**Rates of depression, mental illness and suicide rose as pandemic upended life**

SAN FRANCISCO –– As the pandemic enters a precarious new phase, University of California San Francisco researchers and psychiatrists are working to combat a sharp overall increase in depression and anxiety among Californians.

At a news conference Monday, UCSF child psychiatrist and human geneticist Dr. Matthew State outlined the pandemic’s toll on Californian’s mental health. While significant improvements to the telehealth system have improved outcomes, millions of people still suffer without access to quality mental health treatment.

“The pandemic has had a significant impact on people’s sense of their mental health and wellness,” State said. “The numbers are concerning, with dramatically increased rates of people reporting anxiety, depression and worse overall mental health.”

As of March 2022, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 32% of Californians reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression –– that’s one of the highest statewide figures in the United States, but the rate has lowered by roughly 7% since March 2021.

Hospitals and psychiatric institutions that were already burdened with overcrowding and staffing shortages before the pandemic have struggled to cope with the rising numbers, State said.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a pattern of sustained stressors that worsened symptoms for people with mental illness. Research shows that extended quarantines, a lack of social interaction, and economic pressures also pushed some previously healthy adults into depression and anxiety.

“People who already had mental illness are showing that they’re doing worse,” State said. “But then you’re also seeing people who didn’t have those things previously reporting increased rates.”

In 2019, the American Psychological Association found that 87% of Americans believed that “having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of.” State believes the pandemic may have pushed the United States to a “tipping point” when it comes to accepting the need to address mental health issues.

“We’ve seen an increase in the openness of people to talk about mental health issues and to talk about taking care of themselves,” State said. “I think we see that as, in part, a consequence of what’s been going on over the last couple of years.”

At Monday’s news conference, State outlined how UCSF is working to break down barriers to treatment for communities that face stigma and that traditionally lack access to psychiatric care.

The Citywide Case Management program, which offers comprehensive behavioral healthcare to 1,500 clients each year, is one of the critical ways UCSF hopes to expand access to treatment.

The programs are promising, State said, but many innovative treatment methods are still in the trial phase. As the pandemic ebbs and flows, San Francisco’s mental health professionals face a long road ahead to bring comprehensive treatment to those most in need.

“There’s a renewed emphasis kind of across the board in how to think creatively about allying with nursing and social workers and peer therapists to do a better job of delivering care,” State said. “Those are all going to take time.”