



ADA Live!

Episode 79 (Part 3 of 3): Protecting Your Mental Health during the Coronavirus Outbreak

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Speaker: Dr. Blake Jones, faculty member at the University of Kentucky College of Social Work and a private therapist

Host: Mary Morder, Material Development Specialist Southeast ADA Center

Dr. Blake Jones: Hi, I'm Dr. Blake Jones and you're listening to ADA Live! (singing).

4 Wheel City: (rapping)

Mary Morder: Hi, everyone. On behalf of the Southeast ADA center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network. Welcome to ADA Live! Episode 79, part three. This is the third episode of a three part series on taking care of our mental health during the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak. Hi, I'm Mary Morder. I'm the materials development specialist here at the Southeast ADA Center, and you may submit your questions at any time at adalive.org.

Good morning, Dr. Jones and welcome to the program. Thank you for being our guest today. The coronavirus, COVID-19 pandemic has upended everybody's lives very quickly. We've had to adjust to being at home, to working from home, to not working, to teaching our children at home and many other disruptions in the lives we had and the lives we knew only a few weeks ago. It's been very stressful and confusing for everyone. You're a faculty member at the University of Kentucky, College of Social Work. You're also a

therapist and a member of the Citizens Review Panels for Child Protective Services and for the Children's Justice Task Force in Kentucky. So, you have a unique perspective to share on the impact that the pandemic is having on everyone. In general, what are you seeing in terms of the impact that the pandemic is having on mental health?

Dr. Blake Jones: Well, Mary, thank you so much for having me on. I really appreciate it. So, I've thought about this question from several perspectives, primarily from my perspective as a therapist and as a person who is also quarantined at home by myself, here in Kentucky. I think there are certainly high levels of anxiety. We've never been through anything like this before, and so there are a lot of unknowns. I think it's necessary, certainly, for all of us to quarantine ourselves as directed by our governmental leaders. And so, people are feeling very isolated. I think people are built to be social. I'm a social worker, I'm a therapist, I'm a professor and I love to be around people, I love to be around my students. I come from a very large extended family, which I'll talk about in a little bit. I love to be around them and I just can't right now, and so that's hard.

So, isolation, I think, feeds anxiety and kind of makes it difficult for people to be in this position. So, I've seen lots of high levels of anxiety among my patients, my students, family. I think there's also been an impact on people's spiritual lives, for those who have a spiritual life. I'm coming to you from Kentucky and our governor has requested that the churches don't meet, and synagogues, and mosques and that's a very large part of a lot of people's lives here in Kentucky. And that's been very hard. I'm also seeing some impact on families, certainly parents who are isolated with their children, their children are trying to do work online through school, and that's very difficult for families as well. And then finally, just sort of a sense of hopelessness in some people that I've run across in my ... Some of my patients just express a sense of hopelessness. So, I think those are all very troubling impacts that we've seen in terms of mental health.

Mary Morder: Yes. It's certainly affecting everyone. I too am home alone, by myself, and it's very difficult some days to just kind of cope with the fact that you can't see people except to wave at them from across the street. Yeah. So, it's a hard time. Turning a little bit to another aspect of your work, I know in your office you provide counseling to older

teens and adults. What are the differences between these two groups in terms of how they are reacting to the current crisis?

Dr. Blake Jones: Well, I'll start with teens first. And I'm a father, I have two teenage sons and I've done a great deal of thinking about teenagers and lots of learning from them, and I see lots of teenagers and in my practice. And so, I think people often get frustrated with teenagers and, of course, we were all teenagers at one time or another in our lives. And what has helped me is to remember brain development. I know that your organization does a lot of work in this area. It's helped me a great deal to remember that teens are not fully developed in terms of their frontal cortex and the way that they make decisions, and the way that they control their impulses. And so, this is terrible for them. They're, again, built to be social, and so for them to be sort of locked down away from their peer group, which is paramount for them, is extremely difficult.

