

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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## “Americans Experiencing More Mental Stress”

Sadly, 2020 has been especially stressful for all Americans. The COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown, job layoffs, the tanking of the stock market, the crash of the petroleum industry, and the racial rioting has had a cumulative negative effect on all of us. Yes, 2020 has been rough on the American psyche. Folks in the U.S.A. are more unhappy today than they have been in nearly 50 years. Gun sales and alcohol sales are at all time highs. About twice as many Americans report being lonely today as in 2018, and not surprisingly given the lockdowns that tried to contain the spread of the coronavirus, there has also been a drop in satisfaction with social activities and relationships. Compared with 2018, Americans also are about twice as likely to say they sometimes or often have felt a lack of companionship (45% vs 27%) and felt left out (37% vs 18%) in the past 4 weeks. Some have expressed that 2020 fast forwarded a spiritual decay. Reportedly, one in ten people in the U.S.A. rely on antidepressants and 1 in 4 women in their 40s and 50s take antidepressants. The FDA has warned that such antidepressant drugs might increase suicides in a small percentage of children and adults. Even stopping antidepressants may cause withdrawal reactions that last days and sometimes longer, causing some patients to feel depressed, suicidal, or even violent. A recent study suggests common antidepressants may pose a profoundly serious risk to health; they drastically raise the risk of mortality 33%. Users were 14% more likely to have a stroke or a heart attack. Some say things have improved from those early, dark days of the pandemic. Yet, we are surrounded by racial unrest and cries of police brutality. Personally, I see the racial divide accelerating with increasing momentum, with no solutions in sight. That alone is extremely mentally stressful. Many were left in a depressed daze during those first few weeks of unemployment. Still, there is lots of evidence that we can adapt to almost anything over time. However, we all wonder if our children and grandchildren will inherit a better world or will the chaos and unrest continue to rise. Anything can happen and you must be prepared. When it comes to depression and anxiety, exercise may be the simple answer. The largest and most extensive study of its kind has revealed that regular exercise of any intensity can prevent future depression – and just one hour can help. Even small amounts of exercise can protect against depression.

In the America that I love, the best advice seems to be that we must move forward. People are remarkably resilient. Try to avoid the toxicity or adverse effects of antidepressants.

**Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.**

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

[rhowesmd@hughes.net](mailto:rhowesmd@hughes.net) | [www.iwillfindthecure.org](http://www.iwillfindthecure.org)

