

The Trauma of COVID-19

Understanding and Coping With Pandemic Trauma

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, people around the world are facing uncertainty and upheaval. Many of us are feeling anxious about many facets of life. Among other things, we may be:

- Worried about loved ones contracting the virus (or catching it ourselves)
- Wondering how secure our jobs and finances are and whether (or when) things will return to normal
- Feeling disconnected and cut off from people we love
- Feeling unsettled by watching the community and financial disruption
- Struggling to cope with the restrictions of isolation or the complicated juggle of working from home and caring for children and family members

There's a lot to feel anxious and sad about right now. This pandemic is a global crisis that is affecting *all* of us, both individually and collectively.

An experience is generally considered to be “traumatic” when it overwhelms our normal abilities to cope and shatters our sense of being safe and in control. During this pandemic most of us will—at times—feel overwhelmed, unsafe, and helpless to control the course of events. As such, it's fair to say that most of us will experience some degree of trauma as a result. These events are impacting us emotionally and personally. That is natural and normal.

So where does that leave us?

When we don't know what may happen next and we don't know how to control it, the most helpful thing we can do is focus on controlling our own reactions and making decisions and doing things that will help us cope well.

Even while the pandemic continues, there are many things that we can do now to help ourselves cope with the stress and trauma. Research suggests that these are some of the most effective things we can do.

1. Expect to experience some intense and difficult feelings

We should expect to feel some complicated and intense feelings related to these events—both now and in the future. During this time, we may experience more (and more intense) feelings of stress, distress, depression, irritability, and feelings of hopelessness, panic, anxiety, and grief. So, just as you are probably monitoring the global news, *monitor yourself*.

Be attuned and observe what you're feeling and thinking. What signs of stress are you showing? Where are your limits, and how close to them are you? What do you need in this moment? Knowing your typical early warning signs of stress and checking in regularly with yourself will help you decide what you need to do in order to best prevent and address the traumatic impact of this pandemic. This will go a long way towards making sure you don't feel too overwhelmed and helpless or take your anxiety and frustration out on others.

2. Develop a plan for responding to mental health needs

Because of the strain we are all under it's important that we support ourselves and others during this time. It is important to have a plan for responding to your mental health needs, just as you likely have a plan for taking care of your medical needs. Where should you start? With this next point...

3. Create some structure for yourself

When the world feels unpredictable and frightening, one of the best things you can do to help yourself cope is to make your own life more predictable. This means that if many of your normal routines have changed, one of the best things you can do is to create some structure for yourself. Divide up the day and schedule it. Begin to organize your time around things you *can* influence and control.

4. Stay connected with people who are important to you

Stay connected! Even if we need to be staying far apart from other people physically, we can still get creative about how we connect. During times of intense stress and physical isolation, it's even *more* important that we are connecting with loved ones. Use technology and stay in touch.

5. Get back to basics

When all else fails, remember the basics. These basics support our body and brain in coping effectively, regulating stress, improving mood, processing information, and making good decisions:

- ✓ **Get enough sleep** (yes, that will probably mean not reading the news at night and deliberately finding ways to calm down in the evening).
- ✓ **Get some exercise every day.** Even if you have to get creative, move your body! Exercising will help use up some of the many stress chemicals your body is producing and help you feel calmer and less helpless.
- ✓ **Eat healthy food.** The food (and drink) you put into your body fuels you. If you put in poor quality fuel, or the wrong type, your body and brain cannot respond and work as effectively.
- ✓ **Aim for balance.** When you're planning your structure and your schedule, aim for balance in your day. Are you using your body as well as your mind? Do you have time for some play and rest as well as work?

6. Create a coping toolkit

You probably already have a first aid kit somewhere in your house. Now it's time to create a coping toolkit. Put together a list or collection of activities and objects that help you feel calm, safe, grounded, and joyful. Answering these questions may help you assemble this toolkit.

- What brings me pleasure? What do I enjoy doing, just because I love it?
- What do I do to play?

- What helps me feel peaceful and rested? What helps me calm down when I'm feeling really tense? What movements help ground me and connect me to my body? [Expert tip, deep breathing exercises are *really* good at helping here.]
- What helps me connect to sources of meaning, purpose, perspective, and hope?

7. Stop reading and watching the NEWS

Sure, we all need to stay informed at some level. However, research is clear that the more exposure you have to the media around this pandemic the more likely you are to feel traumatized and unsafe. So put limits on how much news you consume. And “change the channel” in the evenings (not just on the TV, but in your brain). Don't talk about COVID-19 too late in the evening, and read, watch, or do something else that has nothing to do with the pandemic before you try to sleep.

8. Stay away from dangerous coping mechanisms

When we're stressed, we all do things to try to help ourselves cope. Some of the coping strategies we choose are riskier and more harmful than others (take, for example, exercise versus alcohol). This is a good time to limit dangerous coping methods. For example, don't drink too much, take drugs, or stay up all night bingeing on the news or intense television. These things can feel good and fun in the moment, but they are not helping you.

9. Look for silver linings

You know that saying, “every cloud has a silver lining?” Well, on very dark days hearing someone say that phrase can feel super annoying. *However*, there is also truth in that saying. COVID-19 is currently causing unprecedented disruption and difficulty for many of us, but there will be “good moments” in spite of (and sometimes *because of*) this pandemic. Look for those. Name them. Celebrate them. They don't have to outweigh or negate the hard stuff to be valuable.

10. Reach out and ask for help

If you feel desperate, unsafe, extremely sad or upset, out of control, or simply feel that you would benefit from talking with a support professional, reach out and ask for help. Many employers have Staff Support Programs that provide counseling. Many psychologists, doctors, and spiritual advisors are available to provide support by phone or video call. Support is out there.

A closing note...

Remember, the pandemic will subside, and we will create a new rhythm in our lives. In the meantime, be kind to yourself and others. Everyone is stressed and struggling to concentrate and stay grounded. Treat yourself and others gently.