And so, I encourage us to have a lot of patience and I encourage parents to have patience with their teenagers. And teens are used to having things immediately through technology, they can connect immediately, and so this loss of social connection, physical connection to their friends is very difficult. And I also think that I've seen a loss of milestones for teenagers. My son is a junior in high school, they've canceled prom. I have a number of friends who have eighth graders, they've canceled their graduation or senior graduations. And if we think back about our lives as teenagers, these were all very important to us. Important milestones. So, I think teenagers are grieving and families are grieving about these losses.

Mary Morder: That's a very good point. And I hadn't quite thought of it in that way, as a type of grief. Can you tell us what are some things that the teenagers themselves can do to keep themselves mentally healthy during this stressful time?

Dr. Blake Jones: Sure. There are a number of things, and I've been working on this with my own sons, and with also the teenagers that I see in my practice. So, I'm going to say something here that's going to make me sound like a very old person, that I used to cringe when people would say, "Back when I was your age, back when I was a teenager." You know how that goes? I grew up in a family of eight people. I have five brothers and

sisters and we grew up on a farm, very poor growing up, and I look back on that situation and it forced me to embrace solitude, in a way. And what I mean, you would say, "Well, how could you do that in a family of eight?" Well, it forced me to go out into nature and it forced me to read a lot, and it forced me to ...

I play music. I'm a musician. So, it forced me to learn music. And so, one of the things I encourage teenagers to do is to embrace this time, if they can, of learning new things and of maybe teaching new things. I think families can learn and teach together. I've seen some wonderful examples on Facebook of families cooking together, people learning new recipes and cooking and teaching each other new things. So, I think it's important for teenagers to be open to that and not just, again, not just isolate themselves in their room or just sink down into their grief and despair, but challenge themselves to learn new things.

Another kind of ethic of my family growing up was helping others and I credit my mom with this, I think she's the reason I became a social worker. Is because she would always take us and do things for other people all the time. Her life was spent and is spent, she's in her 80s now, but she still spends her life helping other people. I think teenagers are kind of self-focused a lot and, again, that's pretty normal, but I think if there's a way for them to get out and do something kind for someone else, it gets them out of that head space that they're in.

There are some great apps out there for calming anxiety. I love the app, Stop, Think, Breathe. That's a really good one and the other one is Calm, if a teenager is just having some difficulty calming their anxiety down, this is a really helpful tool. And then finally I want to mention the crisis text line, which is 741741, that's open to not only teenagers but anyone who's struggling, even up to the point of feeling suicidal, they can anonymously text that line and get some help.

Mary Morder: Those are all great suggestions and ideas. Thank you for that. It's a tough time for everybody and these are coping skills that everyone can use, whether you're a teenager or not. It's great to have these resources and we will be adding them to our

resource list. What are some things that the parents of teenagers or the other adults in their lives can do to help?

Dr. Blake Jones: Well, again, I'm speaking as not only a therapist, but a parent of teenagers, and so they don't give you a roadmap for when you become a parent, so you sort of figure it out yourself. And one of the things I struggle with and really have tried to work on in my life is to be patient, and to understand the developmental milestones that teenagers are in. It's normal for them to isolate. It's normal for them to not like their parents. That's very normal. And so, I think the best advice I ever got was, just ride it out, try to keep them safe, first of all, from the big things. But then sort of plant seeds and hope that they will take and that later on they'll become good adults, and that's been good advice. But I think in this time of uncertainty and just the lockdown nature of all of this, is that some parents get very anxious and they want to have a rigid schedule every day for their teenagers.

And I don't think that's a great idea. I think some form of a schedule is good, that people need to have something to do with their day. But if we're overly rigid, that's not a good thing. I think parents can really create some opportunities for connection with the family or with other people. But again, don't push that. Don't make it a kind of a hill to die on. Also, parents need to be aware if a teen is struggling, teenage depression is a real thing. Teenage suicide, especially here in Kentucky, unfortunately is very high. And so, as therapists we're trying to do this through telemedicine and we're available, therapists are available to help teenagers that are struggling. So, I would encourage families to reach out if their teen is struggling. And then, finally I would encourage parents to be open to learning something new, as I mentioned before.

