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been more than two years since a global pandemic began changing the narrative for people around the world. For some, the storylines produced by COVID-19 offered a chance to reimagine life and its possibilities. For others, it's an ongoing struggle to put past, present and future into context.

And that, says Dr. Ann Moris, the founder and owner of Transformative Healthcare Solutions, has many people feeling anxious. And lost. And angry.

According to a recent City University of New York study, nearly 10 percent of all Americans suffer from depression, a rate that's doubled among teens. A Mental Health America study, meanwhile, estimated that 1 in 5 adults in the United States are dealing with some form of mental illness.

Asked if those figures resonate with her and the nearly 100 licensed psychologists that serve clients through Transformative Healthcare Solutions' five Florida locations (from Jacksonville to Fort Lauderdale) and beyond, Moris doesn't hesitate. If anything, she says, the numbers are understated.

"Think about what we've experienced," says the forensically trained clinical psychologist. "People were isolated. There were financial stresses. People lost their jobs. Children were taught remotely. High schoolers missed prom and graduation. We couldn't travel. We couldn't dine out at restaurants. All of the things we enjoyed in the course of our day-to-day lives, things we took for granted, were suddenly gone for a time. And much of it was beyond our control.

"That can have a dramatic effect on humans. What happens when we're cornered? What happens when you feel like you don't have choices? People start to have knee-jerk reactions when you pin them up against the wall

“I knew that I wanted to be responsible for myself. I learned early that having someone else responsible for you means that you have fewer options. I didn’t want that. I wanted to have choices; I wanted to be the one making the decisions.”

and tell them that they can’t make decisions for their children or themselves.

“Suddenly, all these buttons are being pushed. Every individual responds in a different way. But there’s no question that people everywhere are having a reaction.”

That Monis has emerged as one of her industry’s leading and most respected voices in such a relatively brief span of time is a story in and of itself.

When she launched Mental Health Center of Florida nearly a decade ago, Monis was drowning in student loan debt and driving an old Nissan Murano that her grandmother helped her purchase just so she had wheels.

Today, the mother of two sons (ages 5 and 7) leads Florida’s largest private provider of behavioral health care services—a nationally renowned business with an emphasis on assisted living/nursing facility residents, at-risk youth and in-office or telehealth outpatient care (which has dramatically spiked since COVID-19). The company now operates as Transformative Healthcare Solutions (ths.health), which encompasses expansion outside of Florida and into Georgia and South Carolina.

Along the way, she’s dealt with her share of old-boys-club notions about women and business. But Monis understands better than anyone that, for perceptions to change, some buttons need to be pushed.

LEARNING BY EXAMPLE

Little about Monis’ family history foreshadowed the career she ultimately would embrace, especially when it comes to her higher education journey—one that includes a postgraduate degree from Harvard Business

School. Her mother finished high school; her father never made it past eighth grade.

But there were episodes and influences that suggested Monis was destined to make her own breaks. Her parents met while serving in the Israeli Air Force; they soon married and worked together at a café her father owned in Tel Aviv. But by the time Monis turned 5, the relationship was over. Her father stayed in Tel Aviv—and, for a few years, Monis spent much of her time there while her mom settled in South Florida.

At age 9, Monis left Israel to live with her mom in Miami.

“For a time, I glorified those years in Israel,” she recalls. “My father had a nice house on the ocean, and I had a very comfortable life. But I think being a product of divorce in the 1980s in that male-dominated society where women weren’t supposed to be divorced—where the man basically owned you—had an impact.

“When I came to America [for good, although she did spend some summers in Tel Aviv visiting her father], I watched how my mom struggled. She waited tables, she tended bar, she was a secretary—my mom did anything and everything she could to [support herself and Monis]. I knew I had to be successful. In college, I wasn’t going to parties every weekend—I worked tables at a Mexican restaurant, I tended bar, I tutored students in math and English. I had to solve this financial problem for my family; my mom couldn’t keep working [so hard].

“I also knew that I wanted to be responsible for myself. I learned early that having someone else responsible for you means that you have fewer options. I didn’t want



that. I wanted to have choices; I wanted to be the one making the decisions.”

