



# MENTAL HEALTH FIRST

## Community pharmacies look inward to address fear, stress, and anxiety

by Chris Linville

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the United States and the world, from both a health and economic standpoint. Things that people took for granted, such as going to a movie, eating in a restaurant, or even getting a haircut, now must be considered as calculated risks. Formerly harmless activities, such as going to the grocery store, require a kind of actuarial focus that would have been absurd only a few months ago. Schools are closed, people have been ordered to stay at home, and a “new normal,” whatever that is, is likely to last for a while.

Not surprisingly, people are struggling to wrap their heads around a crisis that, for now, has more questions than answers. Without a vaccine or a cure, there’s no end in sight. According to a U.S. Census Bureau survey, a third of Americans (including health care providers) are showing signs of clinical anxiety or depression, the most definitive and alarming sign yet of the psychological toll exacted by the pandemic. Nearly half of Americans report that it is harming their mental health, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll.

## FACING UNCERTAINTY

For anyone who was in Moore, Okla., on May 20, 2013, it is a day they will never forget. An EF5 tornado stretching up to a mile wide and packing maximum winds of 210 miles per hour hit the town. When it was over, 24 people were killed and another 377 were injured.

Clark Bishop, PharmD, pharmacy manager at Hutton Pharmacy in Blackwell, Okla., has vivid memories of that day. What he experienced in its aftermath would shape his pharmacy career. It would direct him to become certified in mental health first aid. It would change his attitude about people suffering from mental health-related issues.

At the time, Bishop was living in Moore, a suburb south of Oklahoma City. He was only about 200 yards away from the tornado when it came through, huddled in his storm shelter in his garage at home. Physically he was fine. Afterward he offered to provide a helping hand, but what he experienced with the destruction left a deep impression.

"It's hard to explain, but it wasn't just seeing," he says. "It was what I saw, what I heard, what I smelled, what I tasted, and what I felt. Every sense was overwhelmed by chaos

and things I had never experienced before."

Fast forward seven years and the world is dealing with something it hasn't experienced in modern times. After the Moore tornado, Bishop was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Several years later he was certified as a Mental Health First Aid trainer, through a program by Mental Health First Aid USA. Bishop's training was designed to recognize patients whose behavior might be showing signs of mental health issues, and to see that they are pointed in the right direction toward professionals with mental health treatment expertise.

With the pandemic, he's been looking at the other side of the counter toward his staff, who, like other community pharmacists, are on the front lines.

"Mental health first aid applies in any situation where a mental health issue can arise and can be used on anybody," Bishop says. "This most certainly includes staff and our patients during this pandemic. I use portions of my training nearly every single day. Anxiety has needed the most attention. Anxiety, in and of itself, is perfectly normal. It's when the level and frequency of anxiety

begins to disrupt an individual's ability to live, laugh, and love that it becomes an issue."

## MANAGING FEAR

Bishop says the biggest aspect is to manage fear, both for his staff, and for patients. "Unfortunately, fear is what is primarily being sold by media, politicians, and other leaders," he says. "Fear is an incredibly powerful emotion and it can either be a great motivator or a great destroyer."

Bishop says the important thing to consider is that each individual is capable of influencing which of those paths fear can take.

"As an owner and manager it has been important for me to be honest with my staff," he says. "My whole staff and I have experienced some level of fear during the pandemic. It has been my goal to use that fear to help us reinforce what we believe is our important role in our community. Together we rationally came to the decision that we don't want to get sick and we don't want to get others sick, but that we want to continue to provide our services to the community that has been here for us and that needs us now maybe more than ever."

Bishop says fear can be channeled in a productive way. Independents



*At Perkins Drugs, owner Andrew Finney stressed being open and honest and making sure the staff is constantly being informed.*



## NCPA offers mental health first aid CE

NCPA has certified the Mental Health First Aid program for eight hours of continuing education for both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians. Sign up for a course today at [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org). There is no additional charge for the CE.

are known for their accessibility, and he says it was essential to stay that way. So protocols were developed, allowing the pharmacy to stay open while at the same time keeping staff and patients safe.

“I would argue that little has been accomplished in all of history in the absence of fear,” he says. “When we begin to evaluate our fear appropriately, we become better at knowing what we should be afraid of and what we shouldn’t. Then when we find a way to allow appropriate fear

and assumptions. We try to fill that gap with accurate information and try to over-communicate as much as we can.”

Finney says the pharmacy faced a test at the onset of the pandemic, as it had an employee who had symptoms and ended up testing positive. Adding to the stress was that the test results didn’t come back for two weeks.

“It created a lot of uncertainty with our team, so me and my managers

as quickly as it could, and cleanings at the start and end of each day. It also compounded hand sanitizer.

“We’re trying to be as open and proactive about things as we can,” Finney says.

Finney says other small gestures,

*“Mental health first aid applies in any situation where a mental health issue can arise and can be used on anybody.”*

to drive us instead of cripple us, the things we can accomplish are likely immeasurable.”

### **HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY**

In a time where everyone is looking for answers, Andrew Finney, owner of Perkins Drugs in Gallatin, Tenn., says that honesty is the best policy.

“It’s about being open with one another, and talking about what’s going on,” he says. “We want to make sure that everybody is kept informed because confusion occurs when people just don’t know. If there are communication gaps, people typically fill in that gap with cynicism

were just scouring everything we could get our hands on from the CDC to put together what we thought were the accurate guidelines and best practices,” he says. “We did that, but also let people know that this is something new and we don’t know everything – this is what’s happened, here’s what we’re doing about it, and these are the precautions that we are taking. I think it helps to just be upfront and say that we don’t know everything, but here’s what we think is best based on the guidelines that are out there.”

