

In the new year, resilience is crucial

By El Paso County Public Health Director Susan Wheelan and Executive Director of the National Institute of Human Resilience at the University of Colorado Charles Benight, Ph.D.

Experts in our community have studied disaster recovery for decades and one thing is universal, disasters have a honeymoon period. This phase is filled with well-wishes among community members and a shared sense of purpose, “we can get through this together.”

Previous regional disasters have followed the same script with an outpouring of support for frontline heroes with nightly cheering for our first responders, fire fighters, police officers, and health care workers. However, as a disaster unfolds over time, cracks in the togetherness emerge and in-fighting often makes an appearance. Anger and frustration bubbles over which can lead many to feel alone, isolated, and vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit our community from a physical, emotional and economic perspective.

Here is what we know about COVID-19’s impact on the community’s mental health.

According to an August 2020 study by the Colorado Health Foundation, 53 percent of Coloradans reported increased mental health strain, like depression, anxiety, and loneliness, due to the pandemic and 1 in 3 people have reported difficulty sleeping due to COVID-19 worry and stress.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in an August 2020 study that 13.3 percent of Americans have reported beginning or increasing substance use to cope with COVID-19 related stress.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect individuals for the long term. While communities have largely focused on much-needed economic incentives for struggling businesses and nonprofits, we must also address our behavioral health needs, building a stronger, more resilient community, that can handle what is coming today, and tomorrow.

Community resilience is first and foremost built from mutual support and a shared sense of purpose in recovery. As the COVID-19 pandemic rounds the corner toward a year old, please be aware that free resources are available to deal with trauma, stress and anxiety caused by COVID-19, and beyond.

The National Institute for Human Resilience at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs, in collaboration with El Paso County Public Health, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Colorado Springs, and AspenPointe, has created GRIT or Greater Resilience Information Toolkit.

GRIT is a free, self-paced, five-hour training available at [LetsTalkGrit.com](https://www.LetsTalkGrit.com) that provides instruction on how to build your resiliency muscles and support people you love and care

about. Countless disaster recovery studies have documented the power of social support and personal coping strength that are central to hope and resilience. GRIT was built to bring support and strength together.

Beyond GRIT, there are other resources available to cope with COVID-19. Colorado Crisis Services provides 24/7 crisis support at 844-493-8255, or text "TALK" to 38255. More information is available at [ColoradoCrisisServices.org](https://coloradocrisiservices.org)

El Paso County Public Health (EPCPH) has a list of behavioral health resources in El Paso County. EPCPH also convenes the Youth Suicide Prevention Workgroup, with over 90 community partners taking collective action in support of youth mental health and suicide prevention. To learn more about EPCPH's efforts on suicide prevention or to become involved, visit [Elpasocountyhealth.org](https://elpasocountyhealth.org). AspenPointe offers a crisis walk-in center located at 115 S. Parkside Drive. More information is available at AspenPointe.org or by calling 719-299-2996.

NAMI Colorado Springs offers mental health support and education. More information is available at NAMIcoloradosprings.org or by calling 719-473-8477.

Past disasters have proven our community is strong. But we know that those touched most directly by the pandemic with illness, economic hardship, and grief need our support.

The medical providers, emergency responders, public health employees, teachers, faith leaders and a host of others continuously need to hear from us, that we appreciate and support their efforts as fellow community members.

If you are experiencing difficulties with managing the multitude of stressors associated with the pandemic, please know that you are not alone.

In doing disaster recovery work over so many years, we have witnessed unbelievable resilience in survivors of hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and terrorist bombings where selfless acts such as handing out water or holding someone who just lost a loved one defined a community. The power of this pandemic is no match for human caring. Resilience is based in coming together and collectively sharing our best selves with one another.

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