Tips for Community Members
COVID-19: Coping as the Pandemic Continues

As the COVID-19 pandemic moves towards its peak in the United States, stress and anxiety continue to build – justifiably. A lot of people are already sick with the virus, and many more will become ill in the coming weeks. Some will die, and their loved ones may not be able to observe the funeral rituals that normally provide some small level of comfort. Those on the frontlines as medical professionals or other essential workers are valiantly meeting their professional commitments at the risk of their own health. Even those who will be spared direct exposure to the Coronavirus are having their lives drastically changed by the social distancing and stay-at-home orders that may extend for multiple weeks more, with no predictable end in sight. How can we all deal with the uncertainty about these unprecedented circumstances so we can keep functioning as well as possible?

Of course there are no easy answers to that question, but it may help to think about why this situation feels so different from past challenges we've all lived through. We still may be able to draw on lessons we've learned from those earlier experiences, but we need to adapt the lessons to this unique time.

Blurring the Lines of Disaster Reactions

In the disaster mental health field, we recognize a typical pattern of survivor reactions over time. To be sure, not everyone follows this pattern, but with more traditional disasters, here's what we often see.

For events that are predictable, there's a **warning period** when people have been notified that a disaster is likely to occur so they need to take certain actions to prepare for or avoid the threat. Some people take these warnings seriously while others go into a state of denial that they need to do anything. Still, just receiving a

warning usually generates some level of anxiety because it forces us to acknowledge there's potential danger on the horizon.

Then during the **impact period** as the disaster unfolds, people are largely focused on survival. They're worried about health and safety for themselves and the people around them, and they're anxious about the people they're separated from. First responders and those responsible for protecting others are in high gear during this time, doing the work they've trained so hard for and often willingly putting themselves in harm's way to take care of others in their community.

The **post-impact period** can be broken down into different phases. Sometimes, but not always, there's a **honeymoon phase** where people are just grateful that they survived the disaster. There can be a lot of community spirit during this time as people vow to help each other out and outside support is pouring in. While this optimism is sincere, it usually doesn't last very long. Once people start to recognize the full extent of their losses and how difficult the road to recovery will be, they often enter a **disillusionment phase**. This can be thought of as a kind of reality check. Community members may feel abandoned by the media, the public, and the aid agencies that had previously been present. This may be the lowest emotional point for survivors as they come to terms with the permanent impact of the disaster, recognizing and accepting what they've lost. Finally, there's a **reconstruction phase** as community members take back control over their own recovery, working towards whatever they must do to try to create a "new normal" while accepting that things will never be the same as before the disaster struck.

So how does this apply to COVID-19? The way the pandemic shapes daily life will differ for every individual, but arguably **someone could experience all of these reactions simultaneously rather than spread out over time** since there's no clear before/during/after divide to the outbreak:

- The disease will continue to spread for an unpredictable length of time, so we all are living in a perpetual warning phase where we're bracing for what's ahead. (Hopefully at this point no one is continuing to deny the reality of the threat!) That's extremely stressful, causing dread that can be hard to control as the troubling news keeps spreading.
- Those who have been directly affected as patients or loved ones of patients, or as healthcare professionals or others working to respond to the outbreak, are deeply immersed in the impact period. Especially for responders, those demands will last for an unpredictable period of time, and certainly far longer than the usual acute needs during a more traditional disaster. That places tremendous physical and emotional pressure on these helpers.
- No one is truly in a post-impact phase yet, but some of the reactions that often emerge then may apply at least intermittently to our current state. For

example, we may have felt a bit of a honeymoon phase as we adapted to working or studying from home, but as the novelty has worn off, some disillusionment has likely crept in as we grasp the full impact of the limitations on actions we previously took for granted. Or we may feel a sense of purpose and connection to our community if we volunteer to deliver meals to housebound seniors or we sew a batch of face masks for the local hospital staff, but that's likely tempered by frustration that we can't do more to help. Many people feel helpless and out of control right now, and that's very uncomfortable for most of us.

That mashup of responses may be part of why stress levels are so high right now: We're not able to follow the usual sequence from one type of reaction to the next, but are experiencing all of them at once, so it's easy to feel overloaded. We're grieving what we've already lost, while also anticipating further losses in the future. That's different than typical disasters when we know the damage toll as soon as the event is over. So what can we do to manage our emotions through this protracted crisis?

Table the "New Normal" and Accept the "Now"

As much as everyone looks forward to the time when the situation has stabilized and we reach the "new normal" that's the ultimate goal of the reconstruction phase, that's simply not where most of us are at this point. While the outbreak continues and official guidance and policies keep changing, it's healthier to focus on how to maintain ongoing adaptability than to pine for some stable endpoint that's not yet achievable. Some practices that might help you do that:

Find things to reward yourself with now, not in the future.
Sure, it's nice to think about how great it will be to finally go back to your favorite restaurant or to resume planning the vacation that's currently on hold, but we also need things to enjoy while we're living in these limited circumstances so we're not just focused on something we eventually hope to be able to do again. So find something fun that you can do today: Experiment in the kitchen until you perfect your favorite dish from that restaurant. Take an online lesson in dancing, sketching, or some other skill you've always wanted to acquire. Pick up the instrument you haven't touched in years and see if you still remember how to play it. Take a walk and appreciate the signs of spring arriving. As with all self-care practices, it doesn't matter what enjoyable activities you do, so long as you do something to give your spirits a lift every day.

Be mindful and appreciative of the positive things you do still have.
It's very easy to slip into focusing on the difficult parts of life during the outbreak, so try to shift gears and recognize what you've still got going in your favor. Maybe being cooped up at home with your kids or your partner is driving you a little nuts, but aren't you glad you have them in your life? Everyone who still has a paying job can be grateful for that, even if it's challenging to work effectively right now. Maybe this whole experience had made you realize you want to change fields or go back to school once things stabilize, so you can value being able to use this time to make plans. Or you could just appreciate the fact that all of this is happening during a time when we have technology that allows us to stay in contact with each other. Looking at the bright side in this way does not mean you're ignoring the dark side, it just means finding the positives that do exist.

Give yourself permission to mourn the losses.
Speaking of the dark side, it's important to let yourself recognize and grieve over what you're missing out on. That's especially true for irreplaceable experiences, like celebrating family milestones together, or attending or participating in graduation ceremonies. Of course those missed experiences aren't the same as the death of a loved one, but they're still legitimate losses that deserve to be validated and grieved – especially for children, adolescents, and young adults who don't have the life experience to put these disappointments in context. You may be able to create alternative rituals or ceremonies to mark some of these missed occasions, but we shouldn't downplay their significance.

And Finally...

Let's all remember to give thanks to those essential workers who are keeping life functioning for everyone – not just the healthcare professionals and first responders we all rely on, but the IT people who are keeping us connected to each other, and the unrecognized heroes who are keeping the grocery stores and gas stations running. And don't forget to give yourself credit for whatever you're doing to keep yourself, your family, and your community healthy through our unsettled "now."

To Summarize:

1) Acknowledge that we're all experiencing a lot of different types of stress simultaneously, including uncertainty and dread about what's still to come.
2) Accept that things are going to continue to change for some time, and focus on staying adaptable.
3) Find things you can enjoy and appreciate every day, rather than just waiting for happiness at the end of the outbreak.
4) Recognize the impact of missed experiences and other ways the situation is affecting you and your family, and don't downplay that impact as insignificant in the greater scheme of the pandemic.
5) Remember to thank the essential workers, and to give yourself credit for everything you're doing to get through this unprecedented time.

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