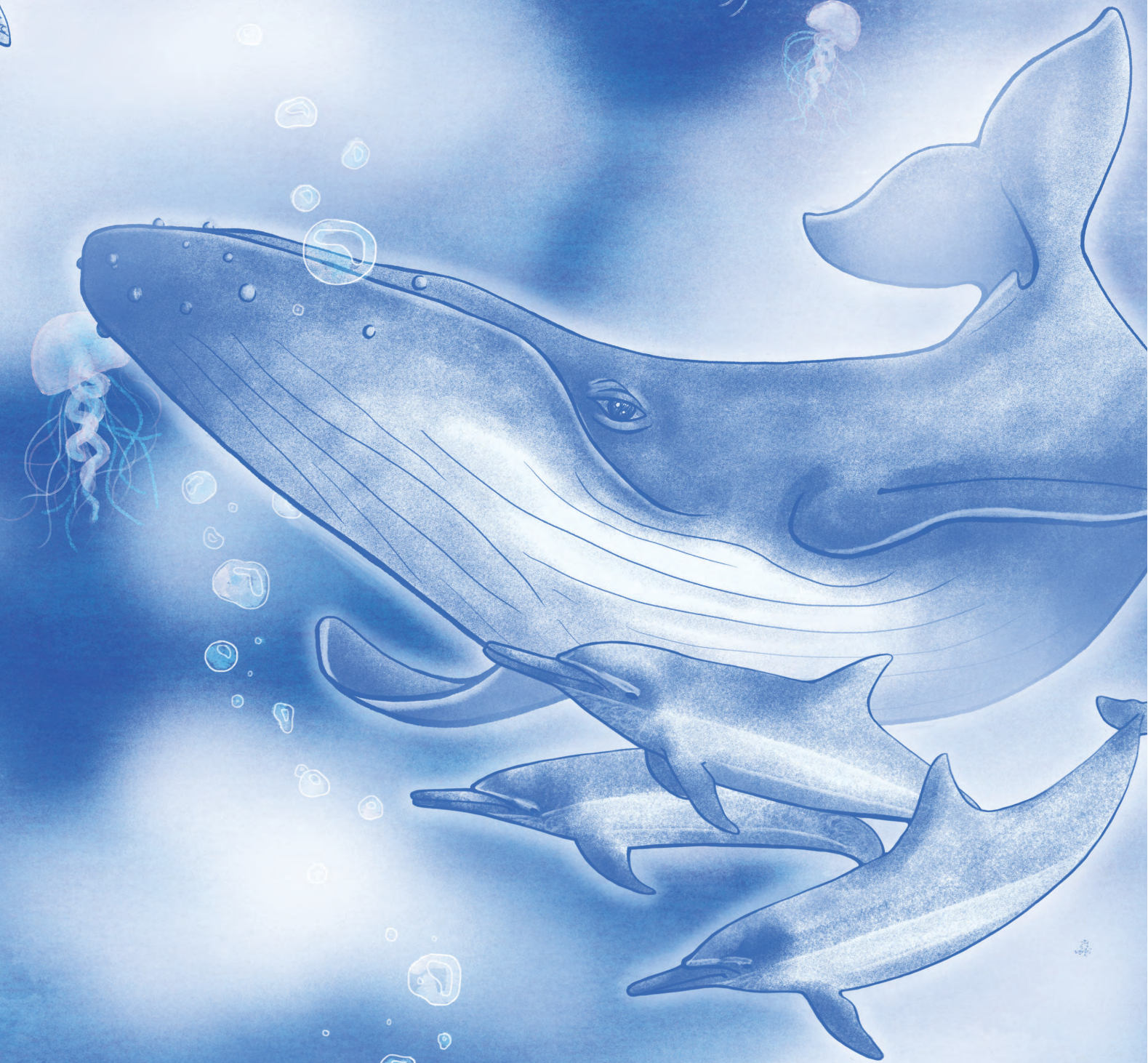
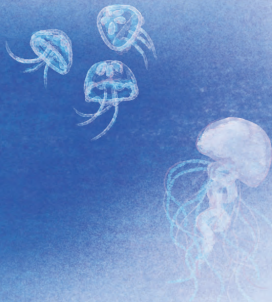


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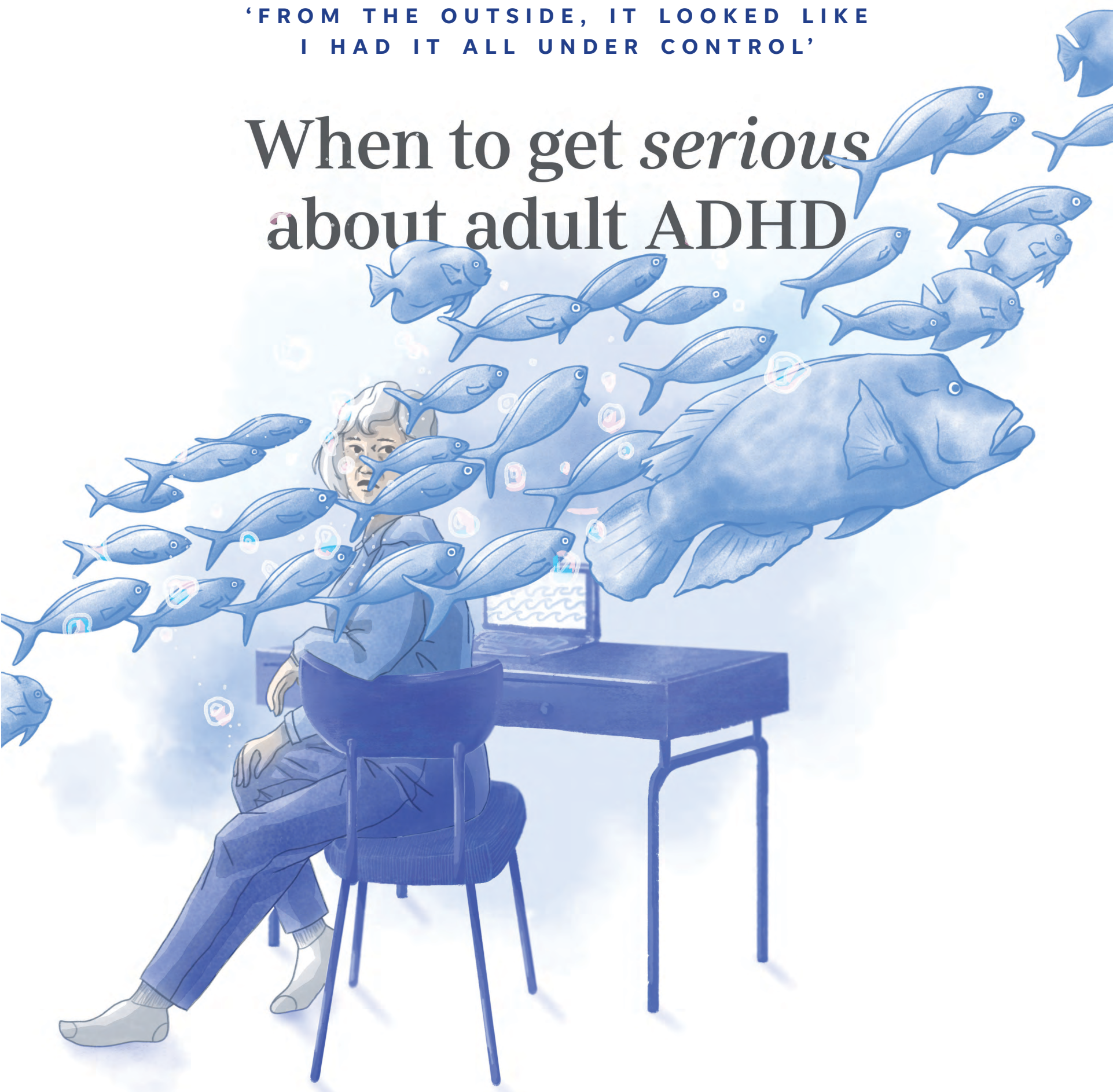
EXPLORING THE TURBULENT WATERS  
OF MENTAL HEALTH





‘FROM THE OUTSIDE, IT LOOKED LIKE  
I HAD IT ALL UNDER CONTROL’

# When to get *serious* about adult ADHD



**Robin Flanigan**  
Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

**R**ebekah Weissert was a high achiever in school, enrolled in gifted and talented programs and thought of as having lots of potential. “From the outside, it looked like I had it all under control,” said the 52-year-old author living in St. Augustine, Florida. “Inside, it has always been awful.”

