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Coping with Covid

The key to managing difficult emotions in uncertain times

BY MICHELLE KELLEY, LCSW

Many of us have a default way of dealing with intense emotions which are often associated with stressful times. Living through a pandemic definitely qualifies as a stressful time. Unless you are over 102 years of age, you have not experienced a pandemic such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Consider the unforeseen changes we have had to adjust to in the last few months: quarantine, teleworking, unemployment, managing health concerns, distance learning, and wearing masks. In the beginning of the “stay-at-home order,” there was much adjustment, fear, and uncertainty. Slowly, many of us have had to reconfigure our lives to adjust to the new normal.

Dealing with COVID-19 has proven to be stressful for many people. Anxiety and fear can cause strong emotions in adults

and children leading to changes in sleep or eating patterns, worsening of chronic physical and mental health problems, self-medicating through tobacco, alcohol or other substances, obsessing over our personal health or the health of family, or lashing out at loved ones. Many are facing a mental health fall-out, including stress, depression, insomnia, irritability, anger, fear, boredom, and frustration.

Unfortunately, many of us were forced to withdraw from friends and family due to our concerns over catching or spreading the virus. Many embraced technology such as FaceTime and Zoom to connect with loved ones, but it's not the same as visiting in person. As humans, social connection is a crucial component of our emotional well-being. Social distancing, self-isolation, and travel restrictions have left many with a feeling of sadness. Often, an emotion can be so low-grade that it is difficult to detect. Over a period of time, even a low-grade emotion can have far-reaching effects on our emotional and physical health as well as our relationships.

On the other hand, one of the most difficult challenges is to adjust to the diminished availability of personal, emotional, and physical space. Some find it challenging being confined to their home with family members, even if relations were favorable prior to COVID-19. Most of us had a healthy amount of space built into our relationships through work, school, and other commitments, which is now absent.

How are you coping with these changes?

If you had healthy coping mechanisms before the pandemic, then you may be doing okay by instinctively using techniques that you have successfully used in the past. We tend to fall back to these familiar patterns of behavior when stressed. For example, I focus on sleeping well, exercise, good nutrition, sticking to a routine, and other forms of self-care when experiencing stress. Self-care, both physical and emotional, is a priority for me and I have raised my children to appropriately navigate their life's challenges using healthy coping mechanisms. This is the foundation for building resiliency in ourselves and our children.

However, if you do not cope well with stress or if you have a mental or physical health condition, you may be struggling. There is only so much stress and uncertainty that we are able to sustain.

Dealing with any crisis well requires self-awareness, intentionality, and self-control. We possess the ability to control our thoughts which impact our emotions. I won't say this is easy — many solutions are simple, yet difficult to implement. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common therapy technique which trains the mind to have better control over one's thoughts. Our thoughts lead to our emotions and our emotions affect our behavior.

It is tremendously important to focus on hope, which is a highly contagious emotion that will also spread to those around you. During any crisis we can intentionally focus on something positive in our lives, and we can all find something positive. The Chinese word for crisis means both danger and opportunity — a reminder to look at the situation objectively.

Many parents ask how they can best help their children to cope with uncertainty and fear. Children rely on their parents for both physical and emotional safety. Using a calm voice, reassure your children that you will get through this together. The old saying “more is caught than taught” definitely applies here. Our children watch us closely and if we manifest fear, they are likely feeling fearful.

I have recommended to many parents and children that they stop absorbing so much information about the pandemic. Too much information can be toxic. Also, the understanding that visual cues, which can also be a factor contributing to fear, can be valuable in understanding and coping with your emotions. We are not accustomed to seeing people wear masks wherever we go. Even if you are not consciously concerned, there is a powerful message sent to your subconscious when you take in this imagery (such as a person wearing a mask). This message is one of fear, and fear is a highly contagious emotion.

Understanding and learning how to effectively cope with your emotions will strengthen you, your loved ones, and your community. Together, we will get through this pandemic. ❖

*“It is
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