

## **Making Sense of and Responding in the Midst of a Global Pandemic**

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2020: A historic, unforgettable year. A year that has brought one of those significant, defining events that will always be used as a post of *before* and *after* the COVID-19 pandemic. Our world seems to have changed overnight. How do we make sense of it and what do we do with this?

### **We are anxious.**

We have many fears of what could happen. We are designed to have a stress response system that kicks in when there is threat of danger. When this kicks in, our body's built-in alarm, the amygdala, hijacks the prefrontal cortex. Immediately, different hormones and bodily responses (like heart rate and breathing) are signaled to start working on our behalf with an automatic fight, flight or freeze reaction. When someone experiences an anxiety disorder, such as have symptoms of panic, this alarm system is going off at the wrong times and/or disproportionately to the situation. This may happen due to chronic stress or to a genetic predisposition to anxiety.

Now we are facing real, ongoing threat. The challenge with ongoing threat of danger is that it will take a toll on our body. This could weaken the immune system or impact us in other ways physically and emotionally. Additionally, when the amygdala hijacks our prefrontal cortex, it shuts off the part of the brain that we need for decision making, organizing and judgment. This is one reason why we may not make the most rational decisions in times of panic. It is why we may respond with self-protective tendencies at the expense of our loved ones or fellow citizens. It is why we felt an air of panic the first several days of threat, including long lines at the grocery store and empty stock of basic supplies such as toilet paper and other paper products.

This threat and panic can also be contagious. It is spreading emotionally and socially. For example, what has it done to you when you go to the grocery store and observe overflowing carts, empty shelves, and people wearing gloves and masks? Have you felt the alert that something is wrong? Has it triggered any responses in your mind, body or emotions? Has it caused you to question if you must do the same thing or if you are doing something wrong by not mirroring the same behaviors? This shows the power of community. We are wired to be in tune with each other and our environment. While this is part of living and can be quite meaningful, we must be careful of what we are transmitting during this time and how we are responding to our unpredictable, disrupted environment. Are our behaviors motivated by caution and social responsibility that comes from a respect and consideration for each other? Or are they governed by fear and self-preservation? What may we sacrifice or lose if our main goal is merely our own self-protection? How may we be alert, without being alarmed, and responsible without panic?

## **We are experiencing collective trauma.**

Trauma is an event/s that involve threat to one's physical and or/mental well-being. It results in feeling a loss of control, fear, and helplessness. It disrupts our relationships and one's basic belief systems. Trauma can also be a result of bearing witness to someone else's experience of trauma.

For many of us, we are threatened by something invisible, but we see and feel signs and symptoms of change, disruption, and alarm. We have experienced this threat on many levels beyond physical, including emotional, financial and social. Some of us are bearing witness to others that are directly impacted and for whom this threat has become a visible reality. This trauma has individual implications, but we are experiencing it collectively. Collective trauma is not a new experience. There are other times in history when our nations or other nations have experienced systemic threat. Yet, it is arguably unprecedented for this experience of global trauma. To date, this trauma is not post-trauma. It is current and ongoing. We are living in a state of unpredictability.

## **We are grieving.**

Trauma inevitably brings loss. There are layers of multiple losses we are experiencing from this disruption. We may be losing jobs or income. We have lost planned events. We have lost contact with loved ones, even normal ways of greeting such as handshakes and hugs. We may be losing loved ones to this illness without the appropriate ways to say goodbye. We have lost our freedom, normalcy, predictability and sense of safety, assumed privileges woven into our American fabric, and often taken for granted. We are in varying stages of acknowledging and coping with these losses. We may not have yet named our experience as loss or given ourselves space to feel the disappointment and share it with others, which may bring relief and connection.

## **We are experiencing our vulnerability.**

We are vulnerable. To be human is to be vulnerable but we tend to avoid experiences of vulnerability. Our illusion of control has been shattered. This has exposed where we find identity, comfort, security, and pleasure. It has disrupted our normalcy. It's rocking our worldview and belief systems. We don't know what to think or believe. We don't know how long this will last and we don't know what will be our new normal and how this will permanently impact our lives and our world.

It may bring up past experiences of trauma and loss or other experiences of threat and vulnerability. This is new for all of us, even those leading our government, organizations and communities. We don't know exactly what we are doing or how to lead others who are following us.

All of these things could increase symptoms of depression, anxiety, grief, chronic stress and may trigger unhealthy ways of responding. We may have changes or disruption in sleep or appetite, fatigue, changes in mood, physical pain, wanting to be alone.

### **We are socially distanced.**

What are the implications of our stay-at-home order and months of social distancing (a term I am not sure existed before March, 2020)? We are going through the same thing, yet we are different in our individual lived experiences, circumstances and responses. These differences can be additionally isolating.

