

## **Hope for the best. Be prepared for the worst**

### **A Psychologists Response to Covid-19**

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The world as we know it is in the process of undergoing sudden and radical change. The general health crisis that is being brought about by the rapid spread of corona virus could easily become a mental health crisis. It seems incumbent on every person who has the insight and ability, to protect their own emotional well-being, and to support the people within their sphere of influence to do the same.

### **Change is the Only Certainty**

Life never stays the same; it only seems that way either when changes happen very far apart or when they happen slowly over time. What is happening in the current crisis is causing sudden drastic changes to people's way of life, livelihoods and sense of safety and security. Many things are still going to change. Some changes will be temporary, and alas, others permanent. This is how life is; it's part of the natural order and you have to learn to embrace that reality to live fully and in the present and not let fear hijack your joy.

### **This is Serious**

It would seem, from what the experts are telling us, that from the point of view of changing habits of hygiene and social interaction, you need to act neurotic and obsessive without succumbing to anxiety or panic. Overreaction, when it comes to keeping yourself and others safe in these circumstances, is the most functional behaviour. Adjustments take time

and can be exhausting and at times seem overwhelming. Treat this as a project that you work on day by day, making incremental adjustments and taking it one step at a time. We will learn from this crisis as we go along. We will be able to develop and benefit from collective wisdom, resources and skills. We can also find reassurance in the knowledge that in our times we access to have wisdom and experience from past disasters to draw upon to know how to adapt to this. We also have the possibility of vaccine which is, historically speaking, a relatively new thing.

### **Emotional Contagion**

Emotions, like viruses, are extremely contagious. Just as we have the obligation to do whatever we can not to spread Corona virus, we equally have a responsibility to not spread the viruses of fear, hysteria, cynicism, pessimism and mistrust. If you put the appropriate mental health measures in place, then it will be possible to keep a healthy state of mind. Achieve that and you can be a beacon of calm, support and encouragement for others.

### **Adjusting to Change**

The first step in the process of adjusting to the transition we face is to let go of the idea that things need to stay the way they have always been. Give up the impulse to try and deny the current reality and resist change. Nobody likes to change especially when it is sudden and forced on them. All the more so for such a pervasive change that it affects your lifestyle and everything that you are accustomed to being able to do and take for granted. It is very disconcerting to be forced out of your comfort zone. It is scary to be confronted with uncertainties and to feel that you do not have control over your world. It is frightening to face the unknown. It is unnerving to feel that your ability to predict and control your future has been taken away. Discipline yourself to not live in nostalgia for what was, in other words to not dwell in the past. The current reality provokes us to draw deeply on inner resources and develop new ways of coping and hopefully even thriving.

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## **The Gift**

While it no doubt can seem overwhelming, this crisis presents an opportunity to turn adversity into a great gift. It is not only a gift for adults. As leaders, parents, teachers and elders we can turn this experience into a gift for children if we are skillful and aware of how we frame the current reality. We need to exercise mindfulness in how we manage our own and their expectation for the future. We need to psychologically healthy and mature behavior. If you do not know what that means, now is the time to find out. It is a collective responsibility to model and teach the children that you encounter, the perspective and skills to deal with adversity.

## **Radical Care**

There is so much commentary and complaint about the indifference, apathy, entitlement and self-centeredness of the younger generation: this is the perfect opportunity to change that by teaching them that showing care and compassion for others is the ideal way to protect your own interests. This is a time when children can be enrolled in acts of service, in being alive to ideals and to the concept of personal responsibility for the welfare of others. Foster awareness of the many people around you whose livelihoods are going to be compromised, who are isolated and in need of practical or emotional care.

## **Celebrate Life**

The pandemic is not going to last forever. While it is around us, it presents us with an invitation to live more fully, thoughtfully and deeply; to become more deeply engaged with what it means to be alive and to be human living in these times. It can bring you to a deeper

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appreciation of the gifts of life and the privilege of the life you have; to be grateful for every new day; for health and for the people around you. It is an opportunity to up your game, on a physical, emotional and spiritual level. This could be a time to discover your own unique strengths and potential for greatness. This is still one the best times in history to be alive.

### **The Freedom to Feel Secure**

The key to feeling secure is to maintain a sense of mastery and control over your life. This is especially so when you cannot control your circumstances or the external conditions of your life. Whatever you can maintain of your normal pattern's habits and rules, do so to keep a sense of stability and to feel anchored in some familiar reality. Keep up your interests and hobbies. Put more effort into your physical health like giving up any addictions especially smoking. Learning about healthy diet and practicing good eating and sleeping habits also help you to feel more in control and more protected. Keep as much of your normal routines as possible and do not allow yourself to drift into free fall.

### **The Reality**

Accept that you will probably be directly affected by this pandemic: you may get ill and there will definitely be people close to you who will get ill, some even seriously. People you know may die. Embracing this reality is hard but also empowering and can help avoid panic, denial and paralysis.

