

Treating Anxiety in a Post Pandemic World

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Pandemic Worries Are Many and Varied

- It is impossible to be unaware of the potential dangers of the virus.
- The results of isolation: anxiety, social isolation, and depression
- Stress of working at home and monitoring school/supervising children
- Stress of working in the community
- The stress of financial difficulty

CDC Survey Estimates Re: Mental Health Related to COVID-19

- 40.9% of respondents reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition (anxiety or depression (30.9%)
- 26.3% - symptoms of trauma/stress related disorder
- 13.3% started or increased substance use to cope with stress or emotions
- 10.7 % seriously considered suicide in the 30 days before completing the survey: significantly higher among those 18–24 years (25.5%), Hispanic respondents (18.6%), black respondents (15.1%), self-reported unpaid caregivers for adults (30.7%), and essential workers (21.7%).

Long COVID-19 Mental Health Outcomes

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/author/melba-newsome/>

- It is necessary to take Long COVID-19 mental health outcomes seriously and practitioners are well-positioned to listen for it
- Symptoms may include: brain fog, fatigue, depression, as well as body regulatory systems: heart rate, blood pressure and sleep
- Inflammation and oxygen deprivation may play a role in virus effects. Psychosis/delirium may be present in severe acute illness, but late-onset psychosis may follow only mild illness.

Loneliness and the Pandemic

- Maintaining social networks is critical for survival and the right balance of social connections must be met.
- Our new report suggests that 36% of all Americans—including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children—feel “serious loneliness.” Not surprisingly, loneliness appears to have increased substantially since the outbreak of the global pandemic.
- Aged persons in facilities suffered intensely
 - Matthews, G. A., & Tye, K. M. (2019). Neural mechanisms of social homeostasis. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1457(1), 5-25.

Pandemic Isolation Affected Cognition and Mood – Social Homeostasis Is One Explanation

- Engagement involves the “reward system” and absence of reward = craving. Reducing social interaction causes social craving
- Social behavior is learned: if you don’t use it, you lose it. Temporary isolation impairs both social memory – like recognizing a familiar face – and working memory – like recalling a recipe while cooking
- Reversible: A recent Scottish study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that residents had some cognitive decline during the harshest lockdown weeks, but recovered once restrictions eased.

Loneliness and Its Impact on Mental Health

- Loneliness affects every aspect of health, enhancing risk for depression but also setting up a self-reinforcing loop (Hawkley & Cacioppo)
- Loneliness impairs self-regulation, and lonely individuals perceive more social threat which exerts a powerful influence on perceptions, cognitions, and behaviors
- Diminishes capacity for attention to positive emotions and decreases effort for positive lifestyle
- Impairs restorative sleep – also reinforces loneliness

Intervening on Loneliness – CBT Helps

Social Anxiety (and Re-entry) affected by loneliness. CBT can help by

- enhancing social skills
- providing social support
- increasing opportunities for social interaction

Most importantly, CBT helps alter the automatic perceptual and cognitive over-attention to negative social information

- identify automatic negative thoughts
- look for disconfirming evidence
- reframe perceptions of loneliness and personal control

Coping with Alcohol

- Surprisingly less alcohol abuse than public narrative would suggest
- However – those with loneliness, anxiety and/or depression have been more likely to use more alcohol
- Women, more than men, show increased alcohol use (increased demands on their time/resources)
- Adolescent/college use varied, one factor was seeing peers increased use of alcohol on social media
- Social anxiety is a factor for increased use

Public Health Interventions for Loneliness – Harvard Study – Therapists Can Help

Providing people with information and strategies & help them identify and manage the self-defeating thoughts and behaviors that fuel loneliness.

Reimagine and reweave our social relationships in health care, schools, and many other institutions.

Working to restore our commitments to each other and the common good to renew a founding promise of this country

Ambient Anxiety – Manage Intake of Stress

- Can't Get Rid of Stressors: Virus, Protests, Relatives, War and Politics – our environment makes it hard to avoid anxiety
- Societal anxiety affects personal anxiety –
 - Germ-o-phobs
 - Worriers
 - Panic
- Note your reactions to new information
- Eliminate the amount of attention you give to these topics.

Start Recovering from Turbulent Times – An Exhausted Person Has Nothing to Give!

Get A Burnout Buddy who will hold you accountable,
and make any shift gradually:

- Make a self-care checklist and follow it
- Take a break from social media, constant news feeds
- Get support to tolerate the empty feelings when you slow down, rest or otherwise quiet yourself
- Plan fun and put it into your calendar

The Purpose of Worry

- Anxiety is a natural response to ambiguity (when we do not know what is happening, what will happen, or when we do not know how to respond.)
- People feel sensations of anxiety before thinking about a problem:
- Worry or 'what-if' thinking is maladaptive effort to resolve it
- Real problems have real solutions. Anxiety sufferers usual handle those

Managing the Stress of the Pandemic

- Acceptance – This is what is. Anger, frustration, fear are all emotional responses based on interpretations and assumptions. What are yours?
- Find ways to express emotional responses responsibly and then step back. Note what is catastrophic vs what is inconvenient
- What has not yet happened, and might not ever happen – when should you deal with it?
- What are your resources to cope with the challenges?

