

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast. Find out what you need to know about preparedness, get all the latest tips from experts in the field and learn what to do before the next disaster strikes from the emergency management department in the city that never sleeps. Here are your hosts, Omar Bourne and Allison Pennisi.

Omar Bourne ([00:28](#)):

Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Omar Bourne.

Allison Pennisi ([00:31](#)):

And I'm Allison Pennisi and you are our listeners and as always, we thank you for joining us. We have been away for the past few months as we've worked together to slow the spread of COVID-19 here in New York City. Omar and I have been doing our best to keep socially distant. For example, I've been working from home and I'm currently coming to you live from my house.

Omar Bourne ([00:51](#)):

That's right Allison. I am also social distancing, also working from home as New York City continues to slowly improve. That is a testament as we know to the great work that New Yorkers have been doing in wearing their face coverings and practicing social distancing. So we want to encourage everyone to continue these practices because they are making a difference. These are unprecedented times. COVID-19 is taking a toll on our physical, emotional and mental well-being, from doctors and nurses and healthcare workers, first responders on the front lines of this battle to everyone who may have lost a loved one. Everyone is affected in some way. Our heart goes out to those who have been affected by this pandemic.

Allison Pennisi ([01:51](#)):

That's right Omar. With everything going on around us, we often stop and think, "What are the mental implications of a pandemic and how can we maintain our mental health and well-being during difficult times like this?" We have a special guest who is here to help us answer those questions. Ali Gheith is a professional disaster mental health counselor and a certified emergency manager.

Omar Bourne ([02:15](#)):

Mr. Gheith has responded to many crises in New York City since 9/11. In 2010 he was assigned as a regional coordinator for a citywide H1N1 campaign to vaccinate New Yorkers. Mr. Gheith or Ali, is dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with mental illness through public education, informational activities and raising awareness to move the mental health agenda forward. So Ali, thank you very much for being here. Welcome to "Prep Talk."

Ali Gheith ([02:51](#)):

Thank you Allison and Omar for having me. I'm glad to be with you. I'm glad to be speaking about this important issue, especially during this time of a type that we are facing not just city wide, but state, nation and globally.

Omar Bourne ([03:09](#)):

Thank you very much. So let's get right into it. Now May is mental health awareness month. And as we've mentioned, we are in difficult and unprecedented times. So Ali, can you describe the importance and significance of this month and helping people cope with stress and what are the mental implications of a pandemic such as COVID-19?

Ali Gheith ([03:35](#)):

Actually mental health is as important as physical health. However, most of the time people monitor their physical health and they tend to neglect or ignore at all taking care of their mental health. Mental health should be an every day thing like physical health. It should be monitored, it should be nourished. Mental health problems are as common as physical or even more common than the physical health problems. As a matter of fact, one out of five adult Americans and young Americans experience mental health problem any given year. The numbers even could be higher. Those are the ones who have been tested and examined and assessed. However, when we speak of mental health, we can not go on talking about without interest in the issue of stigma that is associated with mental health problems. Wherever you go throughout the United States and New York City, when you're dealing with different cultural groups, people always talk about stigma.

Ali Gheith ([04:44](#)):

There is a negativity when it come to thinking about mental health and a lot of people see this as an issue weaknesses, and they don't want to talk about mental health because the stigma often keep people awake from seeking professional, mental health counseling, or services if needed. And other issue, especially with this month to understand that many people are not well-informed about mental health problems. Most of the mental health problems happen about half of them by the age of 14 and sequel of mental health problems happen by the age of 24. So this is a time when young people are developing and often people interpret this as, "This is part of growing up, this is part of being an adolescent," when the person might be actually developing some type of a mental health problems.

Ali Gheith ([05:41](#)):

Other issues to consider here is that professional help is not always on hand. For example, if I grab onto my chest as if I'm having a heart attack, you're going to find a lot of people out there who know how to do CPR. Symptoms of heart attack are similar, very similar to symptoms of a panic attack, which is a mental illness. And if you compare how many people can address heart attack and help someone compared to someone who's having a panic attack. Not that they don't want to help but they often don't know how to respond because of that fear, that stigma, the lack of understanding.