### **Building Resilience**

It is a valuable step to building resilience, to rehearse possible challenging scenarios in your mind as well as to visualize the precautions necessary to prevent them or the strategies available to you for dealing with them. Each of us will either get sick or have people close to us get sick. We will in all likelihood be confronted with death at some level of our family or

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social world. We have to inoculate ourselves and children by building our faith and perspective and rehearsing how we will cope emotionally through a healthy attitude and approach. As hard as this might be, in the long run denial makes you feel even more helpless and fearful. That makes it even harder to cope when crisis happens. Anticipation and rehearsal are very different from worrying and catastrophizing. It is coming to terms with the realities of life that, until we are forced by circumstances to confront, we never think deeply about if at all.

One way to feel in control is to set goals about who you would like to become through this process. Consider what skills and character traits you would like to develop or improve upon? Decide then how you will work on becoming that person. Learn what steps you need to take and what you would need to know to become that person.

A good starting point is to take an inventory of your morals, values and ideals. Those don't change. When you are clear about what is really important to you, decide how you will keep that knowledge close so that you can draw guidance, security and strength from keeping faithful to what truly counts in your life.

### **Learn from Your Own Past**

Think about all the ways that you have dealt with challenges in the past and discuss strategies that you have used to overcome adversity. Get in touch with what you have discovered about yourself: your strength, courage, resilience, resourcefulness, wisdom and skill in those times. Then work out how you can apply that knowledge and experience in dealing with your current challenges.

### **New Opportunities**

It is worthwhile to start considering new opportunities to redefine work. What can be done remotely or at home? If you must be quarantined and cannot work, think about what



interest or projects you can pursue that you had no time for in the past. It may be a good time to, for example, get more interested in gardening, cooking or things to do around the home. Visualize good possibilities for the future: this might be an opportunity to make a drastic change that you have been putting off.

### **Be Curious**

Develop an approach of curiosity about the way things are changing. Become interested rather than fearful. Observe and think try to deeply understand your own reactions and the developments and challenges that each new day brings. This time is presenting an opportunity for great self-discovery. Through self-discovery and awareness, you can gain mastery over your emotions. Through insight and self-mastery, you can become an even more effective beacon of mental health, resilience, hope and encouragement to those around you.

### **Cultivate Self-Awareness**

It takes time and space to develop self-awareness and through that to gain mastery over your reactions. Learn to identify and pay attention to your emotions, being compassionate to yourself and holding space for others to share feelings with you. It is invaluable to make time to reflect on your experience and to record your insights and impressions in a journal. It is very useful to get in touch with and express your emotions, especially your sense of powerlessness (at times), fears and sense of actual or anticipated loss.

### **Express Your Emotions**

It is important to release feelings through crying when you need to. Bottled up feelings lead to behavior that is not useful or even destructive to yourself or others. If you process your own feelings and confide them in someone who can hold the space for you, you will avoid

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spilling them out in ways that upset others, particularly children. Be careful what you say to yourself and in front of others, especially who you say it to, for example children and vulnerable people. Accept your humanity. Practice being more patient and forgiving of the humanity, and at times frailty, of others.

### **The Voice that Others Need**

You need to be a voice of encouragement and support to those around you. If you feel panicked or even doubtful do not spread that, it is very contagious and makes life harder for those around you. Keeping abreast of facts and developments from reliable sources helps you to maintain a sense of control. You are part of history and you will be able to tell your children and grandchildren about this, just like those who lived through the great wars and depression.

### **Keep Connected**

We are social beings who need connection above almost anything else: find creative ways to stay connected and deepen connection. We are all in this together and we have to be there for each other. Tighten your social and relationship bonds, support others and learn to seek and appreciate support from others. Work on your close relationships or marriage. Make sure this crisis strengthens your bonds with the important people in your life and not the opposite. Work as families, colleagues and communities to strategize of ways to stay safe and mitigate not only health but also social and economic effects.

### **Social Responsibility**

It's very important to think about not transmitting the virus. Practicing consideration for others, improving social awareness and learning to put the greater good before your own



interests are excellent qualities to build and improve upon. It is also empowering to take the focus off yourself and your own feeling of vulnerability and to direct it towards being helpful to others. Social distancing is really important to stop spread more than to protect yourself, therefore the decision to practice it cannot be made on the basis of a calculation of personal risk.

### **Hygiene Skills**

It is good to frame the issue of hygiene to children as a life skill and as something that is always important. It is time to learn to be proactive and develop impeccable hygiene if up to now it has not been your thing. If you do normally practice good hygiene, then become even more conscientious about hand washing and wiping surfaces that people regularly touch. This will be better for health even after this pandemic has passed.

### **You Choose**

Remember that regardless of the circumstances you have choices. You can choose how to respond to the situation. You can choose how you wish to be there for others. Whether to grow from this experience and become a deeper, stronger, wiser and more courageous person or to be defeated by fear. Optimism is also a choice. Above all, in keeping yourself healthy and avoiding illness and death, do not forget to live. Even more importantly remember to enjoy the life that you have, the blessings and gifts of each day and the power and opportunity to make a positive difference in the world.