

Cheshire Herald Interview-COVID

Kimberly Citron, PhD

Dr. Kimberly Citron maintains a small private practice in Cheshire and is the Director of Assessment and Forensic Psychology Services at Connecticut Behavioral Health. Dr. Citron has been treating individuals of all ages for over fifteen years and has expertise in treating anxiety, depression, autism spectrum disorders, family conflict, ADHD and trauma. Dr. Citron conducts psychological assessment throughout the state of Connecticut, including forensic, trauma, educational, psychosocial and risk assessments. Dr. Citron has published in peer reviewed journals on a variety of topics.

Ways To Manage Your Mental Health During the COVID Pandemic

- V** Validate your own feelings
- I** Intellectualize in a healthy way
- R** Relaxation and Recreation
- A** Affiliation and Approximation
- L** Learn skills for coping

Validation

Be sure to validate your own emotions as well as the emotions of others:

This is an unprecedented, horribly difficult time. We are mostly confined to our homes and those who are not are out in the community exposed to the virus. People are adjusting to working from home during a pandemic, which a colleague distinguished from our typical notions of 'working from home', as well as homeschooling their children during a pandemic, not in the typical voluntary manner in which people chose to homeschool their children. People are isolated from family, friends and co-workers. It is okay to validate that this does not feel okay. When we minimize, belittle or invalidate our own feelings, it can lead to greater feelings of depression, anxiety and inadequacy. So acknowledge your emotions, feel them, lean on others for support and learn coping strategies for those emotions.

Intellectualize in a healthy way

Like many coping strategies, intellectualization can be both a coping strategy as well as a cognitive distortion, when misused. It is important that we intellectualize on some level, because it helps us to be logical and to avoid emotionally-driven decision-making. By thinking with our logical or rational brain, we obtain the necessary amount of reliable, valid information to make well-informed decisions. We want to limit the sources of information to those that are deemed accurate and reliable such as the CDC. However, we do not want to obsess about statistics and figures presented in the media more so than is necessary to make reasonable, well informed decisions.

Relaxation and Recreation

It is important that we take out time specifically for relaxation and recreation. Relaxation techniques can include mindfulness, meditation, yoga, listening to music or taking a walk. Recreation can take the form of more rigorous physical activity such as having a catch or playing basketball with healthy family members only, going hiking on a trail that is not heavily populated, running or riding a bicycle. Recreation can also include activities such as board games, puzzles, reading, watching a movie, scrapbooking, baking or cooking. It is imperative that we not go from working at home during a pandemic to homeschooling during a pandemic to watching the news about the pandemic. It is essential to our well-being that we integrate activities for relaxation and recreation for ourselves, as well as for our children.

Affiliation and Approximation

Human beings require affiliation and connection with other human beings (as well as our furry friends, chirping friends and squirming friends!) It is important that we maintain a sense of connection with others during this time of social distancing. Connections within a family are important, as well as outside of your family. Take time out to connect with individual family members as well as the entire family. In families with multiple siblings, break up into pairs or groups for certain activities, and switch who people are paired with regularly. Each parent should spend some time individually with each child, regardless of family size. Make sure that you are also connecting with extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Finally, be sure to connect with your friends and co-workers as well as these relationships are important sources of outside support. Talking with others with help to normalize how we are all feeling. I would love to see people more open about sharing the challenges they are experiencing with this process. While I love the success stories and seeing all of the positive discoveries folks are making about themselves and their families ability to be resilient, it would be great if we could normalize the struggle for those who might not be doing as well.

Approximation refers to making close approximations to the activities that you enjoyed prior to the pandemic and associated social distancing. It is beneficial for our mental health to create as close approximations as possible to our previous sources of enjoyment and pleasure. For instance, if you enjoyed getting manicures, paint your own nails ; If you enjoy playing saxophone in a band hop on a zoom meeting and have a jam session with your bandmates. As much as possible, try to integrate close approximations of your normal routine into your day. It will keep you feeling more like yourself and will allow you to continue to access sources of enjoyment.

Learn Skills for Coping

There are skills for coping with feelings of sadness, anxiety and anger that can be accessed via apps on your phone, the internet or reading materials, as well as attending therapy. For instance, thought stopping and thought switching are techniques for coping with what we refer to as negative automatic thoughts in cognitive behavioral therapy. Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic is breeding constant negative automatic about ourselves (i.e. am I safe? Will I get sick? Will I

survive?), our families (i.e. Will my children get sick? My parents? My spouse?) and the world (i.e. What will this do the economy? The population? Our nation? International relations?). One technique for combatting these thoughts is Thought Stopping in which we visualize a stop sign that we can mentally hold up when a negative thought enters our minds. I like to suggest that clients create their own personalized STOP sign in which they include personal details such as musical notes for a musician or a picture of a cake for a baker. The more details the better as the visualization process will assist in distracting us from negative thoughts. Once we have stopped the negative thought using Thought Stopping, we can then utilize Thought Switching to change or modify our thoughts. To accomplish this we have to change our thoughts or cognitions, much like we would change the channel on a television or radio. This can be achieved by counting backwards from 20, or better yet 100. If the thoughts are persistent we need something with a greater cognitive load in order to distract us. For instance, some people might need to count backwards from 100 by 7's in order to switch their thoughts. I often individualize this as well, for instance, if you like to bake or cook, recite a favorite recipe in your mind; if you have a favorite song recite the lyrics; if you're a sports fan, play your most memorable game over in your mind. The goal is to recognize the negative thought you are having, stop the thought and replace it with another thought. Of course, this is a very simplified version of some of the skills one might learn in therapy. For those who are struggling with their mental health in spite of attempts to implement strategies independently, I strongly encourage you to reach out for help. Although we are extremely resilient creatures, this pandemic is being experienced as traumatic for many. It is often beneficial to seek help early in relation to the experience of symptoms of distress as this is shown to improve long term outcomes.