

Mental Health Matters: Leadership Testimonials

Colorado School of Public Health

At the ColoradoSPH, **mental health matters**. Here are testimonials from leaders of the school to provide some personal background into the profound impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on mental health. The ColoradoSPH hopes to continue to reduce the stigmas around mental health conditions and provide as many resources and tips as possible to help those that may be struggling.

It is okay to not always be okay, and please remember that **you are not alone**.



Jonathan Samet, MD, MS

Dean & Professor

Surprised? Being Dean during the COVID-19 has brought challenges—an ever longer infinite work queue, unexpected problems on top of the usual, and the weekly crescendo of the modeling effort with the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment and the Governor. The usual standbys--exercise, reading, music, and family--have helped to find time away from these stressors. Cycling works well for me; the rider watches the road and listens for clues as to what is nearby. Riding is escape from devices and worries. And I read, generally a mix of light, escape fiction and a more weighty non-fiction companion. There is always another must-read book about our times, whether on the pandemic, racism, or science.

“

There is always another must-read book about our times...

For me, the additional work and challenges of the pandemic have brought fascinating opportunities to problem-solve and to make a difference. There are rewards here.



Dani Brittain, PhD

Associate Dean for Academic & Student Affairs, Professor

I read a story recently about people languishing during the pandemic. A word I haven't heard often – but something so real as we continue to navigate this pandemic. What we've learned over the past year+ is that mental health is so very important to all of us. For myself, I've found that starting a new position during a pandemic is quite a bit more challenging than I anticipated, but maybe it's the working, living, sleeping, and exercising in the same space that is the most challenging of all. I try very hard to give myself breaks when I need them as my productivity increases when I can take those breaks. When I am feeling mentally fatigued or anxious, my first choice is to exercise (running on my treadmill; walking with or without my dog). Depending on whether an upcoming meeting is lingering, I may not run, but rather do a short walk instead (to not be sweaty). Overall though, I feel the keys to navigating my every day include exercise, meditation, semi-healthy eating, plenty of sleep and finding things to make me laugh...and of course also the opportunity to sit outside on my porch and work (i.e., no meetings). I would also say that I am quite lucky to work with such wonderful people – that this is also how I am able to mentally navigate my days.



Christine Gillen, MS

Associate Dean for Administration & Finance

Mostly, I lived with a new sense of anxiety. My desire for the convenience and socialization of offsite daycare for my three-year-old twins competed with my gut telling me my kids would be safer at home; competed with my desire to be a hard-working employee/supervisor and the necessity to bring home a paycheck; all while being present and engaged against the social injustices in our country and grappling with the guilt knowing it was privilege that afforded me these choices. While biking and yoga had a purpose, getting fresh air was nice; and committing to a weekly audio book practice has been educational, thought-provoking, and a mix of inspiration and tribulation; it was my continued and heightened connection to my friends that was the critical component of my self-care this past year. Having someone listen to you and offer compassion can't be beat!

“

It was my connection to my friends that was the critical component of my self-care this past year.



Lee Newman, MD, MA

Director of the Center for Health, Work & Environment,
Distinguished Professor

I count myself among the privileged and the fortunate of this pandemic, as I look at the ongoing human toll and suffering of the past year plus. My mental health, while impacted, has been buffered by a loving partner and family, close friends, and work colleagues who I get to connect with on a regular basis to keep doing meaningful work. This social safety net has been hugely important. Even so, I would characterize my mental health as a challenge—in two ways.

Phase 1. Anxiety. In the first phases of the pandemic, there was the grief, worry about my family's health, my health, my students' health, the well-being of my entire team at ColoradoSPH, and uncertainty in my ability to pivot our Center to take urgent new directions to meet the needs of the employers and workers who look to us for critical advice on how to keep people safe on the job. There were waves of feeling overwhelmed and anxious. **My strategies:** I stuck to routines. Exercise, nutrition, time with family and friends (most of it remotely). Even with the pressures, I took days off that were unplugged. I practiced talking about my feelings – checking in. I took vacation and reminded everyone in our group to do it, even if it meant staying home. I got outdoors. Despite it all, I found myself working gonzo hours, and had to find ways to establish time limits when the laptop would shut. Lastly, I made a point of “over-communicating,” sharing both my own feelings and vulnerability, while also articulating goals and sense of our mission to our team.

“

I practiced talking about my feelings—checking in.

Phase 2. A Sense of Languishing. More recently, I've shared what I now understand to be a common feeling as part of the COVID “emotional long-haul”. In a recent article in the New York Times, Adam Grant referred to this as a “sense of stagnation and emptiness.” Of not feeling joy. Of muddling through. It's not burn-out, it's not depression, it's not hopelessness. It has been described more like an emotional fog. **My strategies:** Naming it has been extremely important, because that has led to solutions that are working for me. I've been granting myself uninterrupted blocks of time in which I can be productive and do the cognitive “deep work” that I'm ‘paid’ to do. It provides me with a sense of progress. I focus on achievable, small goals. Today it will be putting the screens on the windows, and updating my biosketch for a new grant application, despite a string of Zoom calls. I set myself “reach goals” that are challenging but achievable.

(Example, today it will be to tackle an unfamiliar branch of research literature – I will research whether mitochondrial DNA can be used as a screening tool for muscle injury.) I take satisfaction in contributing to COVID response, by volunteering on weekends as a vaccinator. To boost the sensation of optimism and ‘flourishing’ that has dominated my persona for most of my life, I’m embracing celebrations like the birth of my first grandson, the engagement of my daughter, and the wedding of my nephew. Lastly, I will check in with the people I meet (virtually or increasingly in person) and remind myself to express gratitude. Just the act of saying “thank you” feels restorative.



Lisa Miller, MD, MSPH

Associate Dean for Public Health Practice, Professor

Exercise has always been key for me as a way to destress and disconnect from work. During the Pandemic, I stopped going to the gym, which was hard! Instead, I tried to get over to Red Rocks occasionally to do the stairs, took walks with the dog, and started my own little in-home exercise routine. Walks had the additional advantage of being an opportunity to catch up with my neighbors in a safe, socially distanced, and non-Zoom world way.



Nichole Carlson, PhD

Director of the Center for Innovative Design & Analysis, Professor

At times, I publicly practice gratitude by listing three things I am grateful for on the CIDA Teams site and encourage others to list what they are grateful for. I run outside (or ski), and perhaps my biggest strategy is to avoid email for blocks of time. These activities help me to concentrate on the good things that are happening and allow me to accomplish things that are important to me and others. I also take vacation very seriously and take one extended vacation every summer with no email or other work allowed.

“

I take vacation very seriously.