



Network News

On Our Own of Maryland, Inc.

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We are a network of people with lived experience of mental health and/or substance use challenges and recovery journeys.



Validating the COVID Vaccine

Addressing Expectations and Equity

By Huck Talwar

COVID-19 entered our lives in a year we thought would be one of world-wide celebration: 2020. What started as a localized concern quickly turned into a global pandemic. Lives were changed, traumas took place, people were lost, and the whole world was put under an immense amount of stress.

While much of the disruption to our lives continues, there is finally some good news. After a year of waiting, the COVID-19 vaccine is here! There are three of them, in fact: Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson/Janssen.

The vaccine is proving to be highly effective, but some individuals and groups have questions, concerns, and hesitations. Three aspects of the vaccine process are receiving a lot of attention: the speed of development, concerns about equity and access, and the pacing of the priority system used for rollout in Maryland.

Although it felt like the vaccine was invented very quickly, it was subject to the same rigorous evaluation standards as other vaccines, including tens of thousands of participants in clinical trials.¹ Scientists and pharmaceutical companies have become very proficient in creating new vaccines over the last decade; we're already accustomed to seeing a new flu shot become available each fall. The COVID-19 vaccine effort was given top priority and upfront funding by the agencies involved, which helped smooth and speed up the production process.

After the dose is developed, what about distribution? The push to make the vaccine widely available also highlights existing barriers and disparities when it comes to healthcare access. BIPOC individuals, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and folks with limited income already often have difficulty finding medical providers who are familiar with important cultural factors or who have expertise in specific issues or treatment modalities. Waitlists for medical, dental, and behavioral healthcare appointments can be long, and there aren't enough providers located in underserved areas, both urban or rural. While the vaccine itself only requires an injection or two, getting quality care to address the overall health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is still a challenge for too many Marylanders.

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Is the Pandemic Reducing Behavioral Health Stigma?

By Denise Camp

It's been a year since the COVID-19 virus changed our world. Physical distancing, wearing a mask, and working/schooling from home have become the norm. With the restrictions on what were our regular activities and the isolation that is being endured, many more people are beginning to experience symptoms of behavioral health issues like depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, and substance use.

The impact of these disruptions and new stressors is shown by a spike in the number of calls into call centers and crisis lines. According to a June 2020 article in *USA Today*, NAMI's HelpLine experienced a 65%

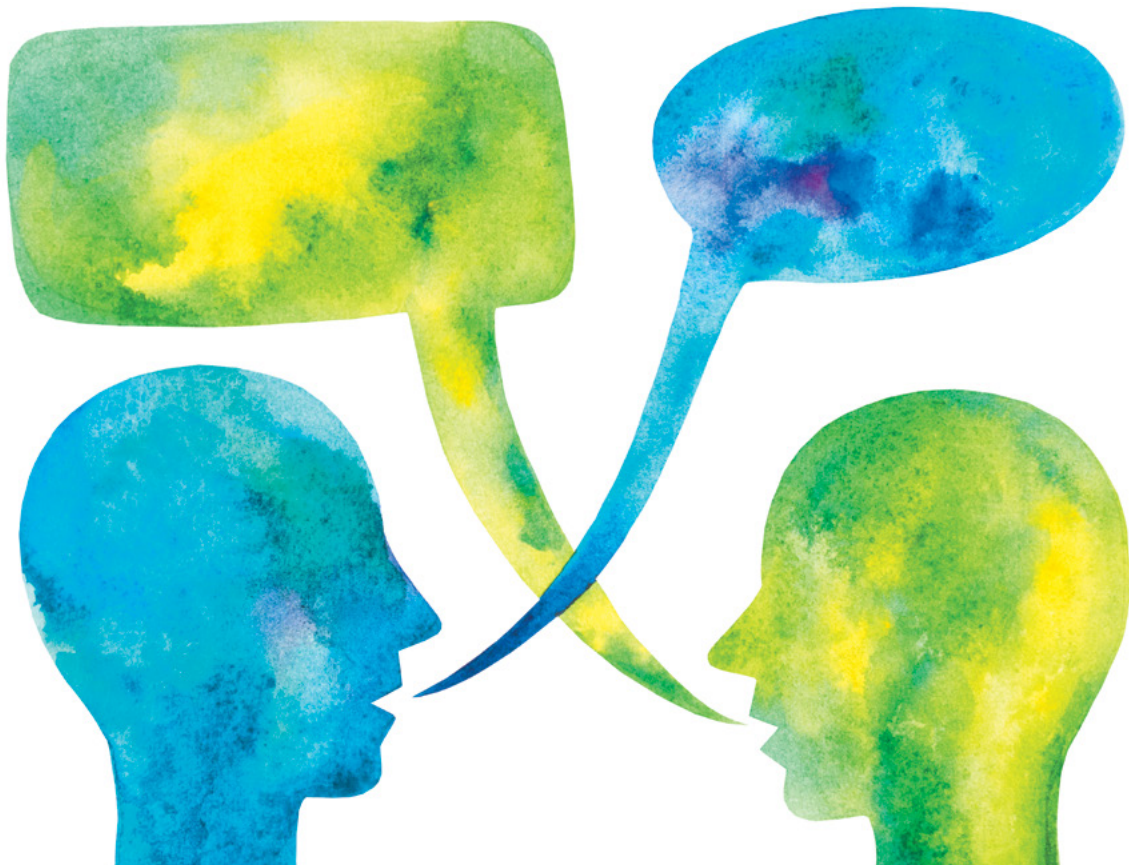
increase in calls in March and April 2020, as compared to the same time period in 2019. Even more notable is the 890% increase in call volume at The Disaster Distress Helpline, a sub-network of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, seen in April 2020 as compared to April 2019.¹

