

WORKING THROUGH COVID-19



Article 1

Understanding the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Traumatic Event

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on organizations placing individuals under immense physical and mental pressures. Whether balancing activities of essential work with risk exposure, bearing witness to suffering or loss, dealing with isolation from working at home, or returning to the office, we are encountering increases in mental health issues and trauma-related aftereffects.

Understanding the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Traumatic Event

It's important to realize we aren't alone in experiencing the trauma of COVID-19 since it collectively affected people in every country around the world. Individuals may have experienced a wide range of emotions and developments during the unfolding of the pandemic such as:

- Uncertainty – blindsided by the virus; how long will it last and disrupt our lives; will life ever return to normal or get better; what tomorrow will look like; or how it affects our making plans.
- Isolation – quarantined at home; restricted from routines and normal ways of living; limited contact with others; or inability to socialize or gather with family and friends.
- Abandonment – betrayed by our bodies for contracting the virus; missed milestone celebrations due to social distance requirements; or desertion by society in our abilities to receive medical or support services.
- Fear of sickness or death – how to protect ourselves or others from the virus; concerns about being vaccinated or unvaccinated; doubt about our ability to survive the virus or long term affects; questions about our own mortality; or death of human life, loved ones, friends, and co-workers.
- Helplessness – where to get support; how to support someone else; feelings of not doing enough; or uneasiness about not having enough supplies or scarcity of favorite items.
- Loss – longing for the lives we had pre-COVID-19; grieving the loss of loved ones, friends, and co-workers; suffering financial hardships or debt; or facing end of lease agreements or house foreclosures.



At the same time, no individual's situation is identical and how individuals are affected may be drastically different. Individual experiences will fall on a spectrum from, "I'm Ok to I'm Not Ok." Regardless of where an individual falls on this spectrum, these are normal emotional reactions to an abnormal, distressing situation. It's usual to experience different emotions or re-experience the same ones as the pandemic continues and we face additional stress, worry, and anxiety.

It's also critical to understand the trauma of COVID-19 doesn't stand alone. It layers on top of an individual's personal history, experiences, and ability to process trauma. Groups of individuals at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder include:

- Survivors of serious COVID-19 who had near-death experiences or individuals still struggling with long-term symptoms.
- First responders or health care professionals who served on the frontlines placing themselves and their loved ones in danger while enduring daily contact to pandemic-related death or dying.
- Essential workers who kept services going for organizations and communities risking exposure to the virus without the option of sheltering in place.
- The bereaved who suffered the death of family members while being restricted from their loved one's bedside or not being able to engage in funeral, religious, and spiritual rituals.
- Communities of color who were disproportionately impacted through higher infection rates, increased hate crimes, or affected by ancestral inherited trauma.
- Victims of intimate partner or family domestic violence facing increased incidents or more severe dangers due to the quarantines and stay-at-home measures enacted to reduce the speed of transmission.

Many individuals will initially have post-traumatic stress disorder like symptoms short-term, such as preoccupation with what's happened and what will happen next or intensified feelings of grief, anger, depression, and guilt. These are all common post-trauma reactions to the pandemic. However, the good news is most individuals will not develop long-term symptoms and will recover on their own or seek support by turning to family, friends, spiritual leaders, employee assistance program professionals, or mental health therapists who will listen and offer comfort without judgment.

Acknowledging and realizing individual emotions and different ways of handling trauma are key to lessening its impact while furthering recovery. Periodically check in with others to see how everyone is doing. Listen to each other's concerns with kindness and an open mind. Now is the time to connect with each other about the challenges we face and offer support. The key to recovery is practicing empathy, finding out what individuals' needs are, and allowing them the space to find their own rhythms and means to adapt.