Ali Gheith ([06:24](#)):

In general, when people become anxious, they think this is part of life, life is stressful. And not understanding that they might be developing some type of mental health problem. And when you live in a city as fast as New York, where so much happening, people experience some type of anxiety, sometimes there's a confusion between normal stressors to day-to-day life compared to the stress that's caused by anxiety that can be debilitating and that can be harming to the person. It is important in that recognize the signs and symptoms and get into treatment as early as possible. Early intervention matters. The sooner you speak to a professional about this, most likely will recover much faster, much quicker and stay in recovery and then do well.

Ali Gheith ([07:24](#)):

Now these are the types of things that we need to think about. I know month of May is mental health month, but we have to think about these things on daily basis as we move forward with our lives. Not just for ourselves, but for our loved one.

Allison Pennisi ([07:41](#)):

So I'm glad Ali, you brought up how mental health issues can affect people at a very young age as we're growing up and developing. And we know this working in emergency management, that disasters affect people differently. So what are some steps people can take to help cope with COVID-19 specifically?

Ali Gheith ([08:02](#)):

Here is some of the thing that you can do to manage and alleviate your stress, by taking time to take care of yourself. It's very important to keep things in perspective. Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching the news, you would want to stay up to date on news of the outbreak particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have gotten sick. And we see this here in the city of course, but make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control. Second, get the facts. Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself against illness.

Ali Gheith ([08:54](#)):

Keep yourself healthy, eat healthy food and drink water, avoid excessive amount of caffeine. And this is one thing people often do. They drink a lot of coffee and caffeine. After a while, it starts adding more to the anxiety. And unfortunately some people start drinking more alcohol or self-medicating. Don't use tobacco, illegal drugs, always consult with your doctor and get enough sleep and rest and get some physical exercise.

Omar Bourne ([09:23](#)):

I love it. That is great information. And I like the fact that you say, "Take a break, especially from the news," because people can become so overwhelmed with just listening to the news and trying to stay up to date with what's going on that they become bombarded with just everything that is going on. For me, I like to sometimes we listen to some sports radio just to get my mind off of everything that's going on. And then I also like to drink a lot of water. I know, as you said, a lot of people drink coffee. So for our listeners out there during this time, water. How about tea Ali? I'm a tea person. I was never really a coffee person. Is tea a good option?

Ali Gheith ([10:14](#)):

I love tea as long as it is decaffeinated. Even if you drink coffee, okay, make sure you like the taste of coffee. Make sure it's decaffeinated because lots of caffeine can ignite anxieties. So it's not really helpful. I know for a fact, I need my coffee in the morning, but after that if I need something later in the evening hour, I will drink anything that's tea or coffee that is decaffeinated. It's very important that we learn how to be practical and learn how to relax our body by doing things that work for me. So what may work for me may not work for others. For example, taking deep breaths, stretching, meditating, wash your face and wash your hands, engaged in pleasurable hobby. It's important to pace yourself between the stressful activities and do fun things instead of hard work. Use time off to relax and eat good meals.

Ali Gheith ([11:17](#)):

So here's important thing to realize that our body during stressful time it's taught craving for not the healthy food. We start craving for carbs, we start for sugary things. And after a while, it takes toll on the mental health because whatever happened in our stomach, the enzymes, the bacteria, have an impact on our mind and our emotion. Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends, often helpful. Talk to people who are nonjudgmental. People who accept you for who you are and stay connected with them. That's extremely helpful. So this is kind of having a best friend, someone who will accept you for who your are, genuine to your feelings and show some kind of empathy. We all have to be best friends nowadays.

Omar Bourne ([12:16](#)):

A lot of great points here, Ali. Allison, I don't know about you. I have developed a sweet tooth of late that I've found. I've been craving a lot of Snickers. I try only to eat sweets once a week, but how about you, anything on your end?