Some of us love the extra time and space. Some of us wish we had more time and space and feel busier than before. Some of us love not having to go anywhere and be governed by a full schedule. Some of us are alone, longing for face to face or physical contact. Some of us are using this time in creative, productive ways. Others feel stuck, lost and unmotivated. Some of us have embraced the extra space for rest and lack of structure. Others feel guilty for having so much rest and down time. Some of us love the extra time with family and are so thankful to be sequestered with the ones we love. Others are confined to home environments that feel as unsafe as the virus, and are distanced from their only coping skills and safety nets. Some of us are worried from a distance about loved ones who are sick, longing to be by their side. Others are feeling shame for testing positive or showing symptoms of the virus.

These differences can lead to comparison, and comparison has the danger of further disconnection. Our words, our actions or our own internal responses could further isolate. Comparison results in us seeing ourselves and others through the lenses of superiority or inferiority. Comparing may lead to judgment. Comparing could promote shame. Judgment, shame, superiority and inferiority are all agents of disconnection. Disconnection is the thing we have already been forced to do, while also a necessary ingredient for healing from anxiety, grief and trauma.

### **So, how do we respond to this individually and collectively?**

#### **Responding to our Emotions:**

**Sometimes just naming our emotions, naming our experience as trauma or as loss is helpful and validating.** Sharing our feelings with loved ones who are safe may provide relief. If you have had phone calls with friends or have been part of any type of group or work video meeting, you may notice at least the first minutes are focused on sharing our experiences, asking each other how things are going with our current shared crisis. We need this. Acknowledging emotion, especially when being seen and heard by another is valuable. Find creative or artistic ways to express emotion. Crying is a natural healing mechanism. So is

laughter. As much as it is important to give space for sadness, we also have the capacity to create room for fun and joy.

### **Responding to our Fear and Anxiety:**

There is an attitude of sobriety and caution that is wise and has been recommended and mandated by our state and national leaders. Yet, we have not been told that *fear* must govern us. Is it possible to be cautious yet not fearful? Is it possible to be vigilant without panic or paranoia? Fear and anxiety are not sustainable. Therefore, let us consider focusing on what we *can* manage within our circumstances.

First, **we must look for what feeds our fear and learn how to manage that.** If you are incessantly watching news or checking social media for the latest stories, it may be feeding fear rather than helping you to fight this virus responsibly. Consider changing your phone notifications or frequency of watching the news. Consider having a family member censor the news and share with you on a need-to-know basis. Consider limiting your exposure to the most factual information that is necessary for responsible knowledge.

**We can help our bodies physiologically through exercise or doing relaxation or deep breathing exercises.** Notice where your body is experiencing pain and tension and find ways to relax those parts of your body.

**We can help our minds by trying to focus and reframe our thoughts on what is helpful, true, and productive.** We can change our catastrophic thoughts to focus on what we do know and what is within our control. We can distract ourselves with things that will fill our minds with what is peaceful, beautiful, or life-giving.

### **Managing Anxiety and Fear within Children:**

Children borrow from the responses of adults, particularly their primary caregivers. **How parents respond will often shape their response. Normalize your children's feelings and give them permission to express their feelings and fears.** Children need space to grieve, express frustrations and ask questions without being considered disrespectful. Children are strong perceivers, but not always accurate interpreters. By nature, children are continually learning from their environment and experiences. They then translate these perceptions into meaning. **How we support them in their responses will help to shape the way these beliefs are formed.**

As adults, we have needed clear information with facts based on science and research. If our leaders are minimizing or give false hope or promises, it will not be helpful. In the same way, **children must be given facts and information that will help them to understand the reality of our situation. They benefit from hearing the truth in a way that they can understand and in a way that gives reassurance, while also acknowledging that there is a lot we do not know and**

**do not understand.** If your children are asking questions, please answer their questions in a way that is appropriate for their age. Help them to feel a sense of agency by joining with what we have been recommended to do, like wash our hands and practice social distancing. Reassure them to focus on what we CAN do and control. **Protect them with giving them creative ways to express their feelings, helping them to focus on having fun and establishing consistent routine and structure. Protect your children from overhearing difficult conversations or uncensored media.** Some children will be more anxious than others and will need your support in how to think and how to distract their minds to focus on what is helpful.

### **Coping with Trauma:**

How does one cope with trauma, especially when the trauma is ongoing? **Healing and coping from trauma are always the opposite of the traumatic experience.**

**If trauma results in feeling powerless, we find things that are within our power.** We can choose to move our bodies. We can choose what we think and how we think about it. Practicing gratitude can be helpful medicine for a worried mind and dismal mood.