She’s talking about her attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, a neurodevelopmental condition she didn’t start considering until she was in her late 30s because it had long been focused on kids, mostly boys, who “were bouncing off the walls.”

Weissert’s story is common.

An estimated 15.5 million U.S. adults had an ADHD diagnosis in 2023, the latest data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One-half of those received their diagnosis in adulthood.

## Cost of undiagnosed ADHD is high

These adults often experience shame from repeatedly failing to meet expectations, or from being labeled as lazy or unmotivated even though their behavior is more about an unintended lack of attention, organization and impulse control.

“As a child, you get diagnosed because you’re a pain in the butt to other people; as an adult, you get diagnosed because you’ve become a pain in the butt to yourself,” said David Goodman, assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and founder of the Adult Attention Deficit Disorder Center of Maryland.

Weissert can relate to this.

The overwhelming feelings she felt growing up intensified after having two children. She had trouble keeping up with housework and laundry, remembering to sign school permission slips and showing up on time for events.

At one point, she was diagnosed with clinical depression. But that never felt quite right.

## Getting an answer can make a difference

Finally, at age 43, she received an official ADHD diagnosis.

She was identified as an “inattentive type,” characterized by having difficulty concentrating, focusing on a task and staying organized.

“I was so relieved there was an answer – that I had an explanation for things – but there was grief because if I had understood this earlier, would I not have had to go through as much emotional turmoil?” she said.

“I’d been beating myself up for being such a mess.”

Many adults with ADHD are “pedaling twice as hard and accomplishing half as much,” said Goodman, who also is a professional expert working with Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), the nation’s leading nonprofit organization serving people affected by ADHD.

This is particularly true, he continued, for those who’ve made choices in life that reflect low self-confidence, such as not pursuing a promotion because of a fear of incompetence.

## What to do next

So what to do if this feels familiar?

To learn more about adult ADHD, Goodman recommended spending time on credible websites, including CHADD; the CDC; the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; and the American Professional Society of ADHD and Related Disorders, which has partnered with CHADD to develop and publish guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD in adults.

And if reaching out to a mental health practitioner, be sure it’s one authorized to deliver psychological assessments and tools, advised Adam Rodríguez, a clinical psychologist in Portland, Oregon. ADHD symptoms can be similar to symptoms of other disorders, so in an ideal world, a full neuropsychological battery delivered by someone with a PhD or PsyD in psychology would yield a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of what’s going on.

If that is too costly, however, Rodríguez encourages working with a psychologist who specializes in assessment, rather than a psychiatrist or masters-level therapist.

Also, consider finding a “depth therapist” who takes into account “ways of being which are sometimes out of our conscious awareness” and “can understand a person’s character or personality at a deeper level,” Rodríguez said. All psychological conditions manifest uniquely in each person, and knowing how someone experiences and expresses ADHD is important, he added.

## What about ADHD medication?

While medication is not always required to treat adult ADHD, it can be effective in managing symptoms, said Goodman: “It’s like having blurred vision and deciding to put on glasses. You don’t need to wear glasses, but your productivity during the day, and the ease at which you get things done, is remarkably better than without glasses. It’s a quality-of-life issue.”

Weissert writes the ADHD Mamas in Midlife blog, which offers

**See ADHD, Page 9**

“As a child, you get diagnosed because you’re a pain in the butt to other people;  
as an adult, you get diagnosed because you’ve become a pain in the butt to yourself.”

**David Goodman**  
Founder of the Adult Attention Deficit Disorder Center of Maryland





# An effect of *climate change*

THE STATE OF THE GLOBE IS GETTING SOME OF US DOWN

Steve Howe

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

The headlines can stoke a feeling of fear or unease. Raging wildfires, devastating floods and blistering heat waves. The effects of climate change are being felt already, stoking the sort of existential dread that only world-threatening events can. And while the result is not an official diagnosis, the feeling itself is real: climate anxiety.

The American Psychological Association and EcoAmerica were among the first to address the impacts of climate change on mental health in a report in 2014.

“To our knowledge, no research has examined the impact of learning about the psychological effects of climate change – such as anxiety and depression – on individuals’ willingness to accept and take steps to mitigate or prepare for climate change,” said the report, “Beyond Storms and Droughts: The Psychological Impacts of Climate Change.”

There have been plenty of studies on the topic since that report. And there is a reason people are worried. The World Health Organization anticipates climate change will result in approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 because of undernutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress.

The WHO identified immediate mental health issues, anxiety and post-traumatic stress, and long-term disorders related to climate change.

Who is most susceptible to climate anxiety?

The greater someone’s knowledge of climate change, the more likely they are to experience climate anxiety. Media exposure plays a role in this, as well as lived experiences and social pressures to take action.

The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication looked at an objective measure for those with potentially serious levels of psychological distress from climate change. The report found 3% of the U.S. population, based on a survey on climate change in the American mind, qualified in 2023.

A 2021 study found most young people ages 16-25 in 10 countries, including the United States, were very or extremely worried about climate change (59%) and 84% were at least moderately worried. Of the 10,000 young people in the study, 45% said those feelings “negatively affected their daily life and functioning” and 75% said they think the future is frightening.

“It can also help them to ... address the situation and feel some sense of agency.”

Jennifer Mooney

Licensed mental health counselor at University of Rochester Medical Center

What can you do to help cope with climate anxiety?

What can people dealing with climate anxiety do? Building a sense of community by finding other people they can connect with, said Jennifer Mooney, a licensed mental health counselor at University of Rochester Medical Center. Understanding they’re not alone and that other people have the same worries can bring them comfort.

“And it can also help them to get some ideas for what other people are doing to try to help themselves feel better and also address the situation and feel some sense of agency,” Mooney said.

Finding peace with climate anxiety can be difficult, but there are some generally agreed-upon ways to help.

**Tune out distressing climate news when you need a break:** In a 24/7 media environment, overconsumption of climate change news can tip the scales from informative to distressing. Try to take a break when you’re feeling overwhelmed or limit your daily consumption with a timer.

**Center what you can control:** There is a lot of climate change that’s out of the average person’s hands. But you can reduce energy, write to elected officials or choose foods that have less environmental impact. “Even though it may seem small, they can at least reassure themselves that they’re doing what they can,” Mooney said.

**Take good care of your own health and well-being:** Being active, validating your emotions and connecting with nature are just some of the ways you can find joy and stay positive despite the reality and future worry about climate change.

How does climate anxiety affect mental health?

There are several mental health effects resulting from climate anxiety, including these from Mental Health America:

**Helplessness:** In addition to feeling a sense of impending doom, those who have lived through extreme weather events may have feelings of helplessness while they try to recover.

**Aggression:** Warmer temperatures lead to increased violence, as the D&C detailed in the series “City on Fire.”

**Uncertainty:** Those in the path of severe weather and other climate-related natural disasters are less sure of the effects, especially those in marginalized communities that are less likely to find housing or work if displaced.

Who is affected?

The demographics with a greater than average rate of climate anxiety:

**Hispanic/Latino:** 10%

**Gen X:** 5%

**Male:** 5%

**Gen Z/millennial:** 4%



# Everything, *all of the time*

## HOW DO WE DEAL WITH THE STATE OF THE WORLD?

Robin Flanigan

Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

Economic instability. Geopolitical conflicts. Climate change. Social media addiction.

There can be countless questions and seemingly few answers when it comes to what feels, to many, like a historically challenging time – and unprecedented attack on our mental health.

“The unknown is what we human beings don’t like,” said Nancy Wilson, a psychotherapist and licensed professional counselor in Houston. “Anxiety is probably the biggest emotion people are feeling right now. Our brains are wired to assess risk and figure out how we can stay alive and safe, and we’re constantly feeling on alert because we don’t know what’s going to happen next.”