Some of the steps the pharmacy did included getting masks and gloves

such as providing lunch once every few weeks, also helps tell staff they are appreciated. "It reminds them that you are thinking about them and it's a really simple way to just say thank you," he says. Buying lunches also helps benefit local restaurants, as it fits into the pharmacy's core value of helping support its local community.

### SHOW APPRECIATION

Jack Dunn, owner of Jasper Drug Store in Jasper, Ga., says, "Your staff is your No. 1 asset. Understand that there is a lot of anxiety and fear in the pharmacy right now. Listen to them. Hear their concerns, and

share the steps you are implementing to keep them safe."

Dunn says he encourages each employee to leave the pharmacy during the day and walk outside with another employee for at least 15 minutes.

"I noticed like some others that my staff was having a lot of stress, so I started making my staff walk in twos for about 2-3 blocks to get away from the phone," he says. "I told them I don't want you talking about this (pandemic). I want you to get away from it, talk about family or anything else you want."

Another idea Dunn heard to help morale was to have each person on staff select a song of the day, then rotate the submitted songs.

"We play a new song every hour for five minutes," he says. "We take that

of his staff to let them know how thankful he is to them for serving customers in a challenging time. "We take our staff for granted a lot, but I thought it was very important to let them know how I feel," he says.

### USING HUMOR

Jay Norberg, owner of A & S Drugs in Pipestone, Minn., says he has implemented several steps to help staff keep their minds off the pandemic, including having more breaks (when possible) to just sit down and decompress. He encourages the staff to discuss their family or just make small talk, just to keep their minds clear. And going with the adage that laughter is the best medicine, Norberg thinks humor between staff and patients helps lighten the mood.

Acknowledging that it works better on some days than others, Norberg says, "I have found that humor has

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time to wipe down workstations or parts of the pharmacy."

As an independent pharmacist, Dunn wants to help the local economy, so like Perkins Drugs' Finney, he'll buy lunch from a restaurant in town.

"It lets your staff know that you appreciate the fact that they are working extra hard under these stressful situations, and it lets them know that you are trying to support other local businesses," he says.

Dunn says he personally texts all

always been a great release, at least for me. You can find something humorous in almost anything, even in bad situations."

Norberg has a dry sense of humor, saying, "My way of trying to make light of a situation is to try and come up with something that's even worse. This person might not be crazy about the copayment they have, but I could give you this other medicine and it's 10 times as much. Then it's not so bad."

A & S Drugs is a small pharmacy, with only five full-time employees,

and Norberg, who has been with the pharmacy since 1993 and owned it since 2010, tries to keep a pulse on his staff's state of mind.

"A lot of pharmacies are not as busy as they used to be, so of course you have all the cleaning that has to be done, but we'll take time out in the morning to see how their night was, how their family is doing, and again strengthen the relationship that you already have," he says.

Norberg says his focus is to focus on the big picture and not sweat the small details.

"We're basically in a situation where you do what has to be done, and let the rest of the stuff slide," he says. "I would say that for the most part we are hanging in there. We had one person who left way back in March because she was sick at that time and had underlying conditions. We only have three people working at a time. That makes the other two work harder. I've been putting in more time trying to pick up the slack, do some of the things that aren't as enjoyable to do and leave the rest for everyone else."

Social media doesn't always help when people are on edge, Norberg says, pointing out that based on who you read, it's the end of the world or the coronavirus is nothing more serious than the flu. Pipestone County, with about 10,000 residents in the southwest corner of the state, has been largely spared, with 15 cases in mid-June.

"It hasn't been as bad for us, but that doesn't mean that you don't take all the safeguards you possibly can," Norberg says.

### BREATHE DEEPLY

Dorinda Martin, co-owner at Martin's Wellness Pharmacy in Austin, Texas,

### Mental health issues take a toll

According to Mental Health First Aid USA, one in five Americans has a mental illness, 70 percent of Americans with depression are in the workforce, and 35 million workdays are lost every year due to mental illness. Additionally, the cost of untreated mental illness in the U.S. is \$105 billion annually, mostly due to lost productivity.

says she took her pharmacy's name to heart. She says an employee with yoga training led the staff in a session to relieve stress.

"It's important to have fun and divert attention to our own staff's well-being," Martin says. "Some of our guys had never done yoga – so this was fun!"

Martin's advice: "Choose a leader, someone who knows yoga, and take a few minutes to relax and breathe deep."

### TRAINING COMES IN HANDY

Bishop says he has completed 32 mental health trainings since he was certified. He must be re-certified every three years and complete a certain amount of CE. He has acquired the "Fire and EMS," "Law Enforcement, Corrections, and Public Safety," and "Opioid Response" designations of the training.

And in times like these, that training comes in handy.

"It has allowed us to recognize and intervene when we see the signs and symptoms," Bishop says. "A great deal of that involves helping patients do what we have done, managing their fear."

Bishop acknowledges some days are harder than others, and he is proud of the staff's resolve.

"The anxiety has been higher than any other time in my time here," says Bishop, who has been at Hutton Pharmacy for four years. "Yet we keep moving forward, we keep adapting, and we do our best to keep our focus on keeping people who rely on us and ourselves healthy." ■

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managing editor.

*Clark Bishop (far right) has used his mental health training to help his staff address anxiety and fear at Hutton Pharmacy.*