While we may not be able to control our external environment and its circumstances, we can take steps to manage our home and/or work environment. This will include communication with those we live with in how we can support each other in managing our needs for shared work, study and living spaces. We can ask each other how we may honor and respect needs for finding privacy or connection. We can monitor and create boundaries while working from home and protect a clear start/end time.

**If the threat of trauma impact us with the experience of helplessness, then we find things we can do that give us a sense of purpose and productivity.** Consider the things you always wish you had time to do, complete, or learn. I have heard examples of individuals who are starting some of those goals and projects and families who have created a quarantine bucket list. Individuals or groups are taking action by seeking ways to be supportive of frontline workers or community members who are in need.

**If trauma is disruptive and unpredictable, then we find ways to make life predictable.** Creating a structure or a schedule to your day can provide a consistent rhythm that is helpful for our minds and bodies. Consider taking a shower and getting dressed every morning even if working from home or staying home. Making life predictable can even include giving ourselves permission to rest and learn how to just *be*.

**If trauma isolates, then we must find ways to connect safely with others.**

Judith Herman (2020), author and expert on trauma, recently interviewed Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who has studied the global perspective of nuclear war and totalitarianism. As they

compared the impact and response of COVID-19 with his experience interviewing those impacted by the atomic bomb experience in Hiroshima, she said:

*“We have learned from survivors everywhere that what helps people most in times of terror is preserving and strengthening our connections with people we trust. This comforts soldiers facing battle and civilians facing disaster, battered women and abused children. Human beings are social creatures; what hurts us most are feelings of abandonment. In the aftermath of trauma, we try to create supportive environments in which survivors can tell their stories. Especially in this time of plague, when safety requires social distancing, we must do everything we can to preserve trust and connection.”*

We must be intentional and find creative ways to connect with others. Pursue those who live alone. When you desire to withdraw and isolate due to loneliness, take a risk to reach out to someone. Trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk (2020) advises us from his work that since our sense of safety comes from being in tune with each other, we are currently in isolation and out of tune and out of sync. He recommends synchronous sounds and movements with other people. This was seen in the videos of Italian neighbors singing with each other. Churches are finding ways to continue their services online. Musicians are hosting livestream jam sessions. We are drawn to these things because music has a way of speaking the language of the soul while connecting us with each other.

Connecting with each other is also important because we are experiencing trauma on a collective level. Jack Saul, who has studied collective trauma after disasters, including 9/11 states this: *“As collective trauma refers to disruptions of relationships at all levels of human systems, recovery then involves collective processes of readjustment and adaptation and the mobilization of capacities for resilience in families and communities.”*

Connecting with each other will also include being responsible for how and what we communicate on social media. Let’s consider if our words will increase or injure connection and how we may support each other in the midst of differences in our personal experiences and responses.

Brene Brown (2020), researcher and expert on shame and vulnerability has poignantly stated:

*“This pandemic experience is a massive experiment in collective vulnerability. We can be our worst selves when we’re afraid, or our very best, bravest selves. In the context of fear and vulnerability, there is often very little in between because when we are uncertain and afraid our default is self-protection. We don’t have to be scary when we’re scared. Let’s choose awkward, brave, and kind. And let’s choose each other.”*

### **Finding Hope: An opportunity for growth and change.**

Posttraumatic Growth is a term created by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) to describe the psychological change that results in a period of trauma or highly challenging life circumstances

in five domains: **personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change.** Recently, I have completed research on the experiences of domestic sex trafficking survivors through the lens of complex trauma and posttraumatic growth. In spite of the unspeakable trauma and layers of exploitation endured by these individuals, the data revealed profound evidence of all five aspects of posttraumatic growth. As we look to the histories of individuals and nations who have survived, we have great hope. **This current circumstance is an opportunity as individuals, families, communities and nations to come out of this not having bounced back, but moving to a new place that represents growth out of what we have collectively endured, evidenced in our strength, in our relationships, spiritual change, new possibilities and appreciation for life.**

I love when I am having conversations with individuals, colleagues and teammates about the impact of this pandemic and they take time to express what they are grateful for, or they share something encouraging that resembles a light in the midst of darkness. Their comments reveal they are finding power by choosing to look for the opportunity amidst the disruption and uncertainty. It changes the tone to one that is life-giving and hopeful. I have heard people envision their future with a new normal or a new rhythm because this experience has forced them to slow down and they have in turn, discovered something helpful, renewing or meaningful within their current experience. I have heard others who have a longing to remain appreciative of things we have taken for granted.

Yet the situation seems bleak and dismal. We may not be there. We are grieving. This is new and unfamiliar. We are in survival mode. But seeking gratitude, looking for evidence of light in darkness, seeing opportunity in the midst of challenge, seeking connection during a time of isolation—these are intentional practices. These have the capacity to not only help us find hope but lead us through to a place of growth.

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