to come out. When we have feelings inside we don't want to dump our feelings on others, make others feel victimized, etc. What we can offer each other is that if I feel understood for what I'm going through, then that is an important step to reduce the level of cortisol and adrenaline going through my body. Understanding, empathy is important. The bottom line, is to give ourselves an opportunity to express what we are feeling, and to feel understood by others.

#### **Alice Gleghorn, PhD, Director County of Santa Barbara, Department of Behavioral Wellness**

- I want to go back to something that the Senator said, this is a period of time where VC and SBC have both in a very special status. We have had repeated exposure to disaster and emergency situations which have had long lasting impacts on the members of our community. We've lost family and friends, we've experienced ash falling from the sky day after day, evacuation worries and anxiety, etc. This puts us in a special place, we are both more sensitive to the next emerging disaster but also a little more resilient because we've gotten through previous disasters.
- As we face social isolation and as different ways of coping with this disaster emerge, you may feel something like an echo. Personally, when I wear masks, I remember of the month-long



period where I wore a mask every day during the Thomas Fire. We are experiencing what the rest of the world is experiencing during COVID-19, but we carry a bit of post-traumatic stress from our own regional disasters. This does give us a little resilience in this situation, because we've helped each other and gotten through it. As a result, there is more edge for us in this situation. There is little wonder about why we feel on edge, feeling like we've lost control, angry, with this disaster. We also have a little more fear of the unknown related to the virus, and what little is known about it. We may have feelings of abandonment and loneliness due to the social isolation. Many of the social supports we previously had, like church, gyms, classes, all of those things are cut off.

- But this is also a time that we've been able to use new tools to stay connected: Zoom groups, social media, FaceTime, Skype, more. In some communities or neighborhoods, neighbors come together at a certain time and let their frustrations out. It's important that everyone remember that the feelings we are having is normal, it's a normal response to an abnormal situation. Part of the problem for us, while it feels like an echo of the last disaster, it feels like it's going on and on. Our typical response of fight versus flight, are meant to be short and quick reactions to stressful situation and this just keeps going.
- What can we do to help ourselves given our limitations? You should go out and get some exercise, taking care of yourself, being mindful of what you're consuming. Remember to be mindful about what you are doing to cope, and which ways are more unhelpful or unhealthy. Finding ways to create distance from distressing news: take a break from the TV or radio. Things aren't changing that much, and much of what you're seeing is speculation. Turn it off. Limit your news media consumption. Turn on your favorite music, dance, sing. Reach out to others, help your neighbor, model good behavior by social distancing and wearing a mask. Journal your experience, your feelings, it helps clarify your thoughts. Reach out to an old friend. We also have online apps and guides that we are making available to our communities, it is available through our [website](#), and will be posted soon.

*Sevet Johnson, PsyD, MA, MFT, Ventura County Behavioral Health Department Director*

- Right now, listeners, we are all at home. While we have this time at home, we have choices. Whether you know it or not, we are building habits in many ways. It could possibly lead to poor choices. Right now we have to take time to take care of ourselves, and really look at the choices we have. The things we do now could become long-term habits. Depending on the choices that we make, these could be good or bad habits that would be hard to break in the future.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Am I eating more often?
  - What kinds of food am I eating?
  - Am I exercising as often as I need to be?
  - Am I spending quality time with my family?
  - Or am I tuning out on my phone or online?
  - Am I drinking alcohol more? Or am I using substances that are illegal?
- As you think more, consider what habits you want to foster and nurture while staying at home. Can you start exercising? Start reading a good book? Could you maybe have a family



game night? Any new recipes you want to try? Can you check in with someone by phone/video?

- These are simple choices you can make that would be good habits over time. We want to build habits that will help us. In Ventura and Santa Barbara, we have gone through so many hard things in the recent past, and all of this seems reminiscent and takes us back to losing income, homes, family members. Hopefulness was also previously mentioned. A good place to start fostering that feeling is a gratitude journal. Write in it every day, of five things I'm grateful for. What research has found is that when you start looking for things that are positive, that bring you joy, or that you're grateful for. Over time, you start to notice more of positive things in your life that you're grateful for. It might make your day or week. Simple things that bring your hope level up, your joy level up. It's a great practice to start and hold on to, as we go through this long journey of recovery. There are fitness classes offered by various organizations/groups that are no cost. Take advantage of those and the mental and physical health benefits it brings.