When asked what they were very or somewhat anxious about, 67% of Americans said current events worldwide, 61% said paying bills and expenses, 44% said the impact of emerging technology in everyday life, and 40% said job security, according to a recent American Psychiatric Association poll.

“My baseline anxiety is higher than it has been in other periods of my life,” said Miranda Wilcox, a 54-year-old leadership development coach in Greece, New York. “Sometimes I feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone. “I’m a fairly rational person, but it’s disorienting to see how much suffering there is going on in the world. Sometimes I’m angry; sometimes there’s just a profound sense of sadness. Is this really the best we can do?”

### How to cope with everything that is going on

Maintaining mental health is critical for coping with open questions about the situation in this country and in the world today, ones that don’t have simple solutions.

When it comes to global conflicts, for example, “I can’t negotiate a ceasefire,” Wilcox said, “but I can turn off what I’m watching, or make a donation to a nongovernmental organization that serves people in need. I can try to address the feelings of powerlessness by figuring out a way to use some of the power that I have to do something that’s better for me, if not others.”

Being in nature helps lower Wilcox’s stress levels in the meantime. Research has found that spending time outside not only reduces anxiety and depression, but also lowers blood pressure and boosts energy levels. “It doesn’t have to be anywhere exotic; it can be in my backyard,” Wilcox said. “Listening to the sounds, noticing the leaves on the trees, looking up at the sky. That’s a useful way for me to feel grounded and, in a way, at peace with some aspect of the world.”

### What are other ways to stay grounded?

Rob Dube, a mindfulness expert and co-author of “Shine: 10 Disciplines for Maximizing Your Energy, Impact, and Inner Peace,” advised trying breath work to help reset the nervous system in times of stress. He recommended the breathing exercise popularized by Andrew Weil, which involves inhaling for four seconds, holding the breath for seven seconds and exhaling for eight seconds, and then repeating the cycle three more times.

Another way to boost mental health is to be grateful for things that typically go unappreciated, said Dube, based in Harbor Springs, Michigan.

“They can be simple interactions – a person you passed during a walk just gave you a smile that got you out of a funk for half a second, or maybe you saw a bunny hop in your backyard that made you chuckle,” he said. “It’s all about perspective. Think of bringing awareness to wonderful things as a workout. It’s like building a muscle.”

Having a strong sense of community has been linked to better mental health as well, reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness.

“We’re all made up with different backgrounds and cultures, but we’re all human,” Dube said. “We need to be here for each other.”

### How are you connected?

It’s “a worthwhile pursuit” to find a community that aligns with your beliefs, Dube said. “There’s an equal exchange of energy. There’s wisdom in sharing things that are great and things that are challenging, and being able to support each other non-judgmentally.”

While it’s good to know you’re not alone, be sure to balance commiseration with positive connection, urged Wilcox: “It feels good to bond over a shared feeling, but that can turn into a negative rant and make people feel worse. So it’s important to find the right balance there.”

### Wilson offers these mental health boosters

**Show self-compassion.** If a friend told you about several things that went wrong yesterday, you likely wouldn’t say “Get over it.” Instead, you’d probably offer something like this: “I’m sorry, that sounds really hard.” Talk to yourself the same way, with love instead of criticism. Try this instead: “That was rough, but I got through it. Good for me.”

**Seek out a therapist.** “We’re not equipped with every tool in the toolbox,” so working with someone “trained to hear you out, to comfort you, to show you the way to feel better” can have a significant impact on mood, noted Wilson.

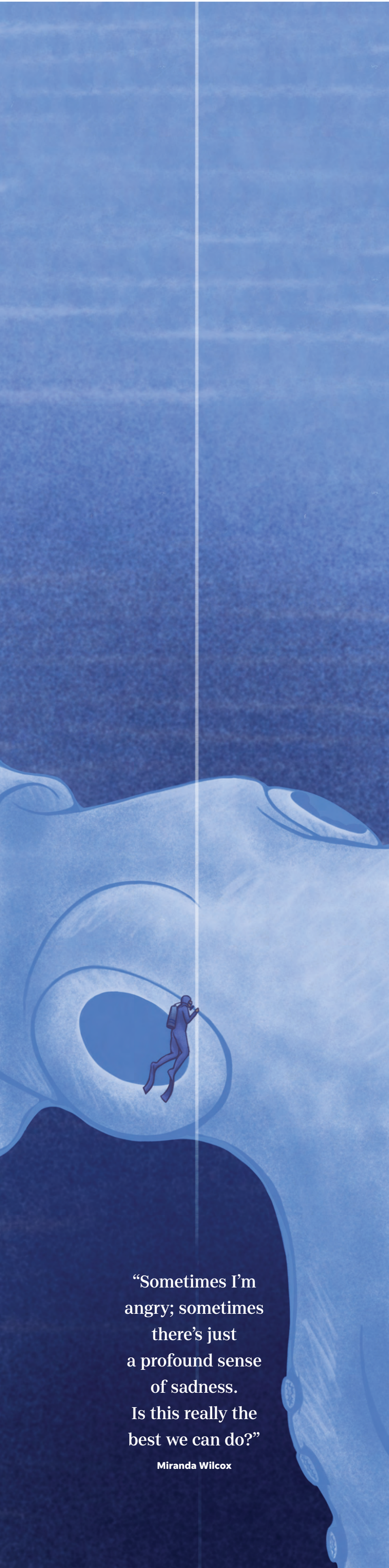
**Set tech boundaries.** Need a social media fast? Wilson does every now and then; she abstains from social networking platforms for a few days if she realizes the news has become too consuming. “How obsessive has your doomscrolling become?” she asked. “People should be honest with themselves.”

**Share positive texts.** Wilson exchanges inspirational words and pictures with family. “I try to train myself every day to notice something that sparks joy or wonder inside of me – and that gives me back my own spark that can be easily lost in these really stressful times.”

Tranquility, if only in small doses, isn’t out of reach, though it may take some practice to get there. Dube recommended using a jar filled with sand and water to help with that practice.

“Make sure the cap’s on real tight and shake it up. All the sand swirling around – that’s your life,” he said. “All the issues, all the wonderful stuff, it’s all swirling around and it’s not clear. When you set the jar down, after a little bit of time the sand settles and then you can see through with absolute clarity.

“When you have more clarity,” he added, “you have more peace.”



“Sometimes I’m  
angry; sometimes  
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a profound sense  
of sadness.  
Is this really the  
best we can do?”

Miranda Wilcox





ANXIETY ISSUES SHOULD  
BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

# Are you ‘future- tripping?’

Robin Flanigan

Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

Anxiety comes in many forms, from persistent worry about everyday situations to excessive and consistent worry about the future (called future-tripping).

And it’s important to talk about, given that 43% of adults in 2024 said they felt more anxious than they did the year before, up from 37% in 2023 and 32% in 2022, according to the American Psychiatric Association.

Renowned entrepreneur Chip Conley not only talks openly about his once-paralyzing anxiety, but also wrote a book about it. In “Emotional Equations,” he offers this definition of anxiety: uncertainty multiplied by powerlessness.

“Those are two of the most combustible issues,” Conley, founder of Modern Elder Academy, a midlife wisdom school in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Baja, Mexico, said in an interview.

Before sharing openly and honesty about your struggles with anxiety, it’s good to get clear about the cause of your unease.

Conley created a balance sheet to help him do just that. Under “uncertainty,” he lists what he does know and what he doesn’t know. Under “powerlessness,” he writes what he does and doesn’t have control and influence over.

“Taking what feels like free-floating anxiety, and making it tangible in that way, takes a lot of the potency away,” he said.

“Taking what feels like free-floating anxiety, and making it tangible in that way, takes a lot of the potency away.”

Chip Conley

Founder of Modern Elder Academy

## Be curious, vulnerable and open about your anxiety

Brandi Pritchett-Johnson, a psychologist based in Detroit, said that “starting from a place of personal vulnerability and flexibility is important with others who may not understand. Starting from a place of curiosity is especially helpful given that anxiety can impair the brain’s executive functioning. This way, the conversations about worry, fear, and overwhelm have a greater chance of being productive.”

