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SUSTAINING MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

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Table of content:

Introduction

In the past few weeks, we have witnessed a coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and a serious shock to health systems across the globe. Although a certain level of anxiety is quite normal under these extraordinary circumstances, it is important to us, as well as to our community, that we stabilize ourselves and channel our anxiety into precautions for our own and others' safety. With that in mind, we look at some of the psychological effects that can occur as a result of the current pandemic, as well as certain measures that we as individuals can take to preserve our mental health and that of colleagues, friends, and family.

One of the major differences between our experiences of seasonal influenza and coronavirus is that we perceive the first as a virus we generally know well. We know seasonal influenza's diagnostic criteria and symptoms, how it is transmitted, how to treat it, to whom to turn, and what to expect. On the other hand, we currently see the coronavirus as something unknown and threatening, which contributes to a feeling of unpredictability about the whole situation, accompanied by feelings of anxiety, fear, increased alertness, and tension.

What do the terms social distancing, quarantine, and isolation mean?

Non-standard situations such as the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) can endanger the health of many citizens. In many countries around the world, local authorities are taking serious measures to limit and control the spread of this infectious disease. The most successful methods to manage it emphasize the importance of social distancing, as well as quarantine and isolation in rare cases, all three of which can have a negative impact on our mental health. Let's look at what each of these terms means, as they are often mentioned in the media these days:

Social distancing is lessened interaction between people, a restriction on the closeness and frequency of personal contact, with recommendations of 1-2 meters minimum distance between people.

Quarantine involves the physical separation and restriction of movement for people who are well but may have been exposed to a communicable disease (e.g. coronavirus). This is to see if they will become ill. Such separation continues until medical staff can ensure that those people have not developed symptoms of the disease.

Isolation is the physical separation of people who have the virus from those who do not. This usually takes place in a health care facility or your own home (self-isolation), whichever is appropriate.
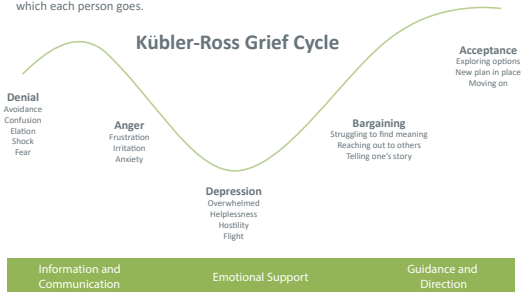
It should be noted that "isolation" and "quarantine", especially "self-isolation" and "self-quarantine" have been used heavily by authorities and the press, not always specifically referring to the potentially ill and confirmed ill, but as a preventative action the general public should take to help stop the spread of the disease.

The psychological aspect

The whole situation with coronavirus is a great and unwanted change for all of us. Very often, this provokes a reaction that goes to two extremes in people. One extreme is overestimation or a so-called disaster when the interpretation of reality goes to worst-case scenarios and outcomes. The other extreme is an underestimation, being indifferent to what is happening and doing absolutely nothing, even engaging in risky behavior unsuitable for the circumstances. From a psychological point of view, when these significant changes occur, there are several stages through which each person goes.

For some these stages are slower, for some faster, until they reach a final acceptance of the current situation, which results in taking appropriate measures. All these phases are part of the curve of change, and each phase has its own characteristics.

The Change Curve is based on a model originally developed in the 1960s by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to explain the grieving process. Since then it has been widely utilized as a method of helping people understand their reactions to significant change or upheaval.

Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle

Acceptance
Exploring options
New plan in place
Moving on

Denial
Avoidance
Confusion
Elation
Shock
Fear

Anger
Frustration
Irritation
Anxiety

Bargaining
Struggling to find meaning
Reaching out to others
Telling one's story

Depression
Overwhelmed
Helplessness
Hostility
Flight

| Information and Communication | Emotional Support | Guidance and Direction |

It is essential to understand that we do not move along the stages in a linear direction or step-by-step. A person tends to move through the stages in random order and may sometimes even return to a previous stage at a certain point in time. Each stage can last for different time periods, and it is possible for a person to get stuck in a particular stage and not move on from there.

But what we can do and in which ways can we help ourselves in order to reach an acceptance of change?

There are several questions and insights we should ask ourselves to help lead us through the process, such as:

- **At what stage am I (today)?**
- **How do I feel?**
- **What can help me get through the process?**
- **How will I know I've gone to the next stage?**
- **What will I feel; what thoughts will I have?**

Be patient and understanding towards yourself and your loved ones, who are also somewhere in the process. Every unwanted change causes stress to a lesser or greater degree, with different types of people manifesting responses differently. It is also important to note that there are two types of stressors on people as a result of this newly emerging situation (i.e. the coronavirus and all related events). One such stress is associated with the uncertainty of the situation itself - how long will it last? What will happen? What are the consequences, and can it be repeated again? The second stress is related to the situation of isolation itself, which is imposed and undesirable. Although isolation is initially perceived as a measure of protection, if it is for a prolonged period, it causes significant stress. The first stress is short-term stress, and it's much more intense than the second, which can cause mental health consequences after a while. After all, people are social beings, and isolation from others can feel like a real punishment. It is important to be aware that people can manifest stress in different ways, and their symptoms can be reflected in the emotional, cognitive, conative or behavioral realm, ranging from overwhelming agitation to significant withdrawal and isolation in every sense.

