

# When the Pandemic Leaves Us Alone, Anxious and Depressed

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For nearly 30 years — most of my adult life — I have struggled with depression and anxiety. While I've never felt alone in such commonplace afflictions — the family secret everyone shares — I now find I have more fellow sufferers than I could have ever imagined.

Within weeks, the familiar symptoms of mental illness have become universal reality. A new poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation found nearly half of respondents said their mental health was being harmed by the coronavirus pandemic. Nearly everyone I know has been thrust in varying degrees into grief, panic, hopelessness and paralyzing fear. If you say, "I'm so terrified I can barely sleep," people may reply, "What sensible person isn't?"

But that response can cause us to lose sight of the dangerous secondary crisis unfolding alongside the more obvious one: an escalation in both short-term and long-term clinical mental illness that may endure for decades after the pandemic recedes. When everyone else is experiencing depression and anxiety, real, clinical mental illness can get erased.

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Social isolation generates at least as much escalation of mental illness as does fear of the virus itself. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychologist, found that social isolation is twice as harmful to a person's physical health as obesity. Solitary confinement in prison systems causes panic attacks and hallucinations, among other symptoms. Isolation can even make people more vulnerable to the disease it is intended to forestall: Researchers have determined that "a lonely person's immune system responds differently to fighting viruses, making them more likely to develop an illness."

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