She advised asking questions such as, “What is this connected to?” and “What are the sensations in my body?”

It’s common to wonder about the reaction you’ll get, said Kristin Anderson, a licensed psychotherapist in Manhattan.

“This is one fact about you, and when your anxiety is coming up, it’s good for somebody else to know what’s happening so they don’t just think you’re standoffish or something like that,” Anderson said. “It actually helps people to get to know you more in a better and deeper way.”

Conley’s suggestion is to start with, “I would love to tap into your wisdom about something that I’m struggling with right now. Could you lend an ear?”

“You’re opening the door for the other person to much more readily say yes,” he explained.

So who should you tell?

“Your closest friends, family members – the people who are probably going to see the impacts of the anxiety on you the most,” Anderson said.

## How does this unfold at your work?

If anxiety is impairing your ability to show up fully for work, Pritchett-Johnson said to consider opening up to your boss, who, in a best-case scenario, would better understand the reason behind your performance and perhaps show empathy. True, this is a case-by-case situation depending on individual circumstances, but she added that in many cases, the boss already suspects something is amiss.

“Yes, you’re vulnerable,” she said, “but you’re already vulnerable.”

In some cases, talking about severe anxiety with human resources may lead to conversations about qualifying for a leave of absence under the Family and Medical Leave Act.

By disclosing your anxiety to “anybody and everybody that feels safe,” Pritchett-Johnson continued, “you’ll get good information. You’re going to get people who have the capacity to hold it, and you’re going to get people who don’t.”

If someone responds by being dismissive or judgmental, for example, two things could be at play.

One is that “they may be going through their own stuff right now, and it may be hard for them to give you attention,” Conley said. “Everybody has a bad day.”

The other may necessitate a re-evaluation of the relationship if their unpleasant response isn’t a one-off and “they show their true colors when you need them the most,” Conley added.

It’s easy to catastrophize a potentially bad reaction, but “90% of the time, that’s not the response you’re going to get,” Anderson said. With the other 10%, “it’s important to remember that this is not about you. If somebody is open and honest and vulnerable, and that is the reaction, that has nothing to do with what’s being shared. It’s



MEDICAID FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE

# Gained, but now *fear* of losing it

**David Robinson**  
New York State Team  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Carol Murdie’s autistic 9-year-old daughter’s mental health care needs went untreated as she languished for two years on a provider’s wait list.

The wait for Murdie’s daughter, Emerson Murdie-Hall, stemmed from a scarcity of youth mental health providers who take Medicaid, the state-federal health program for low-income Americans. It also left her struggling in the classroom, resulting in her repeated suspensions from school and her switch to homeschooling.

Now, Murdie-Hall, who goes by Emmi, has begun getting mental health care at a state-run health system, which is nearly a 90-minute drive from her Apalachin home in upstate New York.

But advocates are worried that some mental health care services could be on the chopping block as states manage federal funding cuts to Medicaid under President Donald Trump’s Republican-backed reconciliation package.

“There’s a lot of concern that we’re going to lose what may seem like little programs to some people, but they are actually life-savers for these kids,” Murdie said.

Medicaid cuts threaten mental health care

The federal Medicaid cuts directly involve imposing work requirements for nondisabled adults. But advocates assert states will face related Medicaid funding shortfalls that affect a range of services, as states shoulder new administrative burdens and other policy changes.

While millions of Americans who rely on Medicaid for a range of health care services fight to preserve their funding, those who use Medicaid for mental health care are concerned they ultimately will be the ones to lose funding.

Put differently, physical health care historically has been prioritized politically over mental health care, despite state and federal laws intended to require parity and equitable coverage.

For Emmi, Medicaid funds both her mental health care in Syracuse and programs closer to her home that provide social activities for people with disabilities.

The prospect of losing any of those services has Murdie on edge. The disruption, she said, likely would derail her daughter’s recent progress toward returning to public school.

“We’re losing these bright and brilliant children due to issues that could be managed if they had access to services,” Murdie said.

How it funds mental health

Medicaid has been the primary payer for mental health or substance use care nationally, spending about \$58 billion on mental health care and \$17 billion on substance use care in 2019, according to The Commonwealth Fund’s analysis of the most recent publicly available data.

In other words, Medicaid pays for 1-in-4 dollars spent in the U.S. on mental health or substance use care, the National Alliance on Mental Health says. Currently, 1-in-3 people with mental illness rely on Medicaid, the group added.

Still, millions of Americans continue to fall through cracks in the nation’s mental health system, according to the 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health released July 28.

Among the survey findings:

- Among the 61.5 million adults ages 18 or older with any mental illness, 47.9% (or 29.5 million people) hadn’t received any mental health treatment in the past year.
- Among those ages 12 to 17 with a co-occurring major depressive episode and a substance use disorder in the past year, 27.9% went untreated in the past year.

A family’s struggle to access mental health care

Faith Beaty’s odyssey through the mental health care system spotlighted key barriers to treatment. Her journey also underscored the potential harm that Medicaid funding cuts could cause.

Beaty first began fighting to get her 15-year-old daughter, Imani Beaty, mental health care through Medicaid more than a decade ago.

Over the years, they have been stuck in the middle of clashes between providers and Medicaid officials over prior authorization approvals, which involve determining whether care is medically necessary.

They also have spent months on provider wait lists to receive specialty care for a range of conditions, including anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity, autism and oppositional defiance disorder.

While Beaty has found stable access to a therapist and pediatrician for her daughter near their home outside Rochester, New York, she has yet to secure a psychiatrist. They are not alone. Only 36% of psychiatrists on average accept new Medicaid patients – lower compared with rates for physicians overall (71%), according to KFF, the health policy group.

Put simply, Beaty said, “Accessing quality mental health care is very difficult for kids right now; I have just learned to advocate for what it is my child needs no matter what the challenges are.”

Continued from previous page

all about that person.”

Younger generations have a much easier time talking openly about diagnoses, therapy and medication, in general.

If needing to build confidence to talk about anxiety in the first place, play out some scenarios in your mind – how much you want to reveal, how you want to respond to questions – so you know exactly what you want to say and how you want to feel during and afterward.

Sarah Cedeño, a 42-year-old creative writing instructor from Brockport, New York, who lives with anxiety, suggested “having some notes so you don’t forget important things that might be relevant, especially if it takes a certain amount of courage to have that conversation.”

That exercise also can bring clarity, said Cedeño, who is “very matter-of-fact” about her anxiety in all parts of her life “because it’s a filter through which I see life.”

Given that Cedeño works with words for a living, she said there’s value in drafting thoughts before a weighty conversation, especially

one in which the information shared has an impact on another person.