Allison Pennisi ([12:34](#)):

I don't know if I've had any cravings per se, but we've made the joke on the show before that, "Omar, you're not you when you're hungry." And I feel like this is a great plug for Snickers right now. I will say though, I will say, I think that emergencies like this one really do change your perspective. And Ali, you touched on empathy. I think that it allows us in a very surreal and bittersweet way, sometimes it allows us to really see things from a different perspective. Maybe we would reach out to people that we haven't been in touch with as often, and even allowing you to establish a different type of routine. For me personally, I've found that during this time I'm doing a lot of work from home, I have my children with me as well, being able to establish a routine with them that we get up in the morning at a certain time, we do certain activities during the day or in the evening and even keeping with certain routines like story time at bed time. Things like that have really also allowed me to keep moving forward.

Allison Pennisi ([13:39](#)):

Because I think that this is a time where people will struggle and do struggle, but to point out the fact that we need to be there for each other and have that empathy. And what one person is experiencing is not what another person is experiencing. It's very important that we continue to move forward and to speak with each other. And not even just be a best friend to someone else, but be a best friend to ourselves and have that self-care.

Ali Gheith ([14:04](#)):

Absolutely.

Omar Bourne ([14:05](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. You bring up a lot of great points. I know for me, a lot of my family are away overseas and so it's a matter of getting on the phone and calling them or FaceTime in with my mother and my grandmother and just checking in on them to make sure that they're okay and to connect with them as well to make sure that I'm keeping the connection. And just checking in and dropping a kind word and seeing how everyone is doing, whether it's a call, a text, you really wants to make sure that you're connecting with others. Ali, you mentioned one out of five Americans experience mental health issues. And you've spoken a lot here about anxiety. So would you say that anxiety is the number one health problem here in this country or for people in general?

Ali Gheith ([14:55](#)):

Yes. It's really important for us also to think about our pop culture. When we think about mental health. Mental illnesses, we think about what we see in the TV, in the media or Hollywood posters. Often people think mental illnesses mean the schizophrenia or a schizo-affective disorder or bipolar disorder when actually the number one mental health problem that impact adult and young Americans at any given year is anxiety. One out of five experience mental health problem any sort, but anxiety is the number one illness. And the median age for anxiety here is 11 years old. A lot of studies have shown that 50% above 11 and 50% below 11. That means it could be a six-year-old or 8-year-old and you can develop anxiety disorders. And anxiety disorder have some subtypes of anxiety like post traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder or panic attacks.

Ali Gheith ([16:09](#)):

So it is common for young people as young as six, seven, to have anxiety disorder. And just think about if you're that age, how this would impact the way you live, love, laugh, and learn? This can be debilitating. But it's important to keep in mind, all these illnesses are treatable and people do recover, especially if you bring them in to a treatment in the early stages, they tend to recover and do well. And other issues we need to think about, anxiety and depression go hand in hand. It's common if you have anxiety that you would develop depression. And if you have depression, you will develop anxiety. So there's more than one thing. And here these, we call mood disorders. So it's very important to seek help for anxiety.

Ali Gheith ([17:06](#)):

And we know the number one cause of mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression is trauma. So what we dealing with right now is a traumatic event for all of us. So yeah, all disasters have an impact and no one sees a disaster is untouched by it. Also, it's important to keep in mind that for adult Americans, about 70% before COVID-19 have experienced at least one trauma in their lifetime. So that's over 225 million people. This traumatic event that we're dealing with right now have touched the entire population. So it's very important to monitor your mental health because this trauma can lead to anxiety.

Allison Pennisi ([17:52](#)):

Thank you for that Ali. As we've mentioned, different mental illnesses, anxiety being one of them, can take physical, emotional, and behavioral tolls. How can an individual identify the warning signs that he or she is experiencing mental anxiety?

Ali Gheith ([18:10](#)):

Thank you Allison for this question. It's really important that people monitor their mental health. So if you have persistent sadness, anxious or empty mood, or if you are sleeping too much or sleeping too little, if you move interest of pleasurable activities that you normally enjoyed, if you become restless or irritable, if you have persistent physical symptoms that don't just go away with typical treatment, if you have difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions, if you feel fatigued or you lose your energy, if you have a feeling of guilt, hopelessness or worthlessness, this is very important because a lot of these things, the feeling of guilt, hopelessness and worthlessness can lead even to self-harm. And unfortunately sometimes can lead to suicidal thoughts.

