



Caring for One's Self During the COVID-19 Crisis

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Recent weeks have seen our nation and world completely transformed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many in our nation, we have not experienced a disaster of this magnitude in our lifetimes. It has challenged us to change how we are living in dramatic ways, with no predictable end in sight. It has also brought with it waves of emotion - everything from fear, to sadness, or frustration, anger and grief.

The definition of a disaster is “a sudden event, such as an accident or a natural catastrophe, that causes great damage or loss of life”. (Merriam-Webster, 2020) Some disasters are more predictable than others. For instance, hurricanes, volcanoes, and even some epidemics offer some signs of warning. Other less predictable disasters are earthquakes, wildfires, or acts of terrorism.

What makes a pandemic? A pandemic refers to a global epidemic-one that has spread over several countries and continents after affecting a large number of people. A pandemic is when there is an outbreak that affects much of the world.

Some examples of pandemics include Black Death (1346-1353), the Cholera Pandemic (1852-1860), the flu pandemics (1889, and 1918, 1968), and the Asian Flu (1956-1958). More recently, at its peak- 2005-2012, the HIV/AIDS pandemic occurred, and now the COVID-19.

Disasters disrupt the routines of life and ones' sense of security. Among the many challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presents are a combination of uncertainty about the cause, treatment, and cure for the disease, combined with the mandate to

“physically distance” and to isolate. Often in a time of crisis, what helps us to heal individually and collectively, is to come together. In this crisis, we cannot do that.

Psychological responses to disasters/pandemics:

It is common to have strong emotional reactions during such an unprecedented experience. It is important to realize that there is no right or wrong way to feel, and almost any reaction is normal. Reactions may include intense or unpredictable feelings, changes in thoughts and behaviors, and sensitivity to environmental factors. It is not unusual to experience strain in ones’ interpersonal relationships simply because everyone is on edge and experiencing a great deal of stress. Because of the unknowns related to COVID-19, many feel a heightened sense of fear and anxiety. It is also important to note that these reactions may be immediate, or delayed.

Anxiety/Fear: Many people may experience fears about being in public, leaving home or work, or fear that the situation will continue to get worse.

Hyper-alertness: Some report feeling on edge, or easily startled.

Guilt: Many people express feelings of guilt about not being able to do more to help, yet relief about not being on the frontlines.

Anger: Life has been disrupted, and we no longer feel safe or in control.

Isolation: Again, this mandate keeps us from the support we might normally seek and may result in loneliness and little perspective on how we are doing compared to everyone else. Family and friends may or may not understand our (or their own) reactions.

Numbness: It is easy to feel overwhelmed by both information and change.

Sadness: Life has been changed in innumerable ways.

Physical Reactions:

Having awareness of and understanding of our emotional responses is important in order to develop ways to cope. Remember your reactions are normal.

In some ways, the reactions one has to the pandemic crisis are similar to surviving any trauma. Physical reactions may include nausea, sweating, dizziness, elevated heart rate, headaches, and sleep disturbance.

Cognitive Reactions:

Times like this can be very confusing. The stress may result in impaired thinking, difficulty making decisions, short-term memory problems, intrusive thoughts, poor attention, and forgetfulness.

A Nation's Grief. David Kessler, a grief expert was interviewed recently by the Harvard Business Review. He suggested that as a nation, we are grieving. The world is changed, and while we know it is temporary, it doesn't feel that way. We have lost a sense of normalcy, and an enormous economic toll is occurring. As mentioned, we have lost our ability to physically connect, and we are experiencing "anticipatory grief" about what the future might look like. (Berinato, Harvard Business Review, 3/23/20)

We may be asking ourselves questions such as when will this end? What will the future look like? Will I and my loved ones be able to stay safe and healthy? Our sense of safety has been unquestionably disrupted. In grief, our reactions often fluctuate between denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and eventually, acceptance and/or the gaining of perspective.

