

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### COVID-19 and Your Brain Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond.*

Many of us are still feeling anxious and depressed about the COVID-19 pandemic. It has taken a psychological toll through isolation, loneliness, unemployment, financial stressors, and the loss of loved ones. It has been just over a year since the novel coronavirus was first seen in this country, and researchers are beginning to see evidence that the effects of this pandemic may last for much longer than we originally thought.

We are still learning about the long-term effects of COVID-19, but data suggest that the virus may affect the brain as well as the respiratory system, with more than one-third of infected patients developing neurologic symptoms including loss of smell and taste, short-term memory loss, confusion, inability to concentrate, and just feeling “different.” In addition to these neurological symptoms, doctors are also seeing evidence of increased psychological effects of the virus.

According to a study published recently in [The Lancet](#), researchers at the University of Oxford found that nearly one in five people diagnosed with COVID-19 is diagnosed with a brain illness, such as anxiety, depression or insomnia within three months of contracting the virus. In reviewing the electronic health records from 69 million individuals, 62,354 of whom had a diagnosis of COVID-19, researchers found that when compared with patients who had experienced certain other health events such as the flu, kidney stones, or a major bone fracture — those diagnosed with COVID-19 were more likely to have a subsequent psychiatric diagnosis within the following three months. The study also showed people recovering from COVID-19 were nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder as compared with someone who had the flu.

This connection between brain health and COVID-19 goes both ways, according to the study: people with psychiatric disorders are more likely to be diagnosed with COVID-19. While the connection is not clear, it may be related to behavioral and lifestyle factors, such as smoking, inflammation, or psychiatric medication.

People who have had COVID-19 and still feel fatigued, stressed, or sad should be screened for depression and anxiety with the understanding that screening tools are not diagnostic. The physical symptoms of COVID-19 infection often overlap with symptoms of depression. It is important for patients to continue to share their symptoms and treatment with their doctor so patients can be treated and improve their functioning and researchers can continue to learn more about the long-term effects of the virus. Check out BHI COVID-19 resources for [practitioners](#) and for the [community](#).

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Whether or not you have had COVID-19, the BHI and [Harvard Health](#) recommend taking these steps to help minimize the brain health consequences from the virus.

- **Get vaccinated.** This is especially important for people with psychiatric disorders, who appear to be at higher risk for COVID-19 infection. Watch this [short video](#) that explains the RNA COVID-19 vaccine.
- **Continue wearing a mask.** Wearing a mask and avoiding crowds continue to be important tools in stopping the spread of COVID-19, but do try to avoid isolation.
- **Use available resources.** Online therapies, workbooks, and mobile applications can provide benefits without risking exposure during your treatment.
- **Be an advocate** for yourself and for those COVID-19 long haulers who may not be in a position to advocate for themselves, especially if they suffer from ongoing fatigue and brain fog.
- **Stay active.** Exercise has been shown to be as effective as medication for improving mood and anxiety. Physical activity also helps with memory and heart health.
- **Find ways to relax.** When your world seems out of control, try establishing a calming ritual. Having control over even one part of your day can help you feel grounded.
- **Be careful with sleep aids and over-the-counter medications.** Short-term use can quickly become long-term abuse for many of these medications, leading to medication tolerance, dependence, and rebound anxiety.
- **Limit alcohol and cannabis use.** Using alcohol and marijuana to relieve prolonged stress can lead to increased and problematic substance use.
- **Limit caffeine, too.** Excess caffeine can exacerbate anxiety and sleep problems.
- **Check on others.** If someone you know is struggling, a simple check-in call or kind gesture can be lifesaving.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose

- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).