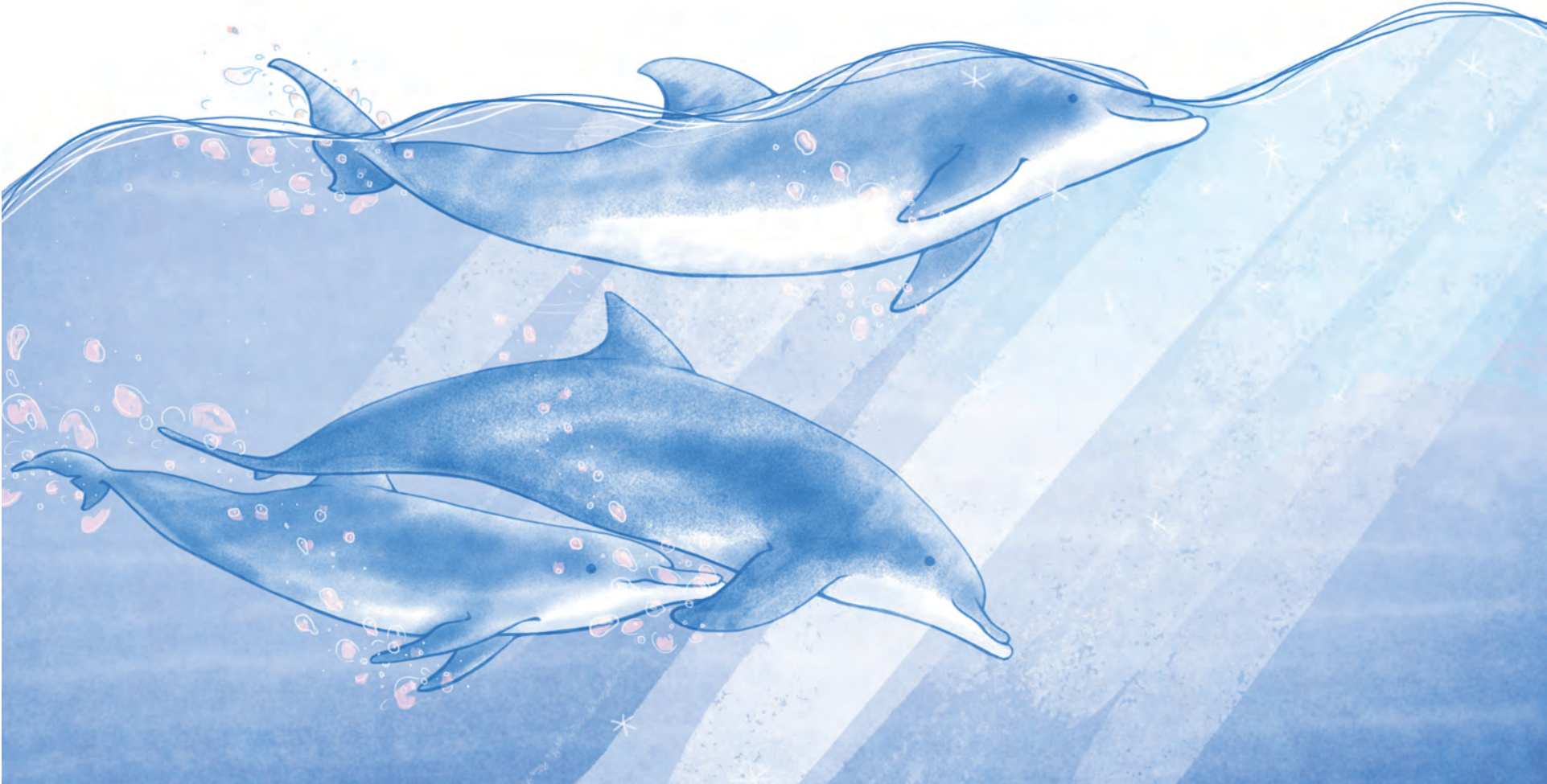
“If we don’t give ourselves space and time to work things out on paper, to think about what we want to say without an audience, sometimes we don’t actually get at what we mean,” Cedeño said.

Instead, when we do gain clarity, we’re less likely to “spin into self-doubt and insecurity.”

Being as prepared as possible ahead of time is “all you can do, then push yourself to take that first step off the ledge even though it (can be) scary,” Anderson said.

In healthy, honest relationships, talking about favorable things and hard things are equally valuable, said Pritchett-Johnson, as is the need for shared accountability. She urged keeping in mind that the people we talk to can offer space and compassion, but they’re “not responsible for managing our anxiety.”

One of Pritchett-Johnson’s favorite ways to start one of these conversations while navigating a healthy dynamic is this: “I’m not asking permission for you to love me because I have anxiety. I’m just wanting you to understand me better.”





GOING DIGITAL

# Bridging the gaps in health care

Misha Manjuran Oberoi

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Patricia, a university professor and mother living in a small town in New Brunswick, Canada, was dealing with workplace conflict in the fall of 2024 that seemed to have no easy fix.

Her psychiatrist, whom she'd been seeing for two decades, was completely booked for the next several months. But Patricia was feeling extremely distressed and needed immediate counseling.

While listening to a trusted podcast, she heard an advertisement for BetterHelp, an online therapy platform that matches users with licensed therapists for video, phone or chat sessions, typically within 48 hours.

Deciding it seemed legitimate, Patricia signed up, paying about \$425 out-of-pocket for a monthly plan since BetterHelp does not accept insurance. Would it help?

## Matching isn't always smooth

BetterHelp's algorithm paired Patricia with a male therapist based in the Pacific time zone. Living in the Atlantic time zone, she couldn't find hours that worked. She messaged him about his availability but never heard back.

While waiting for a new match, Patricia embarked on another part of the platform she hadn't expected to rely on: BetterHelp's library of online classes.

From setting boundaries at work to parenting, the classes were specific and, she said, the most valuable part of her subscription. She also attended a couple of group therapy sessions and found those useful as well.

"My experience was that those (the classes) were really, really helpful, like they really got me through a very, very difficult time," Patricia said. "I don't think that I would have actually gone looking for continuing education classes about setting boundaries. I didn't realize that that was something that I didn't know enough about and needed to know more."

Patricia did eventually get a new therapist – a woman whose main experience was with people who had served in the U.S. military. Although Patricia found her knowledgeable, she felt the sessions lacked depth.

"It seemed like despite her experience, she didn't have a lot of tools at her" disposal, Patricia said. "It wasn't any different at all from talking to a friend who has no training as a mental health provider, and I wasn't gonna pay \$425 per month for that."

After about six sessions, Patricia ended her subscription. Still, she remains thankful for the classes and group sessions that got her through a stressful stretch in a small town where options are limited.

## Growing access, growing concerns

Columbia University psychiatry professor Mark Olfson said online therapy undoubtedly has made care more accessible for people who otherwise face

significant geographical, financial and other barriers.

He added that the format has helped reduce no-shows and made it more likely patients stick with care once they start.

"We've entered a period where more people are kind of sticking with it, and it may be that we're reaching people who have more motivation to hang in there, who had been held back by the barriers," Olfson said. "I don't think we really know why, but it does seem to be one of the benefits of this – reducing the fraction of episodes of care that are in a single session."

But, similar to Patricia's experience, many psychologists and psychiatrists have concerns about the actual depth and quality of care online therapists deliver.

In an email interview, BetterHelp said all its therapists are fully licensed or credentialed, with at least a master's degree and an average of eight years of experience, and must pass a verification process that includes background checks and case study evaluations. Yet, there are questions about how effective care is once the screen turns on.

"There's concern about applied effectiveness," Olfson said, especially for evidence-based approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy, which rely on strict principles. "We know that a lot of them aren't doctoral level – they're master's- or bachelor's-level prepared – and what their training is and how effective they are is sort of an open question."

## Still a preference for in-person care

Saturday Martin, a 30-year-old based in Asheville, North Carolina, signed up for BetterHelp in February of this year, when the company offered three months of free therapy to anyone affected by Hurricane Helene. Despite their preference for in-person therapy, Martin lacked access to a reliable means of getting around the city, and so online therapy felt like the best option.

Martin has settled on a therapist they call "fantastic" – a licensed psychiatrist with significant experience. They liked that BetterHelp let them see each therapist's specializations up front and decide who fit best without having to "interview" multiple people.

"BetterHelp let me just pick my therapist based on what I wanted them to specialize in, so it brought all of that information to me, I didn't have to go and interview a bunch of therapists to try to find out like one that really meshed," Martin said.

Martin affirmed what Olfson said about many therapists being young, as out of the near dozen options they were offered at their second matching attempt, all (except the therapist they picked) were in their early 20s and lacked significant experience, they said.

Martin also finds BetterHelp expensive, especially since the subscription charges monthly whether or not clients use all available sessions.

Continued on next page

ONLINE THERAPY HELPS,  
BUT LIMITS REMAIN





# ‘I’m part of something larger’

## MAKING MUSIC TOGETHER CAN HELP WITH MENTAL HEALTH, ESPECIALLY FOR OLDER ADULTS

Anna Reguero  
Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

When Steven Swanger, 76, from Sudbury, Massachusetts, was approaching retirement, he worried his life would be empty. He lived for work, and his kids would soon leave the nest.

So, when he turned 60, he picked up the clarinet – an instrument he had never played before – and joined the Sudbury Valley New Horizons Music band, which provides music-making opportunities for all adults, targeted at the 50 and older population.