Strategies for Self-Care

There are a number of steps that one can take in order to navigate these complex times. Much of it involves cultivating self-awareness. Noticing how you are feeling and identifying what you can do to take care of yourself is important. Some basics are to make sure you are eating, sleeping, and exercising regularly. Create and keep a routine. This foundation can help create a "new normal" which can be comforting.

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Another strategy is to maintain connections. While we are being told to "isolate", many people are finding that they are being more intentional about staying connected with loved ones through technology. Tools such as using Zoom calls, FaceTime, or even a basic phone calls are ways to remain connected.

It is important to interrupt worrying. Much of the time, when we are anxious, we are either worrying about the future (which we may or may not have control over) or ruminating about the past. Both of those experiences pull us away from the present

moment. Pay attention to your thoughts. It may also be important to develop a practice of “mindfulness”. Very simply stated, being “mindful” is being in the moment. There are many meditation practices and/or mindfulness -based stress reduction techniques that one can learn. There are also a number of phone-based apps that one can use to begin to learn these skills, and many are free. (Examples listed at the end of this article.)


On a very basic level, one can also use a number of “grounding” techniques, that are intended to quiet the stress response in our body. A very simple one is to check your breath. When we are anxious or distressed, we tend to breathe very shallowly which also contributes to increased heart rate, elevated cortisol levels and/or a surge of adrenaline. Take two or three deep breaths, try to focus on the present moment, and be intentional about doing so regularly.

Another strategy is to notice the wins, or “meaningful” experiences. Are there any silver linings that you have discovered, despite the difficulties? Is there anything that you have discovered in this experience that you may want to continue after the pandemic is over? Try to continue to do things that you enjoy.

Limit your exposure to the news. Staying informed is important, but taking breaks from “screen time”, the phones, the TV, the news -can help us to pace ourselves through the constant barrage of information.

Finally, it is important to remember as human beings, that we are resilient. “Resilience” is the ability to “bounce back”. While the road to resilience may be bumpy, resilience involves thoughts, behaviors, and actions that can be learned and developed to help us navigate the course through this time. It allows us to make realistic plans and to carry them out. The key is to identify ways that are likely to work well for you as part of your own personal strategy for fostering resilience.

Seek professional help if you notice persistent feelings of distress or hopelessness and you feel like you are barely able to get through your daily responsibilities and activities. Many mental health professionals are now available through “virtual visits”, to support people in getting help while also staying safe.



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The stress of disasters can actually bring people together. Acute and shared stress can lead to more cooperative behaviors. Examples such as neighbors helping neighbors, and many acts of kindness are occurring despite the difficulty. Throughout history,

people have bonded through difficulty and displayed kindness, heroism and used social connection as a way to survive and thrive.

Be gentle with yourself and give yourself (and others) the grace to be human. Allow yourself to be vulnerable and experience a range of thoughts and feelings, and remember you are resilient.

In time, there will be insights, perspectives, and lessons learned. Healing will take time, but remembering we are all in this together can be helpful. Please take care of yourselves during these challenging times.

Resources for meditation - Apps for phones/IPads

Headspace
Insight Timer
Ten Percent Happier
Aura: Meditation and Sleep
The Mindfulness App
Calm
Zen: Meditation and Sleep
Stop, Breathe & Think Kids
Unplug Meditation

Biography

Susan has been an oncology social worker for thirty-five years and specializes in the development and provision of psychosocial support services for people with cancer and their loved ones. She is the Director of Patient & Family Services for the Knight Cancer Institute at OHSU which includes a team of adult oncology social workers and coordinates wellness offerings of yoga, mindfulness-based stress reduction, exercise, massage, and retreats for people with cancer.

Previously, she directed the cancer counseling program at Cancer Care Resources (a program of the NW Cancer Specialists), and also directed the Palliative Care Program at Hospice and Palliative Care of Washington County.

She has spoken and written extensively about the impact of cancer on individuals and families, and on palliative and end of life care. Is a Senior Scholar for the Center for Ethics at OHSU. Is a past-president of the Association of Oncology Social Work.