Find out what interests your teenager. I have a son, Noah, who is 20, and he is absolutely the most die-hard University of Kentucky basketball fan that I've ever met in my life. I mean, I've seen some die-hard fans, but this kid, since he was very little, just loves UK sports.

Mary Morder: The Wild Cats, right?

Dr. Blake Jones: Yeah, The Wild Cats. I mean, they are a big deal around here. And I enjoy sports, I'm not athletic and I like watching them, but not to the degree that he does. But what I've tried to push myself to do is to engage him and learn the names of the players, and if there's some highlight or something I'll look at that and talk with him about it. So, I think we all as parents of teenagers need to just find what interests them and try to connect in whatever way that we can.

Mary Morder: That's great advice. Thank you, Dr. Jones. I think this is going to be very helpful for our audience. And audience, if you have any questions about this topic or any other ADA Live! Topic, you can submit your questions online, on our website, adalive.org or call the Southeast ADA Center at 1800-949-4232 or our local number (404) 541-9001. Let's pause for a word from our featured organization, the University of Kentucky College of Social Work.

Commercial Break: The University of Kentucky College of Social Work in Lexington, Kentucky continues to be a leader in social work education for over 80 years. The mission of the college is to improve the human condition through focused research, excellence in instruction, and dedicated service. Our faculty dedicate themselves to promoting the development of high quality social workers and researchers. The College of Social Work offers degrees at the bachelor, master and doctoral level. We also have satellite campuses at the Center of Excellence for Rural Health in Hazard, Kentucky and Fort Sam, Houston and San Antonio, Texas. To learn more, visit socialwork.uky.edu.

Mary Morder: Welcome back everybody. We're talking today with Dr. Blake Jones about good mental health in the current world health crisis. Until now our discussion has focused on teenagers or young adults. Let's talk about other adults. Are there certain things we as older adults should and can do if we are feeling stressed or anxious?

Dr. Blake Jones: Sure. There are a lot of things that we can do, and, again, I've tried to practice these in my own life. I've felt anxiety, as everyone has, about this pandemic and how it's going to affect my family and just our world around us. So, one of the things that's been helpful to me, Mary, is to think about the things that are in our control. And I heard another therapist speak the other day and she said, the way she explains this to her

patients is that we have two things that we can control, our beliefs and our behaviors. And so, I'll flip that around a little bit. If we are sitting in our house every day, watching the news all day long, just sitting there in our anxiety thinking about the worst, those things are not helpful. And so, limiting our screen time, limiting the amount of negative information that we ingest every day, I think, is very helpful.

I think also looking at the hard times that we've been through before, I had grandparents who were in the Great Depression and they lived through World War Two and other wars and just turmoil in the country. I remember when 9/11 happened, very clearly, and I thought the world was coming apart then, we lived through that. We'll live through this and I think it's important to think about that and remember that humans are resilient at our core. That we will get through this, there will be another side of this and we need to think back about what we learned from those other times when we went through crises in our lives. I think the other thing we can do is ask for help. A lot of people think they have to do this all alone, they just have to tough it out.

And in a little bit I'll talk about the first responders that I work with and they are sort of notorious for having that attitude. I don't think that's a helpful thing. We all need help, therapists included, everyone, we need help, and we need to ask for that. And then I think finally, being open to technology, especially with older adults. One of the great joys of this pandemic, for me, has been to FaceTime every night with my parents. They're both in their 80s and they live in Ohio. And I've just loved getting on with my mom and talking with her through FaceTime, it's taken a few times, sometimes she would have the camera pointed at the top of her head and I had to ask her to bring it down a little bit. But we've had such a great time and we've also connected on Facebook, video messenger and things, but if older adults are listening, be open to using technology to help you not feel so isolated, as well.