It was a return to the music-making he enjoyed as a child, but it became more than a fun diversion. Music is now a central part of Swanger’s life in retirement, providing social opportunities, mental stimulation and a space to escape the world’s woes. He currently plays in several ensembles, from bands to chamber music, in the region where he lives.

“It has always been a salve, a balm, something that is soothing,” he said. “No matter how lousy a day I’ve had, if I’ve played the clarinet, particularly with other people, I get carried away in it. I’m part of something larger.”

For adults older than 50, picking up a musical instrument or singing might be just what the doctor ordered.

### How does music help?

Older adults are increasingly susceptible to mental health challenges due to factors such as physical decline, cognitive changes, social isolation and grief. But according to recent research studies, music may be preventative. Music not only promotes well-being but also enhances brain health, said Suzanne Hanser, former president of the International Association of Music and Medicine and a professor in Berklee College of Music’s music therapy program.

“That means when we create music, when we play music, when we learn music, when we’re actively engaged with music, we’re establishing new pathways and exercising the brain in a really positive way,” Hanser said.

Those assertions are supported by a report released in 2024 by the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging that found nearly all older adults derive some mental health-related benefit from music, from stress relief to improvements in mood, attitude, motivation and energy. These findings build upon an earlier report from the Global Council on Brain Health, which included music in its recommendations for promoting brain health in aging adults.

However, the role of genetics has yet to be fully accounted for in current music studies, said Daniel Gustavson, a research professor in behavioral genetics at the University of Colorado Boulder. Also, sample sizes tend to be small.

### How to begin with music activity in retirement?

For adults with newfound time after retirement, such programs as New Horizons offer an opportunity to engage in a creative activity that can support their cognitive function and overall mental well-being as they age. Founded in 1991 with a group of 30 members, New Horizons is now an international organization supporting nearly 200 bands, orchestras and choirs internationally, with 120 programs across the U.S.

“In so many cases, people come to us as total beginners, saying, ‘I always wanted to play,’ or ‘I saw how much fun my kid had in band or orchestra,’ or, ‘I played a million years ago and I’d like to get back to it, but I don’t know if I can,’” said Diane Muffitt, founder of Sudbury Valley New Horizons Music.

Designed to accommodate beginners or those starting over on an instrument, some New Horizon programs offer multiple ensembles that cater to varied interests – including band and orchestra concert music, choral music, jazz and folk music. Importantly, it provides an antidote to the isolation that is so common among aging adults.

“I would dare say that there’s probably a large portion of us, if we did not participate in New Horizons would probably be sitting at home, not enjoying it, stuck watching TV,” said Paula Sousa, secretary of the New Horizons International Music Association and a New Horizons flutist in Rochester, New York. “Especially for older single people who don’t have a partner, it is a huge asset.”

### It’s her ‘anti-Alzheimer’s’ exercise

For Judith Blaustein, 81, music has kept her going through several medical procedures, including a knee replacement and a bowel blockage. Playing music, said the New Horizons flutist from Pittsford, New York, “really brings me out of any disappointment in how my health is going. It just removes me from focusing on the pain or the discomfort.”

French horn player Joanne Berry, 77, a Sudbury Valley New Horizons member, calls it her anti-Alzheimer’s exercise.

The extent to which music has enhanced his life only became clear after an eye surgery recently left Swanger blind in one eye and unable to play clarinet. “I realize now that my life has been terribly empty since I haven’t been able to play,” he says. “I found in retirement, if you have one thing that you’ve scheduled in a day, you can build a whole day around that and feel constructive. If your day has nothing at all, life can become very depressing.”

*Editor’s note: Swanger’s eye is slowly healing and he resumed playing at the end of August, commenting “my life has improved by 2,000 percent.”*

### Continued from previous page

To this popular drawback, BetterHelp says it’s working on expanding insurance coverage in the future to help with cost.

**Effective for some needs, not for all**

According to the company, nearly three-quarters of clients report symptom reduction within 12 weeks, and 82% say they’d recommend their therapist to others.

Though Martin reflects positively on their experience so far and finds online therapy suitable for tackling such issues as anxiety or exploring their attachment style, they’d hesitate to rec-

“There’s concern about applied effectiveness.”

Mark Olfson  
Columbia University psychiatry professor

ommend it for processing deeper trauma.

“I would definitely say that for working on some of my anxiety, just discussing my styles of attachment, things like that, it’s golden,” Martin said. “I would probably not recommend it to people who are maybe struggling with much darker areas of their mental health ... I would say maybe online is not the best option for that just because there’s the layer of impersonalness, from talking to a screen, it’s hard to convey, I think.”

The experiences that Patricia and Martin had look different, but both show how online therapy can open doors where few exist, while reminding users that whom you get matched with, what you can afford and what you’re trying to heal all shape whether those avenues work.





ART THERAPY IS AN OPTION

# When words are *not enough*

Anna Reguero

Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

When Lindsay Graf was a child, she was teased relentlessly for her skin condition, known as acanthosis nigricans. It manifested as darkened, thickened areas of skin, most noticeable on her face and other creases of her body. “The kids in school were really mean; they told me I never washed,” said Graf, 41, from Rochester, New York. “They made me feel really bad about myself. I had a lot of issues feeling worthy.”

Graf went undiagnosed until the age of 16, eight years after she first experienced symptoms.

With self-esteem issues stemming from childhood, Graf finally sought out therapy as an adult.

She found Sarah Beren, an art therapist and owner of the Spotted Rabbit Studio in Rochester. Graf always was artistic, but she didn’t know that therapy could incorporate art or that art could be therapeutic. Graf was mostly critical of her artistic creations.

Lack of awareness of art therapy as a clinical treatment for mental health is not unusual.

Nadia Paredes, president of the American Art Therapy Association, said she often is mistaken for an art restorer or an employee of an art museum. However, the term “art therapy” was coined in 1942. A clinical treatment for all ages and mental health conditions, art therapy is gaining recognition and acceptance.

What is art therapy?

Art therapists hold at least a master’s degree in art therapy or its equivalent, which requires coursework in traditional mental health methods, such as talk therapy, and the use of art materials in a therapeutic manner.

Then, art therapists must complete supervised clinical work, as do all mental health professionals, before they can become board-certified and claim the protected title of an art therapist. Seventeen states now have additional licensure requirements, said Paredes, a number the AATA is working hard to increase.

“In art therapy, we not only talk about our feelings but actually make art about them,” Paredes said. “It’s the combination of psychology and art.” Art, she says, “gives you an extra level of communication. Sometimes words are not enough.”

“A common misconception is that we’re analyzing people’s artwork,” Beren said. “It’s really what they see in it. It’s important to note that no art skill is required. It’s not about making good art. It’s more about the process of self-expression. A lot of times we’ll have clients rip up their artwork, burn it, throw it away, bury it, all kinds of things to symbolically release those emotions.”

You can ‘alchemize the trauma’

Beren uses creative directives to draw out emotions and feelings. In Graf’s earliest sessions, Beren took and made two copies of a black-and-white photo of the woman’s face. With the first copy, Beren prompted Graf to create what her bad side looks like, the second for her good and worthy side. On the first photo, Graf crossed out her face with angry black scribbles and gave the photo a bold red hue. She wrote out the ugly phrases that swarmed her head, such as “I’m unworthy” and “I’m stupid.” On the second, she surrounded herself with the colors purple and pink and adorned her face with glitter glasses.

“Sarah helped me alchemize the trauma,” Graf said. “Looking back at it, it’s exciting to see how far I’ve come since then. I don’t think this about myself anymore.”

Therapy leveraged in multiple settings

Art therapy also is used in settings beyond private practice, including in hospitals.

Art therapist Sarah Salice works at Silver Hill Hospital, a psychiatric care facility in New Canaan, Connecticut, that offers residential, inpatient and outpatient services.

In her inpatient group, Salice is limited by the 45-minute time frame, which includes time for the group to share the emotional responses elicited by their art, a more restrictive format than private practice. She works with adolescents and adults across diagnoses, such as mood disorders, neuropsychiatric conditions, trauma and substance use.

