CEDARBURG As we rapidly take action to defend our physical health, local experts urge people stuck at home to also safeguard their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Stephen Saunders, professor and chair of psychology in the Klinger College of Arts and Sciences at Marquette University, recently offered tips on identifying and managing stress, as well as ways to stay motivated while working remotely and during social isolation.

Saunders said about 1 in 6 persons over the age of 12 will have a mental illness, and in any given year, about 1 in 5 people will experience a mental health problem. In addition, 1 in 3 people will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lifetime.

"This time in history is extraordinarily stressful for most persons," Saunders said. "Stress increases the likelihood that someone will develop a mental illness whether for the first time or as a recurrence of a previous illness. Stress also tends to make the manifestations or symptoms of mental illness more severe."

Saunders says everyone should be somewhat anxious right now, but there is a distinction between normal anxiety and excessive anxiety. Anxiety, Saunders said, leads us to engage in protective activities, such as making social distances in response to the coronavirus crisis. In order to keep the anxiety reasonable, Saunders urges people to reflect the facts as we know them.

"Accurate information can reduce anxiety to a reasonable level, so seek out accurate information from reputable resources, such as the CDC," he said. "We know that social distancing, washing one’s hands and other activities reduce the likelihood of contracting the virus, and anyone who is doing those things will hopefully feel less anxious."

Saunders also promotes keeping active, such as going for walks and running outside, waving to neighbors and stopping to chat a distance.

"Physical well-being promotes emotional wellbeing," he said. "Social isolation is a sure prescription for worsening mental health. Don’t isolate yourself. Physical social distancing is needed, but it should be accompanied by more extensive virtual social interaction. Use social media to keep in touch with family, friends and other loved ones. Make phone calls. Even better, do video chats. Stay in touch with people intensively. Interact virtually more than you ever have before."

Disconnecting from devices

Reverend Ryan Duns, assistant Mequon University professor and assistant chair of theology in the Klingler College of Arts and Sciences, offered advice on how to be present and maintain mindfulness and a sense of peace during quarantine and a challenging remote work schedule.
"Amidst chaos and uncertainty, it is natural for us to be glued to the 24-hour news cycle," Duns said. "Every update, every new case, every new dire prediction can elicit anxiety and fear. We all need to develop practices of unplugging from our devices and recharging our spirits. For many of us, these days are sort of an enforced retreat from our daily lives."

Duns said we need to remain aware that we cannot simply try to conduct "business as usual," but says the breakdown in our usual routines can be an opportunity for a spiritual breakthrough. He advises sitting in a quiet room to help restore balance or finding comfort in spiritual rituals, such as a Rosary, televised Mass or turning to Scripture.

"For Christians, this is not the Lent anyone wanted or expected," Duns said. "Yet we can discover solidarity in our solitude. Throughout the world, we can join our minds and hearts in prayer with and for one another."

Duns also urges those who wish to be of support to contact a local parish or church to ask if there are people who could use a phone call.

Above all, Duns said it is okay to feel stressed, burntout, anxious and fearful.

"Tempers will flare, and often we will take it out on those nearest to us," he said. "Do not be afraid to ask for help. Being in isolation does not mean that we’re totally cut off from one another. Use technology to find communion with others."

Other small ways to safeguard your mental health include doing something positive, such as reaching out to others, donating blood and helping deliver groceries to neighbors who cannot leave their home.

"Don’t be ashamed to reach out for help if you need it," Saunders said. "Anxiety and depression and other mental health problems are not voluntary nor a sign of weakness."

For additional help and inquiries, visit Mental Health America at mhanational.org/covid19 or the CDC website. As mental health professionals stay very busy during the pandemic, be aware you might be offered help over the phone or by computer video chat, but Saunders said research shows "telehealth" is as effective as face-to-face help for most people.