

OPINION: The “Hidden Pandemic”

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The COVID-19 pandemic will likely be a defining event for an entire generation. By the end of this pandemic, we will see several million cases of the disease worldwide. But what of the “hidden pandemic?”

History teaches us that there will always be more people adversely affected psychologically than physically. This is what I call the “hidden pandemic.”

During my career, I have responded to SARS, the H1N1 influenza, Ebola, and a wide variety of other disasters throughout the world including the invasion of Kuwait, the Serbo-Croatian War, the Oklahoma City bombing, the World Trade Center attacks and Hurricane Katrina. While appearing to be very different in their nature and scope, they all followed a similar trajectory of psychological phases and reactions.

Predictable Pattern of Distress

If history repeats itself, we can expect to see the same pattern of adverse psychological reactions unfold during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

After realizing the zenith in cases of COVID-19, many parts of the country are beginning to leave the so-called “impact phase.” At this point the number of new cases will decline. Then we will begin the “honeymoon” in the belief the worst is over. We are re-opening the country hoping to return to some semblance of a normal life. But honeymoons seldom last forever. And so we will likely soon enter a phase of disillusionment. Those who have been previously challenged psychologically may react more severely than many others. Generally speaking, in this phase as we all struggle to recover, to rebuild, we may encounter grief, depression, frustration, anger, the desire to blame others, and even despair. It is in the great abyss of despair that we may encounter consuming depression, helplessness, hopelessness. It is here that dark thoughts can turn into dark realities. Here some of us may consider ending careers, ending marriages, and even ending our own lives.

As a society, as a nation, we will get through this. Physically, most will heal. Psychologically most will recover and resume their lives, or construct new lives. On the anniversary of this pandemic, we will pause and remember. Then we will move on. Some will re-experience the angst of past year, but they too will move on.

Moving On

Moving on does not mean forgetting. It simply means moving on. So how can we get started on the journey from disillusionment to revitalization? Here are some simple tips for our patients, as well as ourselves...

1. First and foremost, be kind to yourself and compassionate with others. When angered or annoyed, try for even just a moment to take the other person’s perspective. Try to see the world

through their eyes. In the children's book *Rodney Makes a Friend*, even little Rodney Rabbit learns there are two points of view on almost everything.

2. Unplug from the relentless media efforts to capture your attention with predictions of a viral or economic apocalypse. Watch enough to stay responsibly informed, but no more.
3. Take care of yourself physically and psychologically. Stress has been shown to suppress the immune system (Everly & Lating, 2019)
Left to its own devices, the mind often descends into an abyss of darkness, worry, and despair. Mindfulness combats worry. Whenever your mind takes a distressing excursion, refocus, be mindful of where you are and what you are doing. Those you are with deserve no less.
4. Control what you can, cope with the rest. But remember the only thing you can really control is how you react to the world as it unfolds around you.
5. Staying connected to others, even if physically distanced, makes you stronger and more resilient (Everly & Lating, 2019). This is a good time to rekindle old friendships, or bury old hatchets.
6. Though we are often eager to help others in distress, learning the principles of "psychological first aid" can help us ease another's pain beyond the verbal "Hail Mary" we offer when we say "Everything will be ok." Here at Johns Hopkins we have developed ways to thoughtfully use the principles of psychological first aid to help those in acute distress (Everly & Lating, 2017).
7. The pursuit of perfection is a fool's errand. Do your best, accept excellence.
8. Be grateful for what you have. Pay homage to what age or misfortune has taken away from you, but keeping moving forward. There is a reason the windshield is large and the rear-view mirror is small.
9. Remember that seeking formal psychological or psychiatric treatment when needed helps not only yourself but those who love and depend upon you.
10. Draw strength from the fact that wherever you are and whatever you do, you are part of something greater than yourself. Whether you know it or not, you are never alone. I shall adapt the words of Christopher Robin speaking to Pooh as we move on our journey toward a post pandemic world: "Promise me you'll always remember: We are braver than we believe, stronger than we seem, and smarter than we think."

REFERENCES

Everly, Jr., GS & Lating, JM (2017). *Johns Hopkins Guide to Psychological First Aid*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

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