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How to cope with traumatic events like the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major source of traumatic stress for many of us, which in some cases may develop into PTSD. Here are some ways to get through it.

Use Patient's **coronavirus checker tool** if you have any symptoms of fever, a new cough or loss of smell or taste. Until you have used the tool and been advised what action to take, please stay at home and avoid contact with other people.

The coronavirus pandemic has come as a huge jolt to many of us. Within the space of a few weeks, we went from a state of relative normality to being in lockdown, with almost every aspect of our everyday lives overturned. It didn't help that supermarket shelves looked like something from an apocalypse movie, and the news played scenes of tragedy around the clock.

It's been bad enough, in other words, even if you haven't been exposed to the virus personally. And for those who have been ill or lost a loved one, the potential for traumatic stress is even greater. The same applies to those working on the frontline of the NHS, those who have lost their livelihoods, or those grappling with any number of other personal hardships.

As psychotherapist Noel McDermott explains, trauma can be defined as anything that overwhelms a person's ability to cope.

"Trauma causes feelings of helplessness, and diminishes your sense of self and your ability to feel the full range of emotions," he says. "Everyone has a different reaction to trauma, so you might notice any effects quickly, or not for a long time afterwards."

What traumatic stress involves

What counts as trauma is very personal, meaning two people could experience the same circumstances and respond quite differently. However, traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety (including emotional safety). They might take the form of a single distressing event, such as the sudden loss of a loved one. Or they might be marked by a period of unrelenting stress - for example, working in the NHS and not being able to access PPE.

After a traumatic event (or events) takes place, it is normal to experience trouble sleeping, to show symptoms of anxiety or depression, or to have difficulties re-adjusting to day-to-day life.

"These responses indicate the individual is processing the event and usually this passes after a few weeks," says McDermott. "In most case the trauma symptoms subside significantly after two weeks with possibly some much less intense symptoms staying for up to a month."

Unfortunately, in some cases the initial traumatic stress can develop into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In these cases, you may find yourself unable to move on, with your nervous system stuck in a state of hypervigilance.

"If your symptoms last over a month, you might be suffering from PTSD," says Dr Elena Touroni, a consultant psychologist and co-founder/co-CEO of My Online Therapy. "While the symptoms of PTSD might be extremely distressing, they are, in fact, a form of protection. They are your body's way of trying to keep you alert and 'safe' from that threat happening again."

How to know when it's PTSD

Some common symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts relating to the trauma itself. You might also experience sleeping difficulties, problems concentrating and a racing heart.

"You might also avoid situations or people that remind you of what happened, or you may experience heightened reactions to loud or unexpected noises or movements," says Dr Touroni.

It isn't always clear why some people develop PTSD and others don't. One review of the evidence, which looked at people who'd been exposed to trauma, found that 17% met the clinical criteria for PTSD a year after the event. In general, repeated and long-term exposure to trauma will increase the likelihood of developing PTSD, as will exposure at an early age. The severity of the traumatic event is also a factor.

How to help yourself

While not all of these factors lie within our control, there are still a few ways we can help ourselves and reduce the risk of developing PTSD. It all begins with insight and understanding: accepting the trauma symptoms, and the ways they help us heal, rather than running away from them.

"Don't fight the healing by self-medication through drink and drugs," says McDermott. "Engage in positive self-care when in traumatic situations - eat properly, rest and sleep, hydrate, exercise, ensure you do things that you enjoy, engage with nature. Thirdly, talk to people about what is happening to you. This has a number of benefits as it always helps to share the load - we normalise through sharing with others, and social support is the biggest factor in developing resilience to life's challenges."

Accessing outside help

Dr Touroni adds that grounding techniques and mindfulness breathing exercises can also be beneficial. However, if you think you might be suffering from PTSD (relating to coronavirus or otherwise) it's really important to seek help from a mental health