### Questions & Answers

**Q: For parents with children. I'm a psychologist currently practicing in schools. My husband is an emergency medicine physician. We have 3 children from ages 2-7. As professionals and parents, we are alarmed by the effects that these closures and Stay At Home Orders will have on our children statewide. Especially as they return to school hopefully this Fall. What can be done now to mitigate the effect on our children?**

MacMannis: I feel for the psychologist. We are all struggling with this, especially with the question of what's next. Personally, I've been practicing staying in the moment now and not be so future-oriented which I am more inclined to. There is a recent article in the News Press that talks about what we can teach kids right now in expressing themselves and their various emotions, resolve conflict amongst their peers. It's an opportunity to sit them down and use what's called a Repair Kit. I also have a few songs that is listed on the article. There's much that can be done. Sometimes parents neglect their needs as a couple. What we know is that in the brain, there are mirror neurons that makes our emotions infectious. A mistake that parents do sometimes is to focus attention so much on their children that they neglect their relationship with their spouse. What brings out the best in everybody is to have a 5 to 1 ratio of positive to every neutral/negative interactions. How are you, as a couple, doing on the 5 to 1? How are you nurturing each other?

Gleghorn: It's one of those areas where past experiences makes us better prepared. We've done so much Psychological First Aid in response to the local disasters we have had in recent years that staff and parents have received a lot of training on how to talk to their kids about these emergencies and provide them with emotional support. There is more focus on this statewide on how schools can get this training. This is an area where our counties can get more information on when we bring our kids back to school.

Johnson: As the mom of a first grader, I understand how difficult it is to talk to your children about a pandemic that elicits raw emotion and has such an unclear timeline of



when things will return to normal. Set time aside for each of your children, one on one. They need to be validated for whatever they're feeling, they must have that safe space with their parent. I recommend incorporating some relaxation or meditative time into your daily routine. This is right before bedtime in my house. I agree with Dr. Gleghorn, we have school-based counselors who are still providing tele-health, doing check-ins for the students who have enrolled in and need these services. They are doing workshops to support the mental health of our students who are available to address those needs. I know that in VC we are already having those discussions what the next school year will look like.

MacMannis: Back during the time of nuclear fear, there was a study produced, that if it is possible, have them do something. Ask them how they'd like to help or connect with others, have them draw and share it, have them engaged in an action, make them feel helpful and not so immobilized.

**Q: Is there any form of mental health assistance for those who don't have health insurance?**

MacMannis: In SBC, the [Family Therapy Institute](#) has a low cost clinic. They also offer services in Spanish.

Gleghorn: The [Community Wellness Team](#) in Santa Barbara offers services too.

Johnson: [Ventura County Health Care Agency](#) is a safety net provider, so regardless of insurance status, if you have a job or not, our services are available to you.

Limón: I want listeners to know that assistance can come in the form of a referral to a program or perhaps an online virtual meeting of sorts, is that correct?

Johnson: Yes.

**Q: Many people are struggling with addictions and recovery. What resources are available for online counseling in private or groups? Many NA and AA meetings have been suspended.**

Gleghorn: There are virtual meetings online for NA or AA. Call the regional office for NA or AA and you will have a 24/7 contact available. There are easy ways to stay in touch for those kinds of support groups.

**Q: My dad is in his 70's and his brother has cancer and he's quickly deteriorating. We planned on having him visit his brother. My dad understands the circumstances, but it does not make it any easier for him to not be with his brother and to say his goodbye over telephone. We are not able to hold traditional funeral services even though this is not a COVID-19 related death. What can people do during this time where we cannot come together to cope and mourn with these losses?**



Gleghorn: That is a very tough challenge for those experiencing grief, but also for those who are going through major milestones too. People have been very creative in staying connected, but it is the time to do something different, and then return to regular traditions when time allows it.

