



## Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Inc.

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I have been asked a lot about social isolation associated with shelter at home orders and social distancing causing anxiety and depression since Governor Kelly's emergency declaration due to coronavirus on March 12. Clearly, this is a consideration for all of us, and behavioral health providers like community mental health centers are very aware that as time goes on, staff and services will be even more necessary to help people with increased anxiety, depression, or even post-traumatic stress disorder. With May being Mental Health Awareness Month, this seems like an even more timely occasion to comment.

We know that we have a suicide problem in Kansas. According to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment *Summary of Vital Statistics*, our state has experienced a more than 50 percent increase in death by suicide in the last five years in the age group 15-44.

A substantial body of research has found that social isolation compounds risk factors that can lead to suicidal thoughts. This includes reports by the Centers for Disease Control, American Psychological Association, and many others.

Several months ago, I was reading a speech that a candidate gave when she was running for a board position many years ago with the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI). She said, "We must let our compassion be our compass." This resonated with me on a policy level, a treatment level, and a personal level as well. We can certainly do more for people with mental health issues, and with the coronavirus crisis, there will be more in need of treatment, both children and adults.

My mother, Karen, who is now retired, was a nurse for 40 years and would regularly tell my brother and I when we were younger to get plenty of vitamin C. If we had a cough or were sneezing, she would tell us to get more vitamin C because it was good for the immune system. If we appeared to be perfectly healthy, she would tell us to get more vitamin C because it would keep our immune system strong preventing illnesses. This made sense for our physical health. My mother has always been as wise as she is patient, and I think there is connection to her wisdom from the past to where we are today and will be tomorrow with our mental health relating to coronavirus.

We are at a unique time in our nation's health history where we may have a vitamin C available for our behavioral health: It is the human connection. If you or someone you know feels anxious or depressed or stressed, they should visit with someone like a friend or neighbor or family member. If the condition gets more serious, calling a community mental health center or other behavioral health provider is the next step to work through any moderate or severe mental health issues. Whether it is by phone, e-mail or social media, or regular mail, we can all do our part to enhance the personal connection to keep one another mentally healthy. It might just be that our relationships and the human connection we make with others is Vitamin C for the human spirit.

Kyle Kessler - Executive Director