

DEALING WITH COLLECTIVE TRAUMA DURING COVID-19

April 2021 Newsletter



It has been a little more than a year since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, signaling the beginning of the biggest and deadliest crisis that our world has faced in several decades. As individuals confront the challenges of the pandemic and its long-term impact on their daily lives, they are also experiencing a serious threat to their mental and physical well-being. Health care professionals believe the global community is experiencing a form of collective trauma due to the pandemic and that determining how to cope with this trauma is imperative in mitigating a major mental health crisis. This newsletter will discuss what collective trauma is and how each of us can take steps to begin our healing.

What is Trauma?

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) describes trauma as the emotional response that follows a distressing or life-threatening event, usually one that is unexpected and outside of one's control. Traumatic events, such as the impact of war or a pandemic such as the coronavirus, can also take place over a long period of time causing long-term or chronic trauma. Such events activate our body's flight or fight response, which if triggered over a long period of time, can lead to a host of physical and mental health problems. Examples include increased anxiety, hyper-vigilance, sleep problems, depression, difficulty in relationships, cognitive issues such as difficulty concentrating, physical ailments such as cardiac problems and diabetes, and even PTSD.

COVID-19 and Collective Trauma

While trauma is often experienced on an individual level, traumatic events that take place on a large scale, such as COVID-19, can lead to collective trauma. In an article published in *Psychology Today*, Danielle Render Turmaud explains that collective trauma impacts entire communities, often changing the way societies function and how people live their lives. As individuals across the world encounter changes to their daily lives, new government policies, loss of loved ones, financial difficulties due to job loss, and a constant threat to their health and safety, they are also experiencing psychological and emotional distress as well as physical health problems on a collective level.

A number of surveys completed by the CAMH over the course of the pandemic indicate that a significant population of Canada is indeed experiencing mental health problems due to the pandemic. The most recent survey completed in March 2021 found that 29% of Canadians aged 18-39 and 23% of Canadians aged 40-59 reported experiencing moderate to severe anxiety during this period and that anxiety levels often fluctuated depending on the severity and spread of the virus (anxiety levels reported in December 2020 were even higher than the ones reported in March 2021).

Beginning our healing as a community

While collective trauma is distressing for everyone, knowing that we are all in this together can help us begin our healing process. In her article on collective trauma, Turmaud says that it is important to understand the impact of collective trauma on all of us, empathize with each other, and create a coping plan to respond to this shared crisis. Recognizing that we are experiencing collective trauma can also ultimately help us better relate with each other and come up with solutions together on how we can cope with this trauma collectively.



Recognize your strengths and resilience

While the word “trauma” often conjures images of psychological distress, it is important to mention that trauma can result in positive changes as well. According to *Psychology Today*, trauma can also help individuals see themselves as survivors as well as build resilience, a stronger sense of self-worth, and effective coping skills. Think of everything that you have achieved over this past year. Perhaps you learned new coping skills, helped a loved one through a mental health crisis, or worked on improving your relationships. Going through this crisis, however difficult and tragic it has been, has also shed light on our personal strengths and ability to cope, which we may have been previously unaware of. Recognizing our strengths as well as learning new methods to cope with this crisis can help us build resilience making us more capable and confident about facing other challenges in the future.

Prioritize mental and physical well-being

One of the first steps that we can take towards beginning our healing process is to take care of the basics of physical and mental well-being. Doing things as simple as eating a healthy diet, participating in daily exercise, getting enough sleep, moderating our exposure to media coverage of the pandemic, and staying connected with loved ones are foundational to overall well-being and they can also provide some form of structure and normalcy to our lives when dealing with a major disruptive event such as COVID-19.

In addition, practicing relaxation techniques can help cope with trauma, and in particular, alleviate anxiety and stress. In an interview with *Bustle* magazine, psychiatrist Dr. James Gordon, suggests a number of self-care techniques to help heal from trauma caused by COVID-19. For instance, a few minutes of Belly Breathing every day, which involves deep breathing from the diaphragm (imagine that your belly is a balloon that should expand when breathing in), can help reduce the stress hormone, cortisol, and improve energy and concentration. Similarly, starting a practice of drawing, such as drawing or doodling anything that comes to mind or drawing with intention (Dr. Gordon recommends drawing yourself with a problem that you are facing and then with the solution) can reduce anxiety as well as help facilitate self-expression and problem-solving.

While self-care techniques can be very useful in improving mental health, it is important to recognize when you may need to enlist the additional help of a mental health professional. A number of different forms of psychotherapy, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Exposure Therapy, can be particularly useful in dealing with trauma especially for anyone who may be struggling to manage their mental health symptoms on a daily basis.

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