Mary Morder: That's a great tip. I wish I could get my mother, she's 89, she has an iPad that she will do email on and that's about it. We would never get her on FaceTime, I don't think. She would just not do that, but I'm glad that that's working for you and I hope that's working as a tool for a lot of people out there who have access to technology and can

interact with the people in their lives that way. What are some of the other things to keep in mind to keep children safe, especially children who may be in and out of home placements and/or have behavioral health issues? Can you talk about that?

Dr. Blake Jones: Sure. Well, this is a worrisome time because of schools being out and so kids that are in situations where they're being abused or neglected, they really don't have a lot of eyes on them. My guess is that there may be higher rates of abuse and neglect going on right now. I hope not, I hope I'm wrong about that. We don't have a to really check that yet, but I think it's really important for caregivers to maintain their contact with mental health providers through telemedicine. Again, lots of rules have kind of been lifted around telemedicine. Insurance is paying for it now, which is great, and there are ways, there are absolutely ways for children and teens to connect with mental health providers through telemedicine. So, I think it's really important that that is happening. The other thing I would encourage families to do is to give each other a break.

It's hard being together all the time, 24 hours a day. I remember when my sons were babies, my wife would say, "If you could just take a drive with them and let me take a shower. I don't want diamonds, I don't want a dinner, I want a shower without a baby around, for a few minutes." And so, give each other breaks, take walks, take drives as safely as you can. Just remember that we're all in this together, but it's okay to have some separation from each other as well.

Mary Morder: Dr. Blake, you do a lot of work with first responders. Can you talk with us about their mental health and what they can do now to stay mentally healthy?

Dr. Blake Jones: Sure. I'm really passionate about working with first responders. They need so much support and I've tried to educate myself about their work by doing ride alongs with police and I'll go to the jail and spend a shift there. It's been so educational for me because what I understand about their job, and I'm talking specifically about police now, is that they have to maintain this kind of hypervigilant state. A simple traffic stop can turn into someone trying to hurt them or kill them. They can be driving around just kind of slow, it's a slow night, not much going on and then they're sent to a shooting or a suicide or a domestic violence situation. And so, their brain has to spike into that hypervigilant

mode and to take some control of the situation. The problem with that is that many of them, they don't have the skills to come home and transition out of that state. So, sleeping is a problem with them. They have high levels of anger, frustration, a lot of first responders use alcohol to sleep at night or to kind of forget what they've seen.

And so, what I would encourage them to do, specifically, is to have a life outside of their job, something that is positive for them, a role outside of their job, whether that's as a coach, as a parent, as a musician, as a Christian, as a whatever it is for them, something that is the opposite of all of that negativity that is their job sometimes. I think the other thing they can realize is that they can't control everything, and that's true for all of us, as I've mentioned several times. I have such great respect for first responders, they do such a good job, and they show up on a scene, and they take control of the situation and much of this is not in our control or in their control.

And so, helping ... What I've tried to do with the first responders I've worked with, is to help them realize that. And that they need to ask for help, as all of us do, as I've mentioned several times, we need to ask for help. And then, finally, practice some sort of mindfulness. There's a great program called Yoga For First Responders that is just wonderful. And so, I mentioned some of those apps before, there's a great app called the Virtual Hope Box that's very good for first responders. So, finding a way to calm their mind is also very helpful for them.

Mary Morder: Those are such great tips and thank you for sharing that, Dr. Jones. I know, I'm of course not a first responder, but I've just this year started doing chair yoga and I find it very helpful. I've never done yoga before and I'm sorry to miss my class on Sunday mornings, of course we're not meeting now. And I've tried to do some from home, but it's just not the same, so I can attest that yoga is very helpful for both just feeling both mentally and physically more relaxed and comfortable. Thank you for that.

