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## Forward Together Update—9/22/20

University of Northern Iowa

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# University of Northern Iowa

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has upended all our lives in countless ways. In this time of profound uncertainty, family loss, economic upheaval and often hidden suffering, we asked Jennifer Schneiderman, director of UNI's Counseling Center, about ways we can cope, stay connected and find help.*

*Many of us wonder - how do we balance the health risks of socializing during this pandemic against the need for human connection?*

We are living in this strange and very challenging time when we are battling two potentially dangerous situations that require directly opposing actions from us.

On the one hand, we have this virus that with face-to-face contact can become very serious and cause significant physical harm, illness and even death. So we are supposed to stay away from each other. On the other hand, we have so many people struggling with isolation and loneliness because we are being directed to stay away from each other. And we know that isolation is just a breeding ground for depression and that depression can lead to suicidal thoughts, and even death.

Because our interactions with others are fewer right now, we really need to make those interactions count. Small interactions, the little things, are bigger than you realize.

We all have a responsibility to try to protect one another's physical and mental health. The masks and physical distancing can help with combating the virus - but connecting one-on-one with each other with the question "How are you really?" can help support one another's mental health.

*So how can we be a positive force for ourselves and others?*

We get paid in good feelings when we can be supportive and helpful to our fellow human beings. Look around you for ways you can help or support someone in need. Take the time to listen and show care and concern for how others are doing.

You know we all have this social expectation and habit when we see someone to say "how are you?" And a standard answer we all give is "fine." Well, we are not fine. We are all in the midst of a pandemic, we are in the midst of a national battle over racial inequality, a tense political climate, and economic distress. I highly doubt, if we are being honest, any of us could actually say we are "fine" right now. So maybe we need to start asking "How are you, really?" and opening the door for a real dialogue and honest

conversation. We need to start taking the time to check in on each other. Take the time to listen to each other's honest answers.

And when someone asks you how you are really doing, be honest and share a little bit. That is how we get past the superficial. That is how we actually have honest - supportive - and meaningful interactions with each other.

*How do we get over our grief of losing our 'normal' lives and adjust to an uncertain way of living?*

People all operate from different and individualized sources of strength. Grief is not something we get over - but rather, get through - and what gets each and every one of us through may be different. Practicing gratitude is a good way to shift our focus from what we have lost to what we have.

Also, by learning to live in the present moment we can adjust to putting more focus on the present day and less on the past or future. Mindfulness practices can help people do that. The Counseling Center started Mindful Mondays this year to help teach people mindfulness skills. If you'd like to be a part of this, you can learn more on the [website](#).

*Although this is in some ways a collective traumatic event does it cause some of the same damage as a specific personal trauma?*

We all can perceive the same "traumatic event" very differently, so what is experienced as a trauma to one person may not be to another. Because COVID-19 has affected individuals in so many different ways, it would not be that the damage is the same, but that everyone has been impacted in one way or another.

*Are there any resources you'd like to share?*

Besides Mindfulness Mondays, visit the [Counseling Center website](#) to see all the resources available at the Counseling Center. The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies has a [great list of resources available](#) for people who find themselves in difficult situations, including caring for family with COVID-19.

For those who want to try an app, I'd recommend [COVID Coach](#), which was developed for veterans but can be used by anyone to track their mental health over time. It does not replace professional mental health care, so please call our Counseling Center if needed.