Ali Gheith ([19:10](#)):

So anything that's impacting your mental health, you have to take it very seriously. And these some of the things that we recommend for people to monitor. So it is very important that you pay attention to your body, feeling and spirit. It's important that you recognize and heed early warning signs of stress to recognize how your own past experience affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions, and behavior around past events. So past experiences should help us cope more positively with what we are going through right now.

Ali Gheith ([19:57](#)):

As I mentioned earlier, about 70% of the population experienced some type of trauma. So what have we learn? What are some of the lesson learned that we can incorporate to this one? And not that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry, it's common. And that's what often people misinterpret. They think they are developing mental health problems, but most of these feelings are common. And often people use positive coping skills to take care of themselves. And especially after outbreaks like the one we've seen now, even if it doesn't directly threaten the person. And we spoke about connection. Connect with others who may be experiencing stress about the outbreak. You will learn from others, you will connect them. It's important for people to know that you're not alone. If needed, take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer or helping others in need. Simple thing is finding an elderly person or someone in your community who might need your help to pick up a few things for them here and there. Volunteering can give you that sense of positivity. And that's what we need to think about.

Ali Gheith ([21:13](#)):

What makes us happy? How can we enjoy our life and do things? Because this brings a lot of opportunities to bring the good out of us. Like you mentioned Allison, and you have to know how to take care of yourself if you want to take care of others. And I have to say that we're speaking with first responder. When it comes to first responders, unfortunately they're not good about taking care of themselves. They all think taking care of others more important than taking care of themselves. But take care of yourself so you can take care of others.

Omar Bourne ([21:50](#)):

Very, very well said, Ali.

Ali Gheith ([21:51](#)):

Thank you.

Omar Bourne ([21:53](#)):

Pay attention to your body, your mind, your spirit, makes sure you're taking care of yourself. We are talking to Ali Gheith, professional disaster mental health counselor and certified emergency manager. We are going to take a look at psychological first aid and how it can help battle anxiety and mental illness. But first, here's a public service announcement from New York City Health Commissioner, Dr. Barbot.

Dr. Oxiris Barbot ([22:23](#)):

Hi New Yorkers. This is health commissioner, Dr. Oxiris Barbot with an urgent message. New Yorkers need to stay home to stop the spread of coronavirus. If you must go out for basics like groceries and medicine, practice social distancing and keep at least six feet of space between yourself and other

people, avoid crowds and again, put distance between yourself and others in line at the store and on the street. For alerts from the city, text C-O-V-I-D, COVID, to 692692.

Speaker 6 ([22:53](#)):

You are listening to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast.

Allison Pennisi ([22:58](#)):

We are back. We are talking with Ali Gheith, professional disaster mental health counselor. So Ali, let's talk about psychological first aid. What is psychological first aid and how can someone practice it?

Ali Gheith ([23:12](#)):

Psychological first aid is an evidence informed module approach for assisting people in the immediate aftermath of disasters. It's goals are to reduce initial distress and to force the short and long-term adaptive functioning. It is for use by first responders, incident command systems, primary and emergency health care providers, school [inaudible 00:23:41] response teams, faith-based organization, disaster relief organization, emergency, [inaudible 00:23:49] teams, medical reserve corps, for all of [inaudible 00:23:53]. And you don't have to be a clinician. Anyone can learn psychological first aid. It is easy to use, it's an early intervention, it may minimize and alleviate the stress. The first thing is safety. Safety is very important. During times of disaster, people want to make sure that they're safe. People are not absorbing and not processing things as they usually do. So sometimes you have to find out yourself that you are providing repeated, simple, accurate information and how to obtain these basic services or by providing them with these basic services.

Ali Gheith ([24:33](#)):

And the other step is to promote calm. And often this is one thing that we encourage, especially first responders. And here when I talk about first responders, I'm not just talking about people who are formally in this role, but a mom at home can be the first responder, a dad or you can be the first responder in your building. This is talking about formal and informal first responders, but here it works for both. Promote calm. People often watch your body language. They watch what you do. So everything that you do is monitored by other. You need to listen to people non-judgementally and that's extremely important. People don't like to be labeled and they want to be listened to. And sometimes people like to share the stories without knowing that someone is judging them. And we have to be friendly and compassionate as much as possible and offer accurate information about the incident or what happened. Not just to say anything to calm someone down.

