

Staying Mentally Healthy and Socially Connected Through Your Library

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Did you know that one in four adults suffer from some type of mental disorder in a given year? The month of October brings mental health issues to the forefront. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, this topic is especially important when the necessity of social distancing can make people feel isolated and lonely, not to mention fear and anxiety over your health and the health of your loved ones. World Mental Health Day was observed on October 10, which also coincided with the National Depression & Mental Health Screening Month, Mental Illness Awareness Week, and Emotional Wellness Month.

As we are adapting to the new realities of social distancing, the Alexandria Library is open for business, and while we can't gather in our physical libraries for programs yet, we can still bring you a host of virtual talks that you can experience in the comfort of your own home this fall.

You can also visit our YouTube page and enjoy our recorded virtual programs at your convenience.

The Alexandria Library has the following two online guides, which were carefully selected by librarians to direct you to informative health/mental health resources, in print and online, including links to digital courses on anxiety therapies, handling family emergencies, and nutrition 101.

Book Clubs:

October is also National Reading Group Month. As many are feeling cut off from their everyday hobbies and social lives, reading groups are proving that good books bring people together, and virtual book clubs are one way to stay social online while social distancing. Libraries have long served as a natural place for hosting book clubs, and the Alexandria Library offers a variety to suit your interests, i.e. romance, mystery, short story, etc.: <https://alexlibraryva.org/events?t=Book+Discussion+Groups&r=thismonth>

Coping During the Pandemic:

So, how are some of our library patrons faring during the pandemic to stay mentally healthy? I checked in with several patrons who recently attended library's virtual talks.

One patron said she has loved listening to the library's Zoom programs and "get grumpy when I have to miss out."

Another patron expressed how grateful she was for the Alexandria Library during this "stressful time." She also said, "I am retired and on a fixed income so I love getting books to read from the library. I do not enjoy TV and am not very savvy using the computer. So I was so relieved to be able to get books to read (especially mystery stories) even when the library was closed by putting books on hold and picking them up curbside. During this time I also needed to learn about congestive heart failure and low salt diets. I was able to figure out how to email a librarian and ask about books with this information. She was very helpful and kind. So thank you guys so very much for doing such a good job keeping me less stressed. And it is a joy to return to the library again in a safe manner."

Babs W. said she has maintained her sanity by doing a multitude of activities: volunteering, singing and listening to music, watching musical performances online, staying in touch with her adult children and friends, walking, and reading books.

Julia R. said she has been expanding her "emotional toolkit" with the following activities to help her ward off anxiety and depression: Tai Chi, Yoga, Meditation, Walks, and Online Book Clubs. Eveline G. expressed the difficulty of those who don't have family members close by and having few social contacts in the area, but said "what has helped me to get through Covid since March has been mostly getting out for walks, keeping abreast of the news, my remote job and the book club hosted by the library."

Halina B. said music is helping her emotionally, especially staying in touch by being part of two virtual choruses. She also takes lessons through Skype, exercises, and meditates. As someone who can be found reading something all the time, it's not surprising to hear that she is enjoying the library's "two awesome book clubs" as well!

ADHD Awareness Month:

October is also ADHD Awareness Month. ADHD is a mental disorder that causes an inability to focus, trouble with organization and a difficulty with detail-oriented tasks affecting adults, as well as children. I spoke to Faith Halter of Insightful Transitions, who provides “coaching for mind, body and spirit” for her advice on those affected by this disorder. She provided the following tips:

“Notice when you begin to feel overwhelmed/stressed/anxious (or when your baseline feelings like this start to increase). Once you realize that you are feeling emotionally stressed, you have a chance to do something about it! One strategy that is readily available to all of us is to take a few long exhales, breathing out from your mouth; after each exhale, inhale through your nose naturally, as your body is ready. Imagine that your exhales release stress and your inhales bring calm, peace, or whatever you need. Consciously exhaling this way for as little as 15 seconds can provide noticeable relief. If you are a parent, it can be extra-helpful to practice this technique when distress or tension arises around your parenting. The more you can stay calm, the more your children will sense that, which in turn can help them emotionally. And as you become more proficient in using your exhales for stress reduction, you may find it helps to share this practice with your children, or even do it together as a family (before family meetings, when tempers are fraying, when taking Zoom breaks, as bedtime prep, etc.).”



Maintaining Your Mental Health:

I interviewed Shireen Lewis, Executive Director of EduSeed and Founder of EduSeed's SisterMentors program, who has devoted over 20 years to mentoring and coaching women and girls of color, on what has helped her and what advice she would give to those having a challenging time during the pandemic. She said daily morning yoga and meditation with prayer has helped her, as well as regular walks, staying in touch with friends, including daily calls to her mother, eating vegan, and having compassion for others. She also suggested the following: "Find something that gives you joy and do it every day. Have a daily practice of quiet time or meditation – start with five minutes a day and build in more over time. Wear a mask always and don't go to gatherings including birthday parties. Find something meaningful to do for others staying socially distanced. Keep a daily journal to record your thoughts and feelings. Stop eating processed food and eat food as they occur in nature. Give yourself some grace and extend the same to others including siblings and the adults in your life."

I also checked in with Lane Stone, author of the Pet Palace Mysteries and the Tiara Investigation Mystery series. She praised the library for continuing to "meet the COVID challenge" by making digital resources and programs available online, especially book groups. She said, "I loved our library before, but it's really come through for us when we needed it most. Thank you, thank you, thank you." I also asked her what she has been reading during the pandemic:

"I've mostly limited my fiction reading to books that are soothing or clever or necessary for research. No noir for me right now. I just re-read *Death on the Nile* by Agatha Christie, because a new movie adaptation comes out in 2020. I also like to read books that are getting a lot of buzz for whatever reason. One source I use is *Partners in Crime* podcast. Currently I'm reading *Eight Perfect Murders* by Peter Swanson, which is definitely a buzzy book. A non-crime fiction book I'm reading is *Mona Lisa in Camelot: How Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's Masterpiece charmed and captivated a nation* by Margaret Leslie Davis. For research, I'm reading *Stealing the Show* by John Barelli, former Chief Security Officer at the Metropolitan Museum. And I'm listening to Fareed Zakaria's *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*."

It was good to hear about the positive role that libraries are still playing, especially during the pandemic. I am heartened to know that customers are utilizing the library's digital resources and also enjoying our online programs to stay in social contact with others.