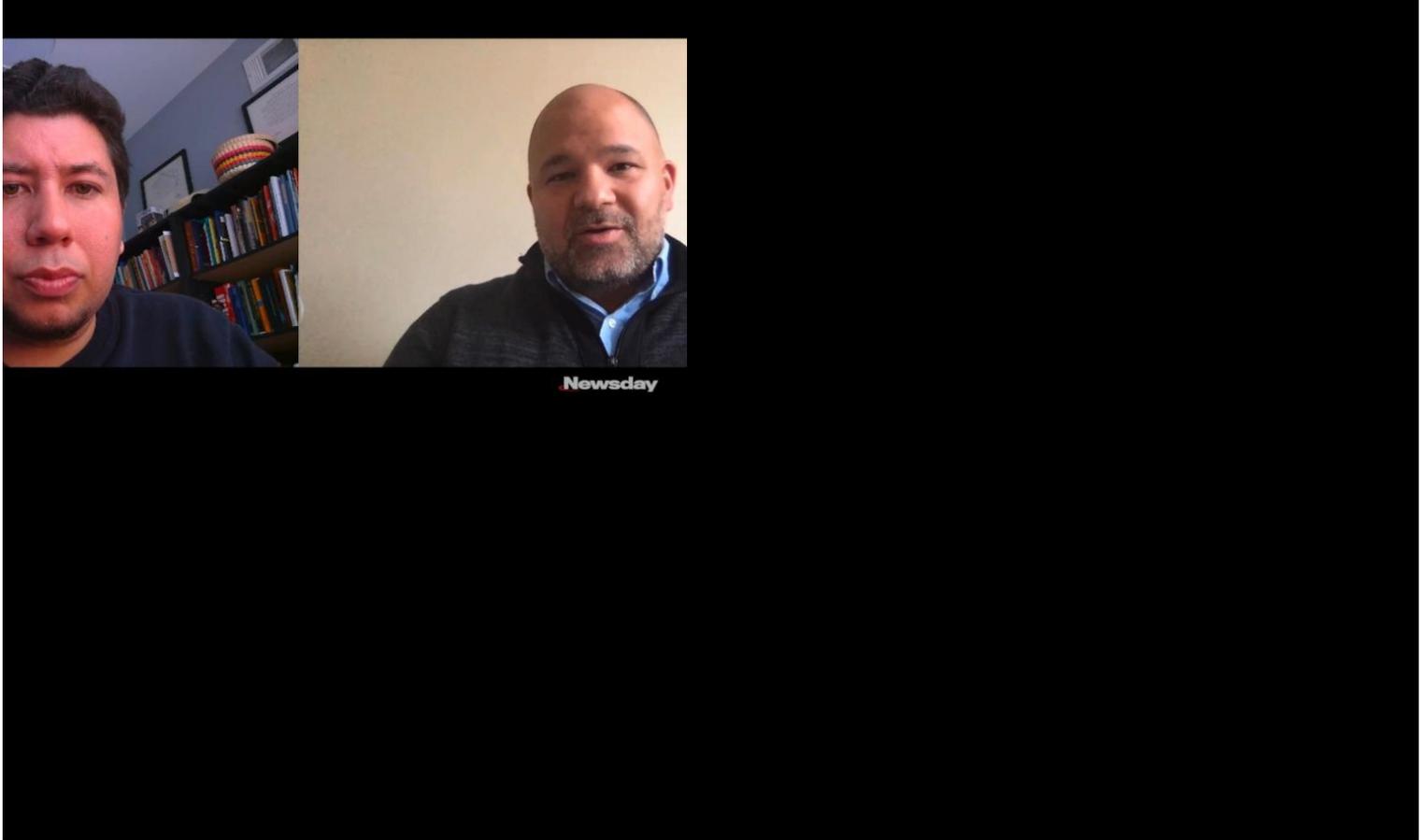




TRACKING THE
CORONAVIRUS

Pandemic alters how the mentally ill on Long Island get treatment, experts say



Adam Gonzalez, right, clinical psychologist and director of behavioral health at the Stony Brook University School of Medicine, spoke via Skype with Newsday reporter Antonio Planas about treating mental illness during the coronavirus pandemic. Credit: Newsday / Susan Yale

By Antonio Planas

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Newsday is opening this story to all readers so Long Islanders have access to important information about the coronavirus outbreak. All readers can learn the latest news at [newsday.com/LiveUpdates](https://www.newsday.com/LiveUpdates).

Like countless other Long Islanders, many with mental health disorders are holed up at home, sometimes alone, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

But isolation, along with additional and abrupt changes to daily life, makes those with mental illness particularly vulnerable to despair, professionals in the field say.

In response, counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists — many of whom have temporarily closed their offices or drastically reduced hours — are trying to ease their patients anxieties and fears by meeting with them through phone and video consultations.

Confirmed coronavirus cases

Updated 04/03/2020

10,154
Suffolk

12,024
Nassau

57,159
NYC

STATEWIDE: 102,863

Sources: Suffolk and Nassau County Departments of Health and New York State

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“Everyone is anxious. Everyone is upset,” said David Sills, president of the Lake Success-based National Alliance of Mental Illness. “The people who suffer from depression or have anxiety disorders, what’s going on may exasperate those issues.”

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He added: “It’s a dangerous time for all people, but especially people with mental health issues.”

The pandemic poses emotional challenges the mentally ill have not experienced since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and superstorm Sandy, experts said, citing uncertainties surrounding the coronavirus and the isolation of social distancing.

“This is a traumatic event. It’s an event, unlike 9/11 and [superstorm] Sandy, those had a beginning and end,” said Michael Stoltz, chief executive officer of the Association for Mental Health and Wellness in Ronkonkoma. “Right now, there is an unclear end. That adds to feelings of trauma.”

Stoltz said his organization, which serves about 4,000 patients a year, including children and military veterans, is adjusting accordingly.

The nonprofit has extended the availability of its phone-based peer support, a hotline where people in distress can speak to those recovering from mental illness and certified to offer consultation. The hotline is now available on the weekdays. Before the pandemic hit the metropolitan area, the hotline only operated on weekends.

The group also hopes to expand the hours of its mental health helpline, an information and referral phone service now available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, and after hours by email, Stoltz said.



100-percent remote.”

State officials last month began requiring New York insurance companies to waive deductibles and copays for phone appointments, commonly known as telemedicine or telehealth. The move was necessary for doctors and mental health professionals to continue providing services during the outbreak, experts said.

Adam Gonzalez, a clinical psychologist and director of behavioral health at the Stony Brook University School of Medicine, said personnel at the university's hospital are video conferencing with patients to treat a broad range of mental health issues like anxiety, depression and borderline personality disorder.

“We are waist deep in all of our services being offered through telehealth,” he said.

Gonzalez said he saw an initial slowdown in services last month as the pandemic spread across New York State because people were more focused on survival and having their basic needs met such as stocking their refrigerators.

However, requests for services have increased over the past week, Gonzalez said, adding he’s concerned that people with no history of mental health problems could find themselves suffering emotionally and in need of professional help.

“That is definitely a concern,” Gonzalez said. “Anxiety and worry breeds stress.”

Online platforms such as Zoom are used by counselors to offer consultation, Stoltz said. The group offers services for a range of mental illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder as well as for victims of traumatic brain injuries.

“There was already some movement to move toward a hybrid system, meaning remote plus face-to-face,” Stoltz said. “This just pushed us further, turned the battleship quickly toward

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