With so many more people experiencing what many of us have lived with for so long, I and many others began to wonder if the stigma related to mental health and substance use issues is diminishing, or if the pandemic is at least changing conversations about behavioral health needs.

If someone has become much more concerned than normal with washing their hands and sanitizing everything during the pandemic, are they more likely to understand what it is like for someone who lives with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder?

If someone is more depressed because they are isolated and not able to find support, might they feel differently about someone living with Major Depressive Disorder?

This subject was addressed as a topic of the month on On Our Own of Maryland's Distorted Perceptions website back in June 2020, including a featured *Time* article by Dr. Jessica Gold about the possibility that the



pandemic has caused a shift in stigmatizing attitudes towards mental illness. Dr. Gold is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, and regularly writes about mental health, stigma, and medical training.

Dr. Gold writes that, “The COVID-19 pandemic is a sort of equalizer. Nearly everyone is self-isolated at home, trying to work while managing a household, and dealing with uncertainty and grief. To some degree, everyone is experiencing what life with anxiety is like. This includes those in management, who are dealing not only with their employees’ stress but also their own. Though depression is already the number one cause of disability worldwide, this is the first time many employers and managers are thinking and openly talking about mental health in the workplace.”²

This trend is not just happening in the US. In the United Kingdom, conversations around mental health are reported as becoming more normalized because more people are dealing with more psychological issues due to the pandemic.³ Similarly, more employers are taking an interest in mental health because their employees are asking for more mental health provisions.

These types of conversations are key to changing attitudes. Talking about the issue of behavioral health

is one of the first steps to reducing the stigma around mental health and substance use issues. Like our Distorted Perceptions campaign emphasizes, once the conversation is started, we can educate those around us about the facts and realities of recovery.

Something else I found interesting is the notable effect of the pandemic on the mental health of young people. According to the recent C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health at Michigan Medicine, researchers found that 46% of 977 parents of teens said their child has shown signs of a new or worsening mental health condition since the start of the pandemic.⁴

If you think about it, the effect of the pandemic on young people’s behavioral health could be long-lasting and a generational issue. At the same time, a June 2020 poll of young people commissioned by the 4-H Council discovered that ultimately, teens are calling for major change in how we approach conversations about mental health, with 82% saying that it’s time for America “to talk more openly and honestly about mental health issues in this country.”⁵ With that attitude among the future adults in our country, I am confident that attitudes and the stigma towards behavioral health issues will continue to change and improve. ■

Rapping for Recovery
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provider who listened to him, adjusted his medication when he started having tremors, and educated him about his mental illness.

Having that support and finding what he calls his reason for being here, educating others and providing hope with his music, truly helped with his recovery. “My goal is to use music to help others get through their day and help people understand that it’s ok to feel things and to keep a positive outlook on life. To instill hope into people – music is my platform to do that. It’s the engine of my work.”

Sean now works as a Peer Support Specialist on an ACT Team in Baltimore City, working with the very provider that provided him support as a teen, “The same doctor that I had as a patient – I work with her now. It’s a full circle type of experience. It’s really cool.”

In talking with Sean it became very clear that he’s grateful for the opportunities he’s been given, and wants his work and his music to provide hope for other young adults struggling. You can follow Sean’s music on Spotify under his music handle, Driscoe. ■

1 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2020/06/15/crisis-hotline-call-volume-spikes-straining-social-workers/5266072002/>

2 <https://time.com/5835960/coronavirus-mental-illness-stigma/>

3 <https://www.raconteur.net/healthcare/mental-health/covid-mental-health-rethink/>

4 <https://mottpoll.org/reports/how-pandemic-has-impacted-teen-mental-health>

5 <https://4-h.org/media/new-survey-finds-7-in-10-teens-are-struggling-with-mental-health/>