



How Is the Pandemic Affecting Mental Health?

A hotline set up to help people cope with the psychological fallout from COVID-19 has received well over 700 calls since its inception, indicating that the pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health. With social interactions reduced to a minimum and many people confined to their homes for weeks or months on end, it's little surprise that hundreds of Emiratis were feeling the strain.

That experience isn't one that's inclusive to the UAE, either. A recent report from the Boston University School of Medicine found that [depression rates have tripled in the USA](#) since the pandemic started. While the upsurge might not be quite as pronounced in the UAE, the Emirati authorities have been striving to improve mental health support services for some time now.

A friendly ear

In May, the National Programme for Happiness and Wellbeing (NPHW) launched its mental health helpline, aimed at alleviating the stress faced by residents of the country during these trying times. The helpline is manned by over 30 specialists with backgrounds in psychology, psychiatry and counselling, but is also supplemented by a further 38 trained volunteers.

It has proven to be a huge help to hundreds of people throughout the nation. Between May and October, the hotline received 740 calls. Concerned citizens can also choose to engage with the scheme via WhatsApp and help is available in both Arabic and English to ensure everyone has access to the aid they need.

Assisting the elderly

That scheme was accompanied by another aimed specifically at older Emirati residents. With home visits brought to a virtual standstill by lockdown measures, many senior citizens found themselves even more vulnerable than usual. The "We Are Your Family" initiative was launched to deal with that problem.

Between January and August, the Ministry of Community Development handled 12,789 calls from the elderly. A team of specialists and volunteers engaged with their older charges on a daily basis where required, using telephone and video software in the vast majority of cases and home visits only where strictly necessary.



Long term goals

The UAE has been aware of the problem of mental health for some time and the outbreak of the pandemic has only exacerbated the problem and intensified the efforts of the authorities to support those in need. For example, the Ministry of Community Development have instigated a national campaign named “Do Not Worry” to deal with the issue.

Since its launch at the start of the year, there have been more than 2.5 million views of online content, while 60 trained consultants, physicians and specialists have offered support sessions. Meanwhile, the ‘Taaluf’ family counselling initiative has conducted 282 sessions, 84% of which were held remotely in order to comply with social distancing obligations whilst still bolstering mental health.