Ali Gheith ([25:46](#)):

And we spoke about connectedness, this is another step and it's important. Now we keep talking about social distance and connectedness. Tell people, contact, connect with their friends and their loved one. That's what really minimizes their anxiety. And now we experiencing this connectedness with older adults who are isolated in whatever they're staying, in these senior centers and isolation and lack of connectedness for older adults can be one of the major risk factors for developing anxieties and depression. During times of disaster we try, if it's safe to keep families together and always keep children with their parents or close relatives. And speaking of children, even disasters like this can have a psychological impact in children. Very young children may express anxieties by going back to thumb sucking or wetting the bed at night. They may fear sickness. They will start fearing strangers, darkness,

or seeing monsters. It is fairly common for children, even as young as a preschooler, to become clingy with their parents or caregivers during times of disaster. So you might notice this in young people.

Ali Gheith ([27:18](#)):

The other thing we have to promote, hope. And promoting hope is extremely important. People have to know that things are going to be improved in the future and they're not alone. There are other people who feeling the same thing and there are many others out there, from professional health care workers to first responders who are out there to help them, if it's by providing health safety for them or by providing food or government that works for them.

Ali Gheith ([27:54](#)):

Other important factors here, step in psychological first aid is to promote self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an extremely important step. You want to empower people to take care of themselves. You want them to be able to stand on their feet because everyone feel different. Everyone react to this differently. And often, often, people thrive and they become more competent if they have the appropriate support. When you go through an emergency crisis or disaster, when you promote self-efficacy, you are empowering the person to come up with a new normal for them and be able to survive from this experience and become more resilient. So these are the five, simple steps that we take in providing psychological first aid. And this can be learned by anyone. If you remember the steps, the simple steps, what's safety, what does it mean to be calm, what is connectedness and hope and how to promote self-efficacy. This has been studied and showed, it does alleviate stress.

Ali Gheith ([29:18](#)):

And remember again, we've spoke about trauma and stress are the number one cause of mental health problems. But if you follow these simple steps that anyone can do this, you are doing a big service to the person and you helping them to avoid having any type of mental health problem in the future.

Omar Bourne ([29:41](#)):

I'm glad that you brought up self care and it seems like you've addressed some of the tips that people can really practice to promote self-care. And I like what you talked about with checking up on other people. For example, during emergencies we always like to mention to check in on neighbors. And obviously with social distancing, there is many ways in which we can do that. Call, texts, FaceTime. We want to really remember that even though you are being social distanced, you can still stay close to your friends and family. There's a lot of measures out there that you can take to ensure that you're still staying close to your loved ones even though we are socially distant. What are some of the things that we do not want people to do in practicing psychological first aid?

Ali Gheith ([30:41](#)):

Let's start with the don'ts when it comes to psychological first aid. You don't make promises that you cannot keep. Because if you can't keep those promises, you're going to lose trust with that person. It's all based on trust. Don't give advice. Leave the advice to professionals. Mental and psychological first aid has its own limitation. Don't dismiss the problem or emotion by saying to someone, "Oh, this is all what you worried about? Look at your neighbors or look at others, they have it worse than you." That is a no, no, we don't do it.

Ali Gheith ([31:18](#)):

Don't focus on the right versus wrong. "This is an odd way of dealing with it and this is the wrong way." That's not for us to decide and what's right and what's wrong. And don't try to fix the problem yourself. You are there to provide the support. Never engage in communication that is belittling, sarcastic, hostile or patronizing with the person who is experiencing the trauma. This will not be helpful. Don't force people to share their stories and don't give them the reassurance that everything's going to be okay. And don't tell people how they should feel. We all feel differently. And very importantly never ever criticize existence services of relief. So these are the most important things about what we should not do when we are providing psychological first aid.

Allison Pennisi ([32:17](#)):

Thank you Ali. And what about the do's of psychological first aid. What are the things that we should be doing?

