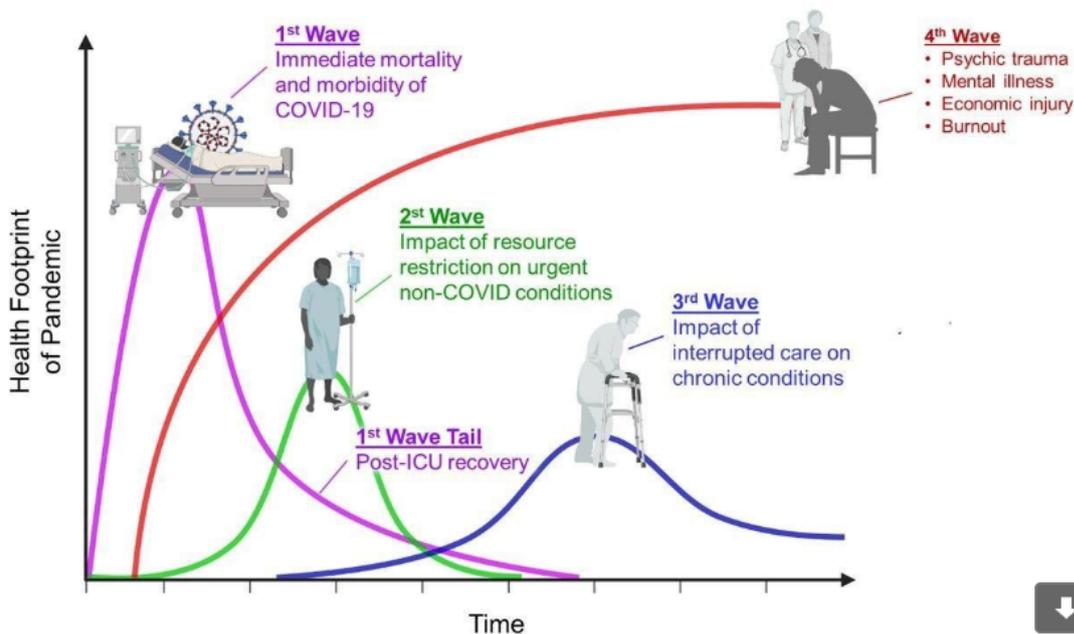


Have we Thought about Flattening the Next Curve?

By Dr Cara Wong, Clinical Neuropsychologist, PhD

A lot of us are at Coronavirus saturation point by now. But I want to talk about the future. The rising curve that isn't get much attention yet. If we look beyond the immediate consequences of COVID-19, we will see that mental illness, trauma, burnout and economic damage caused by the crisis will hang over us for a long time. While we are doing well in flattening the first curve and things are appearing to slowly return to 'normal', early intervention is going to be key to prevent the longer-term mental health burden. If we can find better ways to cope, manage our stress, look after ourselves and others, and use this time effectively to prop ourselves up both emotionally and financially for the future, we could reduce the long-term impact of this crisis.



Source: <https://twitter.com/VectorSting/status/1244671755781898241>

While it's easy to push our own mental health down the priority list in stressful times, we know from a plethora of research studies that looking after our own wellbeing has untold benefits not just for ourselves but for those around us. This is particularly important for those of us who are parents. Children read parents far more than they read news feeds and articles. Emotions and behaviour are contagious; we just have to look at the toilet paper hoarding to observe this first hand!

Feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty are completely normal during any kind of crisis. However, we need to manage these emotions before they turn into more serious problems. Fortunately, there are many ways to be proactive about your mental health.

- Speak to a professional. Psychologists are still operating using Telehealth, and many will adapt pricing if financial loss is a barrier to accessing services (i.e. bulk bill or reduce fees for services). You can access a mental health care plan with your GP via Telehealth.
- Look after your body. Physical health is linked to mental health and studies have shown that exercise is just as effective as some antidepressant medications for improving depression. Try to keep your body healthy by eating well, exercising and getting approximately 8 hours sleep per night.

- Make time for relaxing hobbies and activities. Listening to classical music (Mozart and Strauss) has been shown to lower stress hormones. Of course if you don't like classical music you can choose other relaxing music, or do other calming activities such as walking in nature, art/craft, journaling/creative writing or meditation. Meditation/mindfulness has also been shown to change the brain and some of the benefits include improved focus, memory, emotional awareness, mood and anxiety. There are lots of free meditation apps available such as Headspace, Smiling Mind and Insight Timer.
- Do something kind. Altruism has been shown to be one of the best things to make us feel good! Offer to help your friends and neighbours. If anyone has to self-isolate you can assist them by picking up some groceries/supplies and leaving them at their front door. Send a message or write a letter to a friend, relative or even a stranger who may be going through a difficult time.
- Keep things in perspective. Rather than imagining the worst-case scenario are you assuming something terrible will happen when you really don't know the outcome? Are you overestimating how bad the consequence will be without any evidence? Are you underestimating your ability to cope when bad things happen?
- Try to make productive use of this time in isolation. While we're all forced to stay at home, think about what you could do or learn to better your outcome in the future. Do you need to create content for your business, catch up on life admin, upskill or take a short course you've always thought about doing? Create a vision of where you'd like to be in 1 year, 5 years and even 10 years' time.

Unlike any crisis that's happened in our lifetime, we are all in this one together. Let's take care of ourselves, each other and do our best to flatten the next curve.

Dr Cara Wong is a Clinical Neuropsychologist and Registered Psychologist at The Health Lodge, Byron Bay. She works with children and adults with a range of mental health and cognitive issues. [The Health Lodge](#) currently has Telehealth appointments available for people seeking support from GPs, psychologists and naturopaths. If you need urgent mental health crisis support, please contact LifeLine on 13 11 14; or NSW Mental Health Line on 1800 011 511