We're going to switch gears a little bit and now we're going to go back and talk about your practice a little bit. Dr. Jones, the ADA requires, as we know, that businesses and service providers such as doctors and therapists, make modifications to their programs and services to provide equal access and effective communication for people who have

disabilities. One example during the pandemic is that you may be offering appointments and counseling services using the internet or by telephone, which we've already talked about, which is sometimes called teletherapy or telemedicine. And if you have a client who is deaf, hard of hearing or has another disability that affects their ability to use your programs and services, you'll need to make accommodations or modifications. And this is true regardless of the pandemic, it's true all the time. So, what adjustments have you had to make to your practice since the pandemic began?

Dr. Blake Jones: Sure. Well, I'll speak about my practice and then also about my work as a faculty member at the university. Telemedicine is different and it's a challenge, to be honest. I have not done it before and sitting in front of a screen with someone is kind of distancing, and it's challenging for the therapist and our clients. And so, what I've tried to do is make that situation as comfortable as possible. If I have someone who has a disability, talk with them before we get on telemedicine about that and how I can assist them with that through closed captioning, or whatever, I might be able to help them kind of connect with me better. And that's the same, that also holds true for my teaching. I have a student this semester who is hard of hearing, and so through the use of Zoom, through closed captioning, I've learned a lot about working with her and helping her connect fully with the other students online, and that's been a great learning experience for me.

I've been a teacher for over 20 years and I've never needed to use closed captioning on Zoom and on lectures, and so that's been very helpful to me. And I think it kind of speaks to what I was talking about before, is to being open at any age to learning, learning new technology and learning new ways to connect with people.

Mary Morder: That's great. And you may not know that I'm hard of hearing myself and so I appreciate the fact that you've added captions to your repertoire of skills. So, now you won't be as afraid the next time someone asks for something similar, you'll say, "Oh yes, I know, I can certainly do that. No problem." We all appreciate that when that happens, that the person on the other side, we don't have to explain what we need, and they say, "Oh yes, I'm familiar with that. No problem. I'll provide that for you." So, the world opens up

just a little bit more for everybody. It's a wonderful thing. Dr. Jones, can you tell us a little bit more about the other positive things that you're seeing and doing during this time?

Dr. Blake Jones: Oh, so many good things are happening and I have a friend who is a police officer and I think I mentioned, I work with a lot of first responders, and a lot of police are negatively focused. They are called to a lot of really hard and bad things. But this guy, I just love him because every day he posts something positive on Facebook about the pandemic, someone who is recovered or a mother who's given birth in the middle of this, or a police officer that's survived. It's just something positive and it's so encouraging for me to see that amongst all the negative things that people post on social media. But I've seen communities coming together, I mean, here where I live in Georgetown, Kentucky, our community has just really come together and rallied around our medical professionals, our first responders.

The kids are out in my neighborhood doing sidewalk art. I love that. Walk down the street and there's sidewalk art, pictures of flowers and just other things from a child's perspective, that means so much to me. We've had teachers from a local schools that do parades through the streets that the kids love. And so, it's so important, back to what I said about the two things we can control, our beliefs and our behaviors. And so, we can choose to look at all the negative things every day about what's going on, and there are many of them. I don't want to downplay that at all. My heart breaks for New York City and other places that are just so devastated, but I also think that we really need to look at the good things that are going on in the world as well.

Mary Morder: And thank you for sharing all the positive information that you have with us today. We appreciate your insights and advice on maintaining mental health during this stressful time. ADA Live! Listeners, in this third of a three part series on taking care of our mental health during the coronavirus outbreak, our guest has been Dr. Blake Jones from the University of Kentucky College of Social Work. For questions and comments on this podcast, submit anytime online at adalive.org. And we also want to let you know that the Southeast ADA Center has developed a comprehensive resource site for coronavirus information. You can find this information on our website at adasoutheast.org/coronavirus.

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4 Wheel City: (rapping)

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