FORKS IN THE ROAD

It's not difficult, given her incisive mind and talent for well-reasoned persuasion, to envision Monis stating her case before the court. Indeed, she attended St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens intent on becoming a lawyer. But a conversation with the owner of a criminal defense firm in Naples changed all that.

“I was doing an internship there, and I remember asking the owner one day if he loved his job,” says Monis, who earned her Master of Business Administration (MBA) at St. Thomas. “He looked at me and said, ‘Run.’” He explained that clients aren't happy unless you're winning for them, that the arguing was relentless, and people were ungrateful. I realized he was probably right; it wasn't for me.

“And then it hit me. It wasn't the case law; it wasn't arguing a case. The thing I loved about law school was the forensic sector. It was the psychology of criminal defense that appealed to me. So, I went back to the drawing board and applied to the only school in Florida that offered a doctorate in forensic psychology [Albizu University in Miami; Monis' doctorate is in clinical psychology]. It took me another 2½ years, but I knew I'd found my calling.”

At the time, Monis had set her sights on working with the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit. But during the recruiting process, two things deterred her. For starters, the field agent seemed more interested in her MBA and her language skills (Monis speaks Hebrew, Spanish and English) than anything to do with psychology. More important, she'd have to leave South Florida; new agents, she was told, can't stay in the city where they're living because that place is considered compromised.

A moment of altruism finally set the wheels of her career in full motion. Monis was a supervised resident in training during the latter stage of her doctorate. She'd been working with a patient whose daughter was using drugs; the Florida Department of Children and Families was involved and looking into removing the woman's children. The patient was heartbroken over possibly losing her grandchildren and pleaded for Monis to help.

Monis took the case pro bono and, under the eye of her supervisor, began communicating with FDCF. The agency was so impressed with Monis' passion, professionalism and thoroughness that, after earning her license as a clinical psychologist, she became credentialed as an approved provider for the nonprofit ChildNet (selected by FDCF to manage services and support for abused, abandoned and

neglected children in Broward and Palm Beach counties). ChildNet, in turn, began sending her cases.

"I started to build this tiny niche," says the Fort Lauderdale resident. "The pay was peanuts, but the experience was invaluable. And I loved the work. If you want to help children and families, this is the place where you wanted to be."

However, she couldn't do it alone. So, Monis posted ads on Craigslist for people to help with ChildNet cases under her credentialing.

Her business had taken its initial steps. But another path was about to reveal itself.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

In the early 2010s, Monis was working out of an office space owned by a clinician (not a psychologist) whose small team worked with assisted living facilities and nursing homes. Monis complemented her agency work by seeing some of the elderly patients and providing mental health services for depression, anxiety and trauma.

The business owner, who was planning to retire, called her into his office one day and asked if she wanted to buy the practice.

By 2013, Monis had purchased the business and launched Mental Health Center of Florida, combining the

elder-care work with her government agency cases. But along the way, she gained more than just a new company and additional employees.

"I didn't have two pennies to scrape together at the time," Monis says. "But he said he'd finance it for me, and that started a contract negotiation. What I [soon learned] was that he was trying to sell me a company that wasn't worth anywhere near [the asking price]—which is why he picked the new girl in the office to pitch it to."

A lawyer with whom Monis was familiar helped her to review the contract and the business. The problem was that the company needed to be restructured; billing had been set up incorrectly, leading to potential federal violations. After arriving at a number that was still "a gross overpayment," Monis went ahead with the purchase.

"I understood that I needed to make a move [in order to grow her practice]," Monis says. "My heart was still in helping children and families, but serving the elderly population provided a great marriage. We were treating vulnerable

populations, young and old. It was the full spectrum. Clinically, I was so excited about where we were going.

"Administratively? Operationally? I was in absolute panic mode. It was a circus."

And with good reason. The business she'd purchased was stuck in the 20th century. Billing was done by hand. Accountants were scribbling payments into ledgers. Clinicians were handwriting sloppy notes and slapping them into folders. Nothing had been digitized.

Monis changed everything. She transitioned the business to electronic records. She hired a health care attorney (who's still with the company). She hired a billing company (also still with the company).

"Most of the existing staff left; the change was too overwhelming for them," Monis says. "In the end, I could've just started a business like this on my own. It wasn't worth the money I paid.

"But it was worth the experience and the knowledge that it gave me to understand the system—and build upon it."