Help to Stop Ruminating: Move Your Body, Move Your Mind

- “Shake it off” really works – it seems to reset the nervous system – from the work of Peter Levine Somatic Experiencing
- Have a daily dance party
- Walk, run, ride a bike
- Have a planned play time with children – outside as much as possible: hide and seek, basketball, tag, etc
- Move your activity to a different room in the house

“Soft Fascination” to Relax Your Brain

- Distraction Can Help with anxiety
- Activities that grab and hold our attention too forcefully — books, social interactions, pretty much anything on a screen — entertaining through they may be, are unlikely to recharge our brain’s batteries. These are hard fascination and preclude thinking about anything else
- It is more restorative to develop “soft fascination” such as focus on the natural world or mindful awareness

Stop the Emotional Tug of War

- Work toward clearly identifying the problem, e.g., Are you afraid of dying or might it be that you fear being unable to know what risks are still active?
- Separate caution from worry
- This includes the clear distinction of possible negative outcomes from probably negative outcomes
- Then make a plan and follow it

Make a Plan: Steps to Follow

- Decide if there is current problem that needs solving and define it, then choose a goal/solution
- Make a plan with action steps
- **Do not re-plan the plan** – it is tug of war with worry
- Decide what kind of new information or change in circumstance would warrant reviewing the plan
- Set a date to review the efficacy of the plan

Health Anxiety – Worry Well and Only Once

- Need to clarify the actual worry. Is there a legitimate health issue, such as whether a cancer may recur? Or waiting on test results?
 - If so, set up the steps that person can do to follow through with appropriate care.
- Is this hypothetical, “If I ever got sick...”?
 - Do not look for reassurance on the internet.
- Decide “When do I need to worry about this?”
- Decide whether you have enough information. If so, you are done worrying well.
- Then, between now and that date, when the anxiety arises, DO NOT rehearse all the reasons not to worry. Simply say “Stop! On this date _____ I will think about it!” and then distract.

Cave Syndrome – 49% of Adults Feel It – Even the Vaccinated Showing Reluctance to Emerge

“Cave Syndrome” is a consequence of pulling into isolation to preserve safety. Coming out of the cave means appraisal of your personal risk in various social settings as well as the benefits of emerging

- Nearly half of adults said that they did “not feel comfortable going back to living life like they used to before the pandemic.”
- In-person socializing is familiar and strange because absence challenges our expectations – excitement may feel like anxiety

Re-Entry Anxiety – Not Irrational

- Focus with clients on the realistic aspects of re-entry
- Re-entry is creating anxiety about appropriate behavior and these questions are more anxiety-producing because they are philosophical and existential questions:
 - Do I wear my mask?
 - Do I say yes to this invitation?
 - Do I take my children even if they're not vaccinated?
 - Do I ask people if they are vaccinated.
 - What if I am not vaccinated?

Pandemic Panic

- Sensitivity to body sensations, coupled with anticipatory anxiety can create a frame for people to panic
- Adolescents more susceptible – distinguish between panic and acute anxiety especially in this age group
- People with Social Anxiety pre-pandemic may be more susceptible
- Many have experienced panic attacks during pandemic – without help those may escalate

Breathe

Diaphragmatic Breathing works if you do it. How?
Stimulates the vagus nerve to initiate parasympathetic activity to slow heart, lower BP

Teach the longer exhale = Decrease CO₂

Use apps to remind client to practice several times a day until it comes easily and clients will remember it, such as Breathing App, Breathe2Relax,

Breathing also minimizes anxious arousal for crisis management, in social settings or in vivo exposures

Handling Panic

- Predict, Prepare and Plan
- Correct anticipation of feared situation – get facts but get irrational fears out on the table
- Change catastrophic thinking
- Start small if possible
- Have a plan for what happens if you panic

Invite the Worry – a Big Help with Re-Entry

- The model of “inviting not fighting”
- Natural follow up is “What is the worst that could happen?”
- Focus shifts to coping and resourcefulness – facing reality and recognizing skills (or planning how to develop skills)

Beginning Social Re-Entry

It is important to reestablish neural connections that enhance our “sense of common humanity and collective interests.” (Eckman and Thomas)

That means getting out and doing it.