MacMannis: I understand the anger and frustration of not being physically present. This is when I take this opportunity to educate people about the benefits of crying. We each have a way that we can cry to get feelings out, and have someone be with us either in our household there for us or online or over the phone. There are toxins in the tears that you're crying. Feelings want to come out, and any time we can provide people with the support to do that, that would be great.

**Q: I keep telling my 4 year old that we must stay at home, we cannot go to Grandma's, we cannot go to school, we cannot go to the park. It hit me recently that I probably did not explain the situation very well. Where do I start to help my children understand this pandemic? How can I be there to support them emotionally? Are there certain signs that I should watch out for to see if she is coping well?**

MacMannis: The issue with kids is that they can ask wide questions, and parents can make the mistake of going into the content. Really what's going on, is that feelings are driving their questions. To tap into their feelings is where you want to go as a parent, rather than their thinking-brain. In terms of signs of behavior that is difficult to answer as kids can regress, they can act younger than they actually are, kids can lose their toilet-training, they can get angry at their peers, and more.

Johnson: How you deliver information to children is also very important. When you keep saying "We can't do this, and that", attach it to something like:

"We can't visit Grandma right now because we want to make sure she's safe."

"We can't go to the park, but we can go to the backyard or front lawn instead."

If we can tweak the language a little bit with a positive focus, which is helpful.

**Q: Can you share any available online tools that can help with anxiety? Thoughts on telemedicine, video therapy and its effectiveness?**

Gleghorn: We have a whole series of tasks that we've been developing through our help at hand digital mental health literacy project. There are multiple resources online, [helpathandca.org](http://helpathandca.org). There are different ways to cope with anxiety, connect with friends, there are resources to improve nutrition, exercise habits, taking your medications on time, the 8 dimensions of wellness, and how to connect with those dimensions. May is Mental Health Month and we are doing thirty days of different exercises for mental health at 3pm online on our website.

**Q: Beaches are packed but they're useful for destressing. I'm maintaining my social distancing, it's so frustrating seeing others not taking this safety seriously. How can I deal with this anger? I'm mad that I'm doing everything to stay safe, I'm not a confrontational person, but am I supposed to ignore it and walk away?**



MacMannis: It is hard to stay mad and maintain your cool while confronting others. When you're really upset/angry it can spill out. Here is one way to cope: If you can do an aerobic exercise, if you can think of some of the things that make you angry, it can help you find your center and reduce your stress.

**Q: I'm a community volunteer doing check-in calls. I'm learning for a variety of reasons, seniors who have depression or have schizophrenia are not getting or taking the medications they need. Please ask for neighbors to help assist their senior neighbors in getting their medications for them. Many senior services organizations are not taking on new seniors. There are so many seniors needing check in and wellness calls to find out what they need. Is there anything else we can do?**

Johnson: If there are any seniors that you know of that need support, there is a Senior Support Line: 1-800-235-9980. This is a number that is available to seniors who need support, or individuals who want to check in on their seniors that they haven't been able to connect with. We encourage folks who live in neighborhoods that there are ways they can socially distance but provide support. Write your name, number, and a message offering support. Unless a doctor has told you otherwise, continue taking your prescribed medication. You do not want to stop right now, and you do not want seniors so scared to enter a medical facility or clinic that are ignoring signs of possible health issues in need of care. Please call your healthcare provider because many clinics are offering TeleHealth who can advise you over video or phone call.

Gleghorn: I have parents who are elderly and cannot operate a tablet or complicated phone. Make sure your loved ones or neighbors have technology they can comfortably operate.

**Q: What are your thoughts on news consumption during this time? I want to remain informed but don't want to be always in a doom-and-gloom mood, and the stress that comes with that.**

Johnson: Create a routine. Routine is your friend. Dedicate a specified amount of time to news, and then do something else. It is not healthy to watch news all the time. The news does not change that often. Stay at a healthy limit and go into the rest of your daily routine.

MacMannis: It is best not to do things that are disturbing to you, such as listening to bad news, right before going to sleep. You want to have restful night of sleep. We need to reduce that thinking, and have positive thinking permeate through our day.