Coping with uncertainty & leveraging resilience during COVID-19

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AGENDA

• COVID-19: the psychology of the challenge
• Uncertainty: why it is challenging and how people respond
• Resilience: how to thrive in the face of adversity

COVID-19

• An infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)
• Now classified as a pandemic (global outbreak of a disease)

Why is this so difficult?

• Unknown
• Uncontrolled
• Poorly understood
• Threatens wellbeing (health, but also our way of life, ability to make a living, etc.)
• Feeling out of control -> ↑ distress
• Threatened safety/wellbeing -> ↑ distress
• Both are present here -> ↑ ↑ distress
• This is normal, should be expected, can neither be avoided, nor eliminated
UNCERTAINTY

• The quality of your life is in direct proportion to the amount of uncertainty you can comfortably deal with.

~ Tony Robbins

Coping with uncertainty

The challenge of uncertainty

• Nobody likes uncertainty

• When we have something in our lives we do not like, we try to make it stop

  • We approach this with varying levels of urgency — “intolerance of uncertainty”

  • Instinctual response:

    “uncertainty is causing me distress; therefore, I must eliminate uncertainty”

Common responses to uncertainty

Avoidance

Worry

Control the controllables, coexist with distress

Functioning/QOL

Avoidance

Control the controllables, coexist with distress

Worry
Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.

~ Helen Keller

**Resilience**

- **Definition**
  - “Human capacity to persist, bounce back and flourish when faced with stressors”
  - Bonanno, 2004, Am Psychol
  - Resilience is not any one thing – it is a combination of many behaviors
  - People who are most resilient maximize “resilience behaviors”

**Three important domains of resilience in response to COVID-19**

- Acknowledgement of distress
- Controlling the controllables (within reason)
- Co-existing with the uncontrollable/unknown

- People are more likely to react to distress than acknowledge its presence
- When we acknowledge distress, we become more likely to work with it
- When we do not acknowledge distress, our reactionary response kicks in
- This step cannot be skipped!
Resilience

Controlling the controllables

- Difficult to know if you have done too much or too little
- Follow trusted guidelines – CDC, health department, state and local government
- Do not rely on your gut feeling – it will pull you to do too much or too little

Resilience

Co-existing with the uncontrollable/unknown

- Requires changing mindset:
  - From “eliminating” distress
  - To “tolerating” or “co-existing” with distress

This is hard!

In practical sense, it requires having strategies to manage the stress/distress response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Effect of distress</th>
<th>Preferred response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>↑ fight or flight response (HR, BP, etc.)</td>
<td>Use strategies that lessen fight/flight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>↑ attention to “threats”, ↓ attention to all other factors</td>
<td>Attend to the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>↑ threat mitigation behaviors (e.g., internet checking), ↓ engagement in valued activities</td>
<td>Engage in valued activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>↑ isolation</td>
<td>Be socially engaged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Response

Preferred response

Resource

- Physiological
  - Use strategies that lessen fight/flight
  - Apps: Headspace, Calm
  - Or: sit outside, take a warm bath, go for a walk

- Cognitive
  - Attend to the present
  - Anchor on something in the present (breathing, touch/feel) and redirect to a present task

- Behavioral
  - Engage in valued activities
  - Schedule “worry time” and free plan for the rest of your time to be spent on activities you enjoy/find meaningful

- Social
  - Be socially engaged
  - Face to face interaction is difficult now, but make a concerted effort to be in touch with your community (see methodology)
Promoting Resilience in Yourself and Others

- Are you taking care of yourself so that you are able to help others?

- Modeling your own self-care is a great model for other people you work with.

- Are you offering to be someone others check-in with?

Resources

- Care4U
  - [https://uwmc.uwmedicine.org/BU/Care4U/Pages/default.aspx](https://uwmc.uwmedicine.org/BU/Care4U/Pages/default.aspx)
- Peer to Peer Program
  - [https://faculty.uwmedicine.org/p2p/](https://faculty.uwmedicine.org/p2p/)
- CareLink
  - [https://hr.uw.edu/benefits/uw-carelink/](https://hr.uw.edu/benefits/uw-carelink/)