

The Psychology of a Pandemic

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For the past several months we have been in the throes of a worldwide pandemic. COVID-19 has taken over our lives and there seems to be no end in sight. When it comes to pandemics, George Bonanno PhD, a researcher at Columbia University, did a longitudinal study on returning military personnel, who were previously deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Bonanno et. al, 2012). He wanted to assess how “resilient” we are as human-beings. His results were both startling and controversial. He found that overall, human-beings are resilient, and we typically bounce back after major traumas or traumatic events. His research shows that we are naturally programmed to improve over time on issues such as: grief/loss, traumatic injuries/illnesses, divorce, job loss, combat deployment, and even terrorist attacks. Dr. Bonanno found the only resiliency challenge we faced, in which we did “not” improve over time, was Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (Bonanno et al. 2008). SARS is a COVID virus that attacks the lungs and quickly spread from China to the rest of the world.

Why do we struggle emotionally and psychologically to pandemic's? In Dr. Steven Taylor's book, he defined a pandemic as something, *“more than a disease that spreads, it is a set of events in which psychological reactions to infection play an essential role in the spreading and containment and influence that extent to which widespread emotional distress and social disorder occur”* (Taylor, 2019). Dr. Taylor's book as well as our own anecdotal data from employees seen through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) supports this observation of widespread emotional distress resulting from this pandemic. We have observed associates presenting with heightened anxiety, depression, fear and anger. It appears our cases are more complex than pre-COVID-19. For example, depression associated with marital problems and with domestic violence or anxiety associated with substance abuse, or lack of hope and suicidal thoughts. A recent article by “Newsweek Magazine” (Piore, Adam, 2020) titled, “The Mental Health Toll from the Coronavirus Could Rival that of the Disease itself” stated three major mental health concerns arising from COVID-19: 1) suicide, 2) domestic violence and, 3) opioid/drug abuse.

What can we do to protect our emotional psyche against this virus? Dr. Taylor discussed developing our “Behavioral Immune System” (BIS). As we wait for a vaccine to boost our “physical immune system” I believe there are psychological solutions we can implement now to strengthen our BIS. That includes avoiding social media, conspiracy theories & xenophobia. It includes learning to be less “reactive” and less “impulsive” in our communication and coping skills. It is about understanding what we can and can't control. Anxiety comes from being unable to predict, accept or interpret future events. Anxiety comes from feeling that “outside factors” are impacting us and we are powerless over a solution. It is more about realizing what we can control. We can control such things as hand washing, social distancing, wearing a mask in public, staying home when sick, avoiding large gatherings and managing our emotions of anger, impatience and hopelessness



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We can further increase our BIS from strengthening our relationships with our family and close friends, exercising, eating right, and getting out to the great outdoors in our communities. At work, we can be totally present during our working time, and when we go home, be totally present to our friends and/or family, to ensure a healthy work/life balance. We can also find ways to assist others and strengthen our personal spirituality.

As we look at this time to strengthen our BIS, improve ourselves and our relationships, we will be much more able to defeat the negative effects of this pandemic.

If you need extra support, coaching or counseling or resources to help you maintain emotional stability in your life, please call Profile EAP at **800-645-6571**. We are here to help.

References:

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