Ali Gheith ([32:23](#)):

These are very important things to keep in mind Allison, the do's. What do we do? We have to have a realistic expectation. This is not like flicking a light switch and you're going to expect things just the second day to wake up and feel better. Or you give someone the magic pill and they going to feel better. It takes time for people to recover. It varies from one person to another. And when you offer emotional support, make sure it's consistent. What you did today, you probably need to continue doing tomorrow and the day after and sometimes for a weeks and months. And give the person hope by giving them reassurance and provide practical help what works for them, not what you think might work for them. And provide them information, not advice. Earlier we said, "Don't provide advice," provide information. Information about the services, information about what's going on, truthful information, acknowledge the limit of what you can do.

Ali Gheith ([33:23](#)):

Unless you're a trained clinical professional as a psychological first aider, you have limitation. You are noticing things and you provide the support to what you can do and help them by following the five steps we spoke about earlier. So acknowledge that limitation. Help people meet their basic needs and be friendly and compassionate. Be genuine. Learn to accept people for who they are at this moment and help people connect with family and loved ones. Listen non-judgementally. And the best way of doing this, when you notice something with someone, just say, rather than, "What's wrong with you?" Start your statement with the I statement. "I have noticed, I have observed." For example, "You're not joining us lately for dinner. You're not doing what... If there's anything I can help." So use the word "help" as much as possible. Try to be careful with the words that come out of how we are approaching someone, because this is an opportunity where it can make or break that relationship. So I always advise people to start with, "I have noticed, how can I help encourage?" Encourage self-help. This is really empowering. And it enhances confidence and competence.

Allison Pennisi ([34:46](#)):

So Ali, where can people go to get help? Are there resources available for individuals that maybe don't have a barrier to cost that might be free for people to access a mental health counselor or assistance?

Omar Bourne ([35:00](#)):

So there are a lot of free resources here offered in the city. One of them, you mentioned Allison, which is the NYC Well, 1888-NYC-WELL. This is confidential, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Or you may

want to text to 65173. Text the word "WELL" to 65173 and crisis counselors and mental health professionals will reach out to you. And also then we have another national disaster distress help line. And the number is 1-800-985-5990. Or you can text to 66746, the words "Talk with us" and they will direct you to local resources. And again, because we mentioned earlier, sometimes these kinds of stresses can cause a lot of anxiety and when people start feeling helpless and hopeless, we always noticing, we always assessing. If you think someone start thinking about harming themselves or having suicidal thoughts, we have to call the suicide hotline, which is 1-800-273-TALK, T-A-L-K or just text "HELP" to 741741. That's when the person becomes suicidal.

Omar Bourne ([36:27](#)):

And in extreme cases, of course you call 911. And if you forget about all these numbers, the easiest number to remember here in New York City, which we are fortunate is to have 311. 311 can help guide you to all the available resources. But again, because the stigma that are associated with mental health and sometimes that can [inaudible 00:36:49]. I want to remind people that a lot of our primary care physicians are well-grounded in the area of mental health. Start by talking to your primary care physician, not just about your physical well-being, but about your emotional and your mood and how this is impacting you. But that's extremely important discussion to have with your primary care physician.

Allison Pennisi ([37:17](#)):

Thank you for that Ali. All really important phone numbers, which we will provide to our listeners in the description of this episode.

Ali Gheith ([37:24](#)):

Remember at the end, people can thrive following a traumatic event. This can enhance their competence. Not everything following a disaster is a negative thing. If you have the appropriate support, appropriate information and knowledge, that will be a lesson learned and can empower the people to become more resilient.

Allison Pennisi ([37:47](#)):

Thank you. And I think that's an important lesson for our listeners that mental health is a positive thing and May is mental health awareness month, but this is something that we should acknowledge all year round. For our listeners, we know that COVID-19 is a challenging time for all of us. Be sure to take care of yourselves and each other. Speaking with Ali Gheith, disaster mental health counselor and certified emergency manager. Again, thank you for joining us for "Prep Talk."

Ali Gheith ([38:14](#)):

Thank you for having me.

Speaker 1 ([38:19](#)):

That's this episode of "Prep Talk." If you like what you heard, you can listen to any time online or through your favorite RSS feed. Until next time, stay safe and prepared.