

# SAY ANYTHING

## HOW ARE YOU DEALING WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF COVID-19?



**LISA BROTHERS  
ARBISSER, MD**

■ Adjunct Professor, John A. Moran Eye Center, University of Utah, Salt Lake City

“ In this difficult time when so-called normal behavior can have lethal consequences and our society is in a state of flux, I try to find equanimity by focusing on the following quotes. These profound thoughts help to center me.”

- ▶ ‘Happiness does not depend on what you have or who you are, it solely relies on what you think.’ – *Buddha*
- ▶ ‘The present moment is the only moment available to us and it is the door to all other moments.’ – *Thich Nhat Hanh*
- ▶ ‘If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious you are living in the future. If you are at peace you are living in the present.’ – *Lao Tzu*



**LISA M. NIJM, MD, JD**

■ Founder and Medical Director, Warrenville EyeCare and LASIK, Warrenville, Illinois

“ I am dealing with the psychological toll of COVID-19 by trying my best to take everything one day at a time. I strive to ensure that I engage in activities that support my physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. For me, that means working out regularly, spending time with my family, staying in contact with friends, and attending mass online every week. These things help keep me grounded and focused on what’s important in life so I can devote my energy to taking care of patients to the best of my ability.”



**AHMED ASSAF, MD,  
PHD, FRCSED**

■ Professor, Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt

“ The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for people worldwide and has truly altered the way we live. Our health and safety have been threatened for quite some time, and that threat has not yet been removed.

The psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is significant, and we have to react with it. A few ways to reduce the pandemic’s negative effects on our mental health and well-being include the following:

**No. 1: Protect your sense of well-being.** Find ways to keep your stress levels at a minimum as you cope with periods of confusion and uncertainty. Seek support from others, make exercise a regular part of your weekly routine, eat well, and ensure you get enough sleep each night. It is also essential to take time out to do things you enjoy and remember the importance of downtime.

**No. 2: Manage your reactions.** Learn effective stress management skills such as mindfulness and speak to your colleagues and trusted friends to help process your emotions and thoughts constructively.

**No. 3: Keep perspective.** When we are stressed, it’s easy to see things as worse than they are. Try to keep perspective by reminding yourself that you have built a solid foundation and have coped with change in the past and will find a way to transition successfully through this change.

**No. 4: Don’t waste your most precious resource: your energy.** Recognize what you can and cannot control. Take responsibility for dealing with the situation, avoid worrying about things you cannot control, and focus your energy into forging a positive future.”



**ROBERT J.  
WEINSTOCK, MD**

■ The Eye Institute of West Florida, Largo, Florida

“ Nightly family dinners, lots of time on the water, and being sure to enjoy each patient interaction have all helped me remain sane during these crazy times. I’ve learned to be calmer and more calculated in my decision-making, in less of a hurry, and grateful for the opportunities I have to make people’s lives and vision better. Drinking good wine doesn’t hurt, either.”



**ERIC D. DONNENFELD, MD**

■ Professor of Ophthalmology,  
New York University, New York

“ There are several key aspects we must deal with to help us manage the psychological concerns our patients may have about an ophthalmic examination. First and foremost, we must institute the safety guidelines established for ophthalmic examinations by the AAO, ASCRS, and Outpatient Ophthalmic Surgery Society. Second, one important aspect of overcoming psychological concerns is offering evidence of safety measures in posters, verbal communication, and visible patient safety procedures. Of course, personal protective equipment is the most visibly reassuring measure that we can take in the eyes of our patients.

Leadership and communication by administrators and physicians that establish a culture of commitment to safety can dramatically diminish patient and staff concerns. Our transparency in communicating to staff is crucial to providing internal confidence that extends to our patients.

In the past, patients were most concerned with finding the most technologically advanced practice to deliver the best visual results. I would suggest that this expectation continues to exist but, additionally—and perhaps more importantly—patients are now looking for the practice that provides the safest examination and that assuages their concerns about seeking ophthalmic care.”



**OZANA MORARU, MD**

■ Medical Director,  
Oculus Eye Clinic,  
Bucharest, Romania

“ At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, my colleagues and I faced two different types of psychological difficulties that needed to be overcome.

*No. 1: The need to close the clinic and stop all of its activities.* This of course meant not only a financial impact for the business but also, and more importantly, that the practice’s staff employment status would need to be handled for the next 2 to 3 months, possibly more. Who knew?

*No. 2: We could not offer patients any consultations or surgeries for an unknown period.* Again, who could have known for how long? We of course tried to quickly organize a way to respond to all our patients’ calls, emails, and/or messages from home and even to offer basic online consultations to those patients who the practice would permanently keep in contact with for future care. This psychological difficulty facing myself and the practice was the most important on our minds.

Personally, I tried to spend those months at home as productively as possible. I read more, attended webinars, watched professional videos online, and thought about bringing to life a long-held dream of mine by organizing a new virtual reality surgery department in our clinic. Keeping my mind busy with these activities proved to be helpful in dealing with the psychological impact of the must-stay-home weeks.

Once the rules and obligations became less severe and we were able to restart clinical activities, we reopened step-by-step, taking extra care concerning physical distance in waiting rooms and implementing new and specific safety rules such as mandatory masks. We wanted to offer our patients a safe environment, and we managed to do so. Our patients were happy that they could finally have access to safe, high-quality medical services from our clinic. My colleagues and I were happy seeing the trust our patients gave us during these still uncertain days. I think this mutual trust helped both parties deal with the psychological toll of COVID-19.”