Today, a business that started with a staff of seven now employs approximately 100 people in three states. In addition,

Transformative Health-care Solutions serves more than 350 nursing homes/assisted living facilities.

ANTIQUATED ANTICS

Monis encountered more than questionable

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business practices during dealings with the owner who sold her the company. She recalls him referencing her physique and making lewd comments in general that made the women in the office uncomfortable.

But not all the sexism she's experienced has been so crude and overt.

"Where I've encountered discrimination hasn't been in the psychology world—it was in MBA school, it was being a business owner, and there was even some of it in my Harvard Business School class. We had a graduating group of 165 CEOs; only 25 were women.

"It's marginalization. Your voice, your opinion is not as important—but, hey, you're pretty, so you can participate. In some ways, it gives you a secret weapon, because you're like, 'Sure, you're right, what do I know?' And while they're busy thinking about something else, you do what you need to do [and become successful]. Other times, you're not even invited to the table because you're a woman and, obviously, you're not that smart."

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In the early days of running her business, Monis dealt with social and networking situations that often ended “a certain way,” she says.

“It was like, ‘If you do this for me, I’ll do this for you.’ I’m really good at my job,” she recalls thinking. “We don’t have to have this kind of conversation at all.”

Monis would ask other people in the company to represent her at such functions. She feels it created an early perception in business circles that she was better than everyone else. But just the opposite, she says.

“I felt like I’d been pigeon-holed into a situation where I needed to avoid certain situations because they made me so uncomfortable,” she notes. “Age has helped with that. I’m taken more seriously now. But I do think [despite her experience and success] some people still look at me with surprise.

“I’m a minority, a female CEO who bootstrapped a business, started it on her own—and grew it to be the largest private mental health company in Florida.

“I’m not sure you close your eyes and envision me.”

THE BIG PICTURE

In addition to its forensic assessment services and work with the elderly population, Transformative Healthcare Solutions offers patients access to psychologists with expertise in specific areas—including trauma-informed care, anger management, marriage therapy, play therapy (for younger clients) and more.

The company’s evolution over the past nine-plus years has allowed Monis to take more of a 30,000-foot view of her business. It’s also the biggest reason why she spent three years participating in the Harvard Business School owner/president manager program (part of which required CEOs to live in dorms during one-month stints in Boston).

“It’s important for me to not take for granted everything that we have—and instead take the new technology that’s available, and the new science behind what we can be doing and improve our business processes,” Monis says. “I went back to learn how else I could lead [her team]. What new ideas are there in the industry that may-

be I’m not using because my MBA is 20 years old?”

“Some of the things that are most helpful didn’t come from the classroom. They came from having this amazing group exchange with CEOs who experienced a similar situation. How did you handle it? It’s wonderful to have that kind of sounding board.”

Solidifying the foundation is doubly important given the need for mental health services—and mental health professionals—in Florida and beyond. Monis offers a glimpse behind the curtain at the many challenges facing the industry (like battles with insurance companies, telehealth versus in-office visits, doctors seeking higher payment), but in the end it’s about the overwhelming number of people who’ve been triggered in recent years.

“We have a resurgence of grief and bereavement that’s unprecedented,” Monis says. “Friends or family who died, people who loved ones couldn’t even see in the end due to COVID-19. That was especially difficult among the elderly population [Note: Florida has the second-largest 65-and-over population in the nation].

“There’s also [depression, anxiety and social anxiety] that has gone undiagnosed. Mostly, life is sort of fine, right? But then you add something that is extremely stressful that exacerbates the situation—like isolation, financial distress, grief or loss.

“Is this the chicken or the egg? Are people having a dysfunctional reaction? Or were they always suffering from something that just went a little bit unnoticed? Suddenly, it’s all too much.”

Given the myriad of issues that can stir someone’s mental health—not to mention the wiring that’s unique to each of us—there’s no one answer when it comes easing inner angst. Still, Monis knows from experience that it doesn’t hurt to start small.

“Giving someone something to look forward to works for all ages—it works for 5-year-olds, 15-years-olds, your aging parents. Everyone wants to know that there’s a silver lining, something exciting that’s on the horizon. Plan something fun.

“Most importantly, if you think you need help, seek it.”