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COPING WITH COVID-19

'The anxiety is no joke'

Many COVID-19 survivors are also dealing with mental health concerns as they recover

News outlets have published thousands of headlines and stories about COVID-19. One of the most concerning began to appear last fall: "1-in-5 coronavirus survivors will develop a mental illness."

NPR stated that nearly 1-in-5 of those diagnosed with COVID-19 are also diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder like anxiety, depression or insomnia within three months. That's a weighty statement even for us at Auburn University, as more than 1,800 students and employees have self-reported positive COVID-19 tests since late August. Dr. Julie Hill, an assistant professor in special education, rehabilitation and counseling at Auburn, says the 1-in-5 statistic is not exaggerated.

"In my opinion, that number is accurate or possibly even too low, especially if you are considering those that are dealing with long-haul COVID or have developed chronic health conditions post-COVID," Hill stated in an email.

Hill said survivors often deal with mental health issues that are similar to those of others with chronic illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes or multiple sclerosis. Depression and anxiety are commonly mentioned on a 40,000-member online support group for survivors.

"The anxiety is no joke," one survivor wrote. Another survivor posted, "I am three weeks plus post-test and I feel like I am losing my mind. Every sign and symptom is pushing me over the edge."

Hill said survivors who were asymptomatic may also deal with guilt -- fearing that they may have spread the virus to someone else, or survivor's guilt that they fared better than others.

"Fear, anxiety, depression, loneliness, isolation, anger, and frustration are all going to be possible effects on mental health," Hill said. "For those that are dealing with long-haul COVID, those are going to be heightened, along with feelings of uncertainty, doubt.

"I would expect to also see grief and a sense of loss experienced by these individuals, especially if they considered themselves healthy or able-bodied before COVID. They will experience a loss of their identity, and may also experience grief over the loss of their career or educational pursuits if they are no longer able to work or go to school due to lingering issues or symptoms like chronic fatigue and autonomic nervous system dysfunction like we are seeing with long haulers."

In a recent interview with Self magazine, Hill added that many COVID-19 survivors, like those dealing with chronic illnesses, are going through the five stages of grief. (See the box to the right.)

"They may need to adjust expectations around work or going to school or taking care of their families, but... there's still a new normal that's possible. They just have to figure out what that looks like."

Note: This is the first of a two-part series on COVID-19 survivors. Next week's article will include additional information on coping strategies and ways to support survivors. Email comments or article ideas to thrive@auburn.edu.



THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

* In 1969, a Swiss-American psychiatrist named Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote in her book "On Death and Dying" that grief could be divided into five stages:

- * Denial
- * Anger
- * Bargaining
- * Depression
- * Acceptance

* Not everyone will experience all five stages, or in this order.

* Grief is different for every person, so a person may begin coping with loss in the bargaining stage and find themselves in anger or denial next.

* They may remain for months in one of the five stages but skip others entirely.

- Taken from [Healthline](https://www.healthline.com)