Having this in mind, the most common stress symptoms related to the coronavirus situation are:

Sadness, confusion, irritability, and anger

Reduced concentration, efficiency, and productivity

Social withdrawal and isolation

Interpersonal problems (lies, defensiveness, and communication concerns)

Tension (e.g. headaches, jaw clenching, and teeth grinding)

Body pain (e.g. headaches and muscle spasms)

Reduced energy (e.g. tiredness, weakness, and fatigue)

Sleeping problems

Eating disorders (weight gain or loss)

Stomach pain

Panic attacks

Sweaty hands or feet

Heartburn

Feeling overwhelmed

Obsessive or compulsive behaviors.

How to reduce the effects of stress?

Below are four strategies which are recommended to reduce the effects of stress and/or prevent mental illness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Identify your stress

We all process stress differently so it's important to be aware of your individual stress symptoms. What are your internal alarm bells? Low tolerance, headaches, stomach pains, or a combination of the stress symptoms listed above?

Even if you notice these symptoms, it's tempting to think that you can manage them by brushing them under the rug. If you have been noticing these symptoms since you learned about coronavirus, it is possible that you may be experiencing a normal stress response.

Start managing the things that are under your control

Accept that there are events that you cannot control. There are many things in life we can't control—everything from annoyances to tragedies. We can't control the fact that during social isolation our friends have parties, nor that grandparents can't take grandchildren to playgrounds, but of course, we can control our reactions to all the things beyond our control. It is essential to manage what you can with the information provided, and also very important to release the need to control the uncontrollable.

Know your limits

Your limits may vary based on who you are, how you handle stress, and the level of stress you are experiencing. It may be difficult to set the boundaries you need, however, creating these limitations is a helpful tactic to reduce the amount of stress you let into your life.

Whether in your personal or professional life, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress. Distinguish between the "should" and the "must", and when possible, say "no" to taking on too much.

Practice self-care

Self-care is the active process of acknowledging and tending to your needs. Self-care includes practices that invest in your general wellness. When we talk about self-care, what thoughts come to mind? Eating right, getting enough sleep, and going to the gym? It is very important to note that taking care of yourself does not necessarily mean following general patterns and recommendations that some or most people are sharing. For example, if yoga annoys or doesn't help you, then don't practice it. Find what helps and works for you. Including with whom talking to has a healing and calming effect, along with who is your ideal person to vent negative energy. Embrace and make the most of the reality that you are living. Instead of focusing on all the things you cannot do due to certain restrictions, shift your focus to the wealth of opportunities you have that can also act as coping mechanisms.

Here are some examples:

CRAFTING

MEDITATING

CLEANING

PLAYING WITH A PET

READING A BOOK

CALLING A LOVED ONE

WATCHING YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE

PRACTICING GRATITUDE

TAKING AN ONLINE CLASS

HOSTING A VIRTUAL GATHERING

How to deal with the situation at your workspace?

In a professional context, in terms of both caring for employees and taking action to alleviate the overall situation, there are also activities that can make a difference. These are small but important things, especially if our professional role involves managing and leading people. This is also a time when people more than usual strive to strike a balance between private and professional life. Besides all the media information, employees face another significant challenge for keeping their productivity up. Family members, especially children, are also at home, expecting attention, an active presence, and many other family needs being attended to.

Coronavirus: advice for employers and employees

• **Have a plan.** Let employees know that you are thinking and looking ahead at, that you will stay well-informed, and that you can answer the questions they already have: What if I get sick? How do I take time off work? What if one of my family members contracts the virus? You may want to compile frequently asked questions and direct employees to them often.

• **Communicate, share, and be open.** Worry and fear grow in the absence of up-to-date information. Let your employees know that they can expect regular updates from you. Communicate even if the situation remains unchanged.

• **Empathize.** Share that you know it's stressful. Recognize that it's okay to be anxious. Remind your employees of resources that are available for those who are experiencing stress.

• **Understand.** Recognize when stress has become unmanageable for individual employees, **stress** can lead to anxiety and even panic. Some employees may need mental health days and medical intervention to cope. Encourage employees to practice self-care activities on-the-job and reassure them that it's ok to take steps to manage stress, such as relaxation exercises, listening to relaxing music, or taking regular breaks.

Here are some tips that all of you who lead people or teams can use to proactively give advice. This is the time to show that you are here for your team members, that you are available, even just to talk to them about how they feel, to show understanding and care.

Limit the amount of information you consume

Focus on the things you can control

Take break from work when you feel pressured

Encourage video meetings or short breaks with your team

It is allowed and ok to show fear

Speak about your feelings

In the face of intense virtual communication, what do you say about launching a company "virtual coffee" project where the focus will be on wellbeing? I'm convinced the effect will be phenomenal. Of course, throughout this period it is important to be informed, but it is even more important to consider the relevance of the source from which we derive the information. At the same time, we mustn't allow our whole day to be consumed by the topic of the virus. Identify a time interval within which you will update yourself on the conditions and the events associated with it, and promise yourself that the rest of the time you will do something else, something more constructive. When communicating with others, set your own rules that the topic will be something aside from current events. And yes, this is part of things that are under your control and will at the same time help reduce your stress level and anxiety.

Trusted resources

When we decide to be more informed, we should stick to reading only relevant and trustworthy sources. List of trusted resources about **COVID-19:**

▶ https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/

▶ https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/covid-19-coronavirus-infographic-datapack/

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