- First, set reasonable expectations. Curb high expectations of how fun it will be (and also of how scary it could be.)
- Try re-entry in stages, assess your response
- Be aware of your own comfort and don't push it too hard
- Stay up-to-date on guidelines that tend to change

Utilize Social Media for Re-Entry – Curate with the Client Which Sites Are Supportive

- A majority of teens say social media better connects them to their friends' feelings and lives and plays a critical role in connecting teens to new friends
- Internet easily creates platforms for discussion about mental health, makes it easier to share one's experiences to enhance a sense of security and comfort. This includes healthcare professionals who are at greatest risk in this situation (Sarangi)
- Social media contributes to 'contagious anxiety'

Social Re-entry Includes the Workplace

Humans are risk avoidant – we have had 2 years of focus on risk. Now we have the chance to emerge but it gives many anxiety

“Being physically near each other and not experiencing harmful or threatening consequences is the way that our nervous systems need to relearn the foundational trust, and the affiliative and cooperative potential that is so fundamental to human ultrasociality.” (Simon-Thomas)

- This means rediscovering how to work among others again, how to play, how to meet people, how to start new relationships and end others. You have had the social skills – remind yourself of them

Isolated Elderly Re-Emerging

- May not want to – have found the lack of demand pleasant BUT lack of social engagement can increase depression with the isolation being so much more intense for this age group and social life hard to re-establish as friendships have been lost by death and attrition during this time.
- Their cognition will have suffered more during this isolation so may need more prompting and attention to positive outcomes

Re-Adjusted Family Time – Help Clients Assess Their Needs and Wishes

- Relax about screen time for self and children, and separate schoolwork from fun time
- Keep up the more relaxed pace and increased interaction
- Separate passive scrolling from interactive or content creation time on screens.
- Establish family planned interaction time – include outdoor family activities and alone time

Parental Concerns After Pandemic

- Children who are losing close time with Mom or Dad or Grandparents may feel separation anxiety
- Half of workers prefer to continue work from home and are trying to figure out how to keep the family balance – this includes shared parenting
- Children (mostly) are eager to return to class, and parents may be eager to have life “return to normal” but feel anxiety about little ones who are not yet vaccinated when classmates or older sibs may share COVID infection

Practicing Forgotten or Unlearned Social Skills

- Anecdotal from teachers: high rates of aggression and poor frustration tolerance in young kids not able to socialize in school now re-entering with separation anxiety and also inexperience with peers
- Depending on age, flexible re-entry, such as gradual exposure to separation from parents, may be necessary, as schools may fluctuate with opening/closing for quarantines going forward
- Children need to experience unexpected things that may challenge them in order to develop emotional/perceptual flexibility and resilience

Ekman & Simon-Thomas CPR for Flourishing: Connection, Positivity and Resilience

- Focus on Greater Good with Flourishing
- CPR framework: trainable skills like mindfulness and gratitude that enhance prosociality, genuine connection, and meaningful belonging
- The neurobiology of prosociality in human flourishing highlights the essential role of supporting others well-being in the potential to flourish oneself.
- *“The best predictor of health and well-being is the quality of our relationships and the depth and extent of our attachments to others.”* - Robert Waldinger, Harvard Study of Adult Development

Laurie Santos on the Work of Happiness

- Many things have a positive effect on happiness — a sense of meaning, connection with others, meditation/spirituality
- Cultural structures, religious structures, even smaller groups like a running group or can *cause* true behavior change.
- Long-term change is work. People model behavior of those around them. The structure of a community supports the new behavior.
- Assess and assist – where are there community connections that will model and encourage the change in behavior (mood, activities, self-care routines)

What Are You Committed To?

- Are you committed to your faith? What are you doing to nurture it?
- Are you committed to living fully, staying engaged in life?
- Are you committed to being helpful to others? (Family, friends as individuals or even committed to helping your community at large, a more altruistic stance?)
- Those commitments give meaning to your life/actions
- They will promote an active, problem-solving approach to life in the face of adversity.

Look for Inspiration – Even on Netflix

Stoic Philosophy Meets Positive Psychology

“Where or in whom do I see people facing adversity with persistence, optimism, and other positive character strengths?” Look around for:

- People you know. Who is carrying on in the face of adversity?
- What movies show situations of inspiration?
- What book characters have the hope I want?
- What video game heroes or Marvel Superheroes display positive character traits?

Imagine behaving like those people in the adversity you are facing.

What Is in Your Purview?

- News is overwhelming – what is there that is in your sphere of influence?
- Parker Palmer's remarks about the disempowering effects of 24/7 ongoing tragic situations.
- Think globally, act locally

3 Questions:

What Can I Control Now, Later, or Never?

1. “What Can I Control Now?”
2. “What Can I Control Later?”
3. “What Can I Never Control?”

What degree of control is possible?

- How about influence vs. control?
- Is this a situation where no control is possible – can you let go?