“The directives I do have to work with all of the populations, and that includes using the right materials,” she said. For example, she says, clay can be activating for people with trauma, so she uses a modified airy clay instead.

LaSondra Parsons, the former president of the Oklahoma Art Therapy Association with a private practice in Norman, Oklahoma, has been leading a popular art therapy group at the Resonator community center. It is free and open to all.

While she used to start with directives, she said, the group has now settled into therapeutic art-making, which is distinct from art therapy. However, she is available to help anyone process their feelings. “It is very therapeutic and very healing and has built some great relationships of people that would have never been together before,” Parsons said.

Insurance coverage remains spotty but is improving as more states establish formal licensing requirements for art therapists. To find an art therapist, the AATA offers an art therapist locator. Visit [arttherapy.org/art-therapist-locator](http://arttherapy.org/art-therapist-locator).

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support, tools and resources for, as she describes on the blog’s website, “the first generation of late-diagnosed ADHD women who are also entering peri/menopause.”

She hopes the blog helps others feel less scattered.

“Any way that you can externalize your memory is important,” she said. For example, using a whiteboard or sticky notes for reminders, or setting timers, or using visual cues, such as putting daily vitamins next to your toothbrush.

Other strategies also help

Weissert also uses the acronym INCUP, first proposed by board-certified adult psychiatrist William Dodson, which stands for interest, novelty, challenge, urgency and passion.

Weissert explained the acronym this way: “It’s like our brains are an orchestra and the prefrontal cortex is the conductor – and in ADHD brains, the conductor is asleep most of the time. So the orchestra plays at full volume and there’s no organization. But if there’s something interesting, novel, challenging, etc., the conductor will wake up.

“One of the biggest hacks is understanding how we are motivated,” she said.

Lisa Smith, a licensed professional counselor based in Bellaire, Texas, suggested building in extra time, called “buffer time,” between tasks and to the tasks themselves in case you get sidetracked.

Body doubling is another management tool Smith advocates. This is a productivity strategy in which someone with ADHD does chores, assignments and other jobs – usually ones that are boring or frustrating – in the presence of someone else to help prevent distractions.

For those with ADHD, learning and maintaining strategies such as these are important both to yourself and the people around you, as they reduce stress levels and improve overall health, Smith said.

And if you are wondering if they meet the criteria for ADHD, she proposed filling out the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale online. The free diagnostic tool was developed in part with the World Health Organization.

Being educated about ADHD means less chaos and clutter, and more acceptance and ability.

“When you’re working with their brain and not against it,” Smith said, “you’re going to find you can function just as well as your neurotypical counterparts. It definitely can change your life.”



FINDING CARE IN MEDITATION  
IS POSSIBLE — AND HELPFUL

# Practicing being *present*

Robin Flanigan  
Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

Meditation – pausing, being still and connecting with the breath and the body – can be a powerful practice. “With life the way it is these days, our attention is constantly being pulled toward devices and dings, there’s a wonderful opportunity to disconnect from all of that and connect with what’s happening in the present,” said meditation teacher Lisa Ernst, founder of One Dharma Nashville in Tennessee.

One 2023 study found that meditation supports the immune system; helps with diabetes, hypertension, fibromyalgia and other diseases; lowers bad cholesterol levels; and improves mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Meditation is not mindfulness, though the two are compatible and often used together.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the scientist known globally for developing the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, defines mindfulness as paying attention, on purpose and without judgment or evaluation, to the present moment. This is something that can be done anytime, anywhere.

Meditation, on the other hand, is something we set out to do, explained Susan Dreyer Leon, director of the Mindfulness for Educators Program at Antioch University New England in Keene, New Hampshire.

“It’s a practice we use in the hope that what we’re practicing translates into daily life,” she said.

What works to set meditation habit?

Given how much our culture celebrates busyness, starting a meditation practice can be daunting. And maintaining one can be even more challenging.

To give yourself the best shot at sticking with it, pick a consistent time. This may not be a simple task, particularly if you have unpredictable work hours, are parenting young children or face some other daily obligation not entirely in your control. That said, many people credit their meditation practice with helping to manage their erratic schedules, Ernst said.

“Try not to overthink it,” said Teddi Dean, head of mindfulness and movement at Modern Elder Academy, a midlife wisdom school in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Baja, Mexico. “Do it like you do anything else. You get in the shower, you wash your body – you do all these hygienic things to your outer body, but how is your inner hygiene?”

Our fast-paced world doesn’t help. Dean said the mind may ask this

question about taking the time to meditate: “How dare I when the world is on fire?”

“But the world would be a very different place,” he added, “if everyone took the time and space to just stop and sit and learn that they can work with their minds and tend to the unfinished business of their hearts.”

**A designated space can help**

Next, pick a dedicated space. Ernst meditates on a cushion in a designated room in her house, sometimes opening a sliding door to let in outdoor nature sounds.

Some people sit on a chair to meditate, or on a folded blanket. Practicing near an altar – a table or shelf adorned with meaningful objects such as candles, stones, pictures and plants – also is common.

Choose a length of time. There’s no uniform rule here. If you’ve never meditated and are nervous about being able to follow through, try starting with between five and 15 minutes. Many meditation teachers, however, advise at least 20 minutes.

“We all have 20 minutes to spare, and if you don’t, get up a little earlier,” Dean said. “Morning time is really wonderful because you’re not just going out in the world unaware of your inner landscape and what you’re bringing into the day.”

Mind chatter will happen, and that’s OK

If you choose to sit in silence, be prepared for beliefs, opinions, observations and other mind-filling chatter to appear. It’s all entirely normal.

“A lot of people think that they should somehow shut off their thoughts,” said Ernst. “And when they encounter the busy mind, they think there’s something wrong with that. Instead, notice the busy mind but learn to let it run in the background. In the foreground, pay attention to what’s present – the breath, the body, what’s here and now.”

Guided meditations, either in person or streamed can be especially helpful for those wrestling with anxiety and restlessness. Many apps and YouTube have free content for beginners. They can help you steer away from the external environment and excessive mental chatter, and bring awareness to your internal state.

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Once that happens, whether you're in a solo or group setting, the energy within the mind and body begins to settle," Ernst said. "There's a sinking down and a letting go. And so we have a more complete awareness of ourselves and the world around us. We begin to come into authentic presence."

**"There's a sinking down and a letting go. And so we have a more complete awareness of ourselves and the world around us. We begin to come into authentic presence."**

**Lisa Ernst**

Founder of One Dharma Nashville in Tennessee

**Get a handle on your self-critical thoughts**

For Dean, who has dealt with self-deprecation since childhood, that authentic presence means he has learned to put some distance between himself and his highly critical, judgmental thoughts.

"I just do not believe them the way I used to," he said, "and that's where the liberation lies."

If you find it difficult to establish a meditation practice, be gentle with yourself.

Give it some time.

Dean suggests one year. "This isn't like the gym, where it's a 30-day challenge," he said. "It is an incremental process. It's an attunement of our own patience in a world where our attention is always being challenged."

Dean recommended thinking about the practice in practical terms. We typically don't judge how we perform everyday activities such as brushing our teeth, for instance: "It's not about, 'Oh my God, I brushed my teeth and I really nailed it today!' We just do it. The same approach should be taken with our meditation practice. As you go through your day, you will be more awake and aware and content, and more aligned with your basic goodness."

Dreyer Leon puts it this way: "For a lot of us, the scariest place in our lives is between our ears. When we can get some perspective and reduce identification with whatever thought stream our mind happens to be spewing out at the moment, we have a new opportunity – the capacity to see choices where we didn't have choices before."

**The struggle is real sometimes**

That doesn't mean there won't be days where taking time to meditate feels like a struggle. That happens to most everyone.

"There's a little voice sometimes that says, 'I don't feel like meditating today,' and I say, 'Yeah, I hear you,' and then I go meditate anyway," Ernst said.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there is no "right" way to meditate, emphasized Susan Ruth, a filmmaker based in Santa Monica, California.

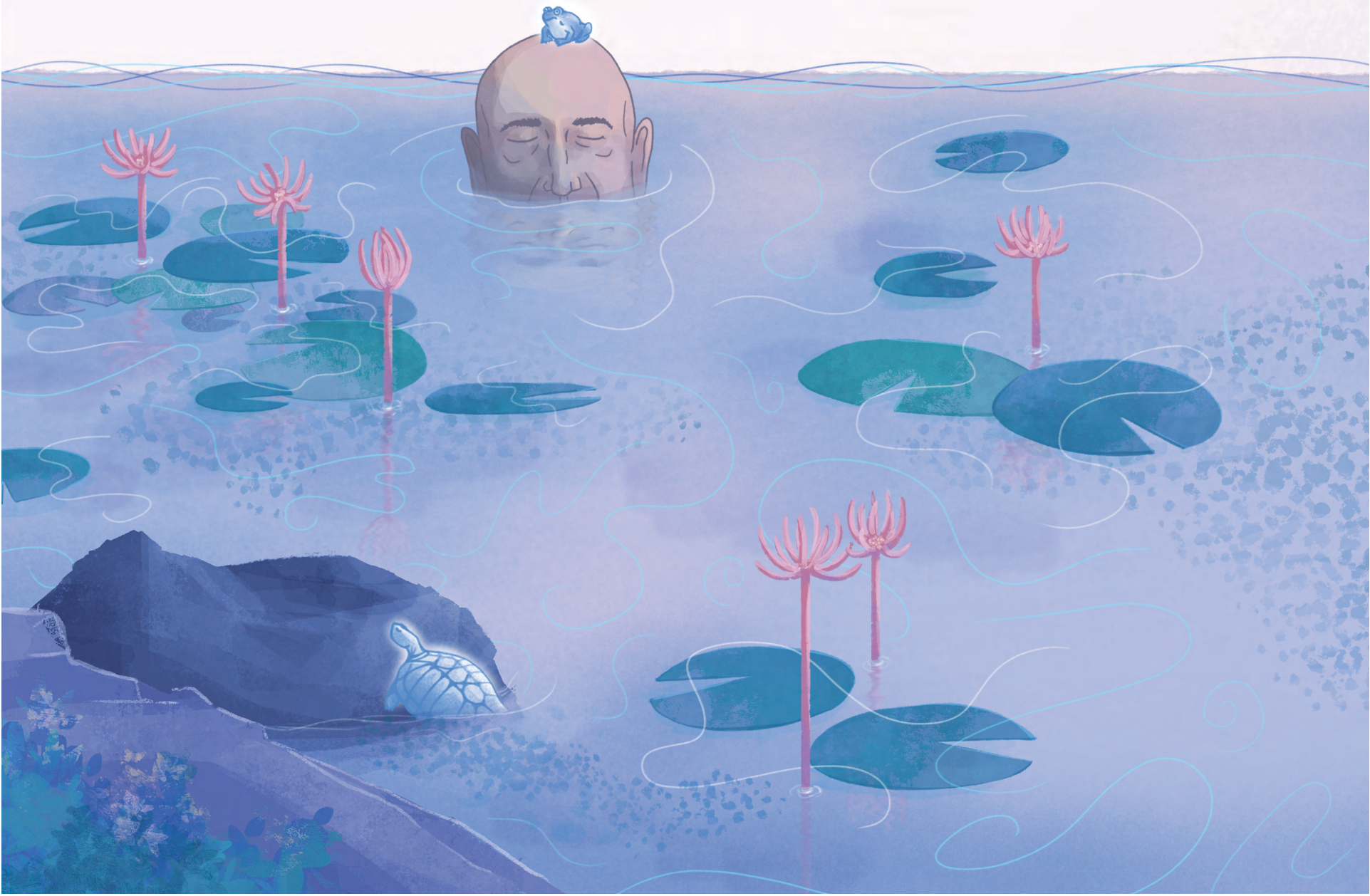
"Expectations kill everything," she said. "I think it's dangerous – and unethical – to tell people there's a right or wrong way to meditate. There is no absolute on how to be 'zen' or how to find inner peace. I know people make jillions of dollars on making us think they have the secret sauce to inner peace, but meditation is such a deeply personal thing."

While Ruth mixes up where and how she meditates, she tends mostly to lie on her back and, when words or numbers or faces appear in her thoughts, ask, "What do you want me to know?"

"I enjoy the practice of it, both in the literal sense – it's something to practice – and in the metaphorical sense – the 'practice' sometimes feels like work but it's great when the work blossoms into results," she said.

And if you wind up dropping your practice? You're not alone.

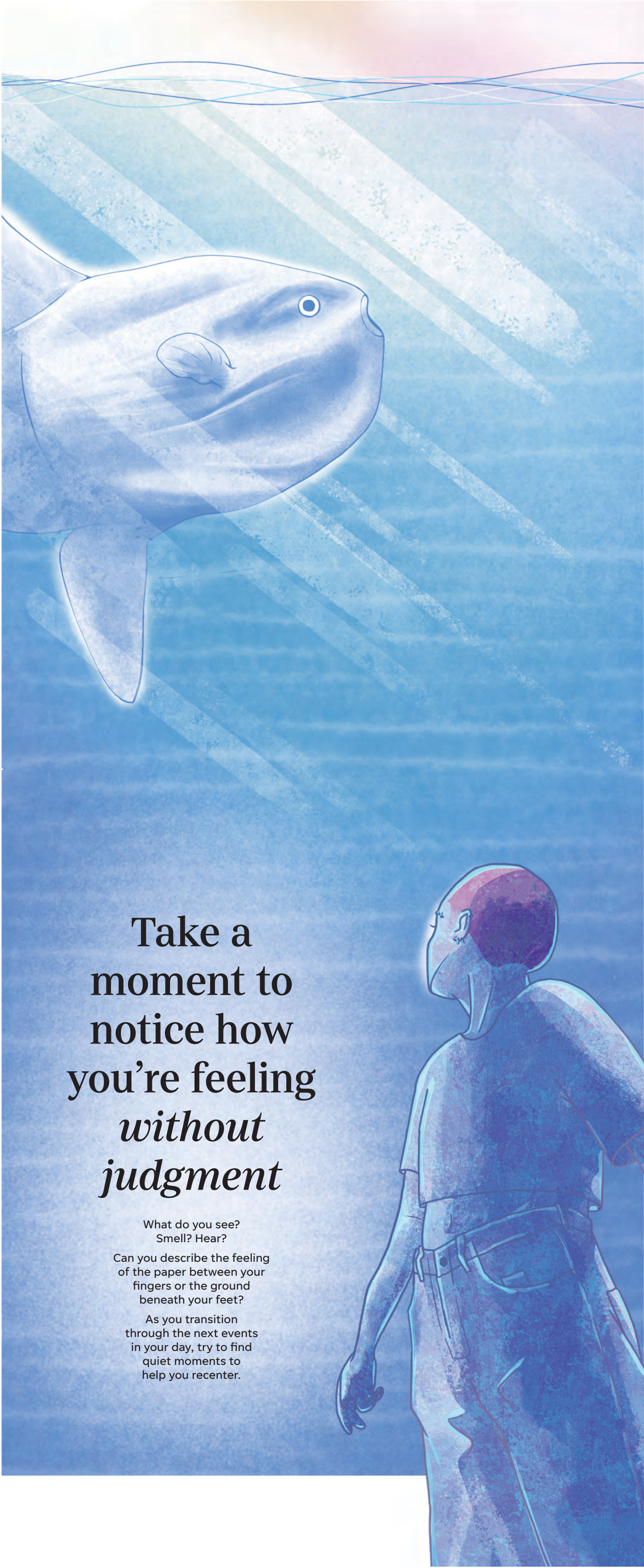
"It's not about being perfect," Ernst said. "The important thing is to recognize you can start again and again and again."





**TIP: If you are feeling very overwhelmed**

Running cold water over your hands or placing an ice pack against the back of your neck could help.



Take a  
moment to  
notice how  
you’re feeling  
*without*  
*judgment*

What do you see?  
Smell? Hear?  
Can you describe the feeling  
of the paper between your  
fingers or the ground  
beneath your feet?  
As you transition  
through the next events  
in your day, try to find  
quiet moments to  
help you recenter.