

RECOVERY

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Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*

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FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

Mental Health Action Day on May 20 is designed to "lift the conversation from awareness to action." We couldn't agree more, especially when it comes to action that moves the needle on measurable progress in rural communities.

Though the recovery housing industry is loosely organized and underfunded, we see it at a critical inflection point poised for momentous change. We are a catalyst for that change, dedicated to untangling the knots and addressing the critical capability gaps that have prevented RH from achieving its full potential.

Our innovative “Recovery Ecosystem” model with recovery housing at the center has already proven to be effective, affordable, and sustainable. The next step in driving substance use and overdose rates to historic lows is bringing together the energy and resources of business, government, nonprofits, and others to enable its implementation. By unlocking pools of previously untapped capital and talent, we can, with your help, summon the throw-weight needed to push us over the tipping point to sweeping, transformative change.

As you’ll see in the following articles written by three of our Outreach and Engagement Specialists, all of whom are in long-term recovery themselves, stopgap measures have failed in protecting rural Americans from the opioid epidemic. As a catalyst for the sweeping change that's needed, we will continue to conduct credible research, codify best practices, nurture grassroots leadership, and create a shared identity based on scalable, evidence-based solutions.

To that end, we look forward to your continued support, believing, as we hope you do, that when it comes to rural America the best is still yet to come.

RURAL INFLECTION POINT

By Nate Conklin Fletcher Group Outreach and Engagement Specialist living in Baker City, Oregon

COVID's been hard for everyone, but especially for rural communities. The social stressors long endured by rural Americans—particularly feelings of isolation and loneliness—have been compounded by the inability, imposed by social distancing, to connect in traditional ways with friends, family, and support groups.

Inequities in healthcare are familiar to rural residents. One example is their historically higher risk of suicide compared to people living in populated areas, yet despite the risk rural Americans often find it more difficult to access the counseling and services needed to address it.*

Inequity is driven by a multitude of structural issues: longer distances to medical facilities, lack of public transportation, a shortage of mental health professionals, and a lack (if not a complete absence) of specialized care for specific populations, such as women in need of specific services and ethnic or racial groups that require cultural sensitivity on the part of providers.**

A Downward Turn

The inequities have, if anything, worsened. Rural Americans have reported a 21 percent decrease in the availability and accessibility of mental health services since the pandemic began.** To make matters worse, rural Americans have reported a 13 percent increase in the stigma attached to those seeking mental health care.

Such changes have not gone unnoticed. According to the latest data:†

- Between April of 2019 and December of 2020, the number of rural Americans who think of mental health as “especially important” increased by six percent.
- Over half of all rural Americans 18 to 34 thought more about mental health more this year than ever before.
- Two-thirds of rural adults 18-44 suffered more mental health issues at the end of 2020 than in April 2019.
- Six of ten rural adults blame the virus for negatively affecting their community's mental health.

What To Do

All is not lost. There are many ways we can work together to improve the mental health outlook for rural America. The first is to raise awareness by bringing together advocates, professionals, families, and elected officials to not only sound the alarm but also push hard for the funding and resources needed to meet the challenge. The second is to support those efforts with in-depth research that demonstrates the urgency of the situation while paving the way for evidence-based practices that can be trusted because they're effective.

Staying Connected

Considering how stressful any form of change can be, we should be proud of our response to the pandemic—not only the hard work we've done to prevent infection but



also the innovative ways in which we've maintained strong personal connections despite social distancing. The growth in virtual meetings, for example, bodes well for improving the healthcare services needed in geographically isolated areas. My hope is that we can continue to refine the use of electronic communication, including Telehealth, to provide needed services while reducing the sense of isolation that people in remote areas often feel. We now have the tools to create connection where none was possible before.

Although the pandemic has caused enormous suffering, we've learned valuable lessons from it. Many of us have a newfound empathy for others and a greater appreciation for the importance of community. Combining those lessons with technological innovation will allow us to positively impact the mental health and well-being of rural Americans, from family members and friends to neighbors and community members we've yet to meet. I'm excited by the prospect and hope you are, too!

* Preventing Suicide In Rural Communities During the Covid-19 Pandemic, NIH National Library of Medicine

** Barriers to Substance Abuse Treatment In Rural and Urban Communities, NIH National Library of Medicine

† Impacts of Covid-19 on Rural Mental Health, American Farm Bureau

CONFRONTING LONELINESS

By Gene Detherage, Fletcher Group Outreach and Engagement Specialist living in Morehead, Kentucky

We all know the pain of feeling lonely. But for those in recovery, the sudden and protracted loss of contact with support groups can be dangerous. Fatal overdoses, for example, have increased by nearly 27 percent during the pandemic.* I know I’m not alone in missing the powerful sense of relief and the tangible therapeutic benefits that come from connecting with others at a favorite support meeting.

Rural Challenges

Those who live in rural communities face the additional challenge of geographic isolation and the closing of what few public spaces were previously available.** All of which begs the question: How can we identify and address loneliness when we’re deprived of our most basic tools?

Back To Basics

At times like this, it’s important to apply the tried-and-true practices we learn about in recovery—from meditation, prayer, reflection and self-acceptance to exercise, getting outdoors, reading recovery-related literature and staying in touch with friends and mentors.

The Good News

Fortunately, despite the pandemic, recovery residences are still functioning safely and online recovery meetings are still being held round the clock. (For help finding an online meeting, I recommend <https://recoverttogether.withgoogle.com/>.)

Remember: It’s Normal!

But in my opinion the most important step in dealing with loneliness is just being honest about it. Feeling lonely is normal and natural. It’s what all people feel in times of stress and isolation.†

That’s because we humans have an in-born need to feel connected. Without a sense of belonging, we naturally feel lonely. The key is not to make a permanent decision based on a temporary feeling, no matter how strong the perceived need for escape may be in the moment.‡

What You Can Do

Keeping that in mind, here are a few other practices I recommend for dealing with loneliness. I hope you’ll share them with others because, ultimately, that’s how we’ll get through this—one day at a time and with each other's help.

- Make a plan each day to talk with friends and family.
- Do as many things as possible with others, from walking and hiking to baking and playing games.



- Write down what you’re feeling—we all have a lot to learn about ourselves.
- Connect with nature and the transcendent beauty of the outdoors.
- Do a virtual tour of the national parks, botanical gardens and other sites you hope to visit in person one day.
- Listen to music, dance, or research a favorite subject.
- Help someone by running an errand for them or simply calling to check in. Nothing combats isolation and loneliness like helping others!

“*Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone. We find it with another.*”
—Thomas Merton

* Centers for Disease Control. Vital Statistics Rapid Release Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts. 17 March 2021
** National Rural Health Association. Approaching the issue of rural social isolation. Franklin, Jennifer & Henning-Smith, Carrie. 9 January 2020
† Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Recovery and Recovery Support. 23 April 2020
‡ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. How To Cope With Sheltering in Place. 2014

HELPING THE HELPERS

By Erica Walker, Fletcher Group Outreach and Engagement Specialist living in Frenchburg, Kentucky

Even before the pandemic, America’s rural healthcare infrastructure was stretched to the limit dealing with homelessness, substance use, mental health issues, and the “revolving door” of the criminal justice system. But as we've all seen, despite an opioid epidemic and a pandemic, “the helpers” just keep showing up to deliver the support and services community members need.

There’s little research about the pandemic’s impact on mental and behavioral health providers, especially in rural areas. But it's clear that the national shortage of behavioral health professionals has taken a toll on rural Americans. Over 90 percent of all psychologists and psychiatrists and 80 percent of all Masters-level Social Workers work in metropolitan areas. As a result, over 60 percent of our nation’s 45 million rural residents have no access to a mental health professional.*

Before joining the Fletcher Group, I worked as a therapist and program coordinator for a rural mental health center where I provided clinical services to those struggling with substance use and trauma. Because I’m in long-term recovery myself, helping others in recovery is more than a job. It’s my passion and my purpose in life.

Nevertheless, I found myself overwhelmed during the pandemic, so much so that I suffered a panic attack in June of 2020. I had been helping clients deal with trauma and stress for years, but had never myself experienced anxiety on this level. Thanks to an amazing colleague, I used some deep breathing and grounding techniques to relax and then talked through the anxiety to process it. The lesson I learned was how important it is to “help the helpers.”

In small rural communities like mine the opioid epidemic continues to have a devastating generational impact on families. And because my colleagues and I were already spread thin, adjusting to the huge and sudden changes in policy and practices brought on by the pandemic was difficult. Serving high-risk clients became even more challenging when we could no longer meet them in person. Virtual meetings are helpful, but they're not the same as looking someone in the eye and observing gestures and body language face to face. I worried for my clients as much as I worried for my friends and family.

Addiction and mental health professionals are accustomed to putting the needs of others ahead of their own. But there’s a cost to that, especially in rural areas where mental health and addictions services may be lacking. Urban colleagues usually find it easier to locate counseling services, join a gym, or attend an art or yoga class. In my case, the nearest gym is 40 minutes away with other therapeutic opportunities limited or non-existent.

What You Can Do

To “help our helpers,” employers can:

- Launch support groups, either in person or virtually.
- Offer therapeutic activities such as yoga and meditation classes.



- Check in once a week with staff to gauge stress levels and support needs

If you're an employee:

- Apply self-care tools such as grounding techniques and deep breathing.
- Join an existing support group, either online or in person.
- Talk to employers about starting a virtual or in-person support group. (Or start one yourself! You can even invite professionals from outside your organization.)
- Participate in outdoor therapeutic activities such as hiking, walking, running, kayaking, and bird watching.
- Explore online counseling services that let you connect with other professionals. (I recommend [psychologytoday.com/us/therapists](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists).)
- If you’re struggling, reach out to friends, family, and colleagues. Chances are they’re struggling, too, and will benefit as much as you.
- Use paid time off or sick leave when you need to relax and recharge.

Above all, remember that, for helpers to help others, they also need to help themselves.

* Potential Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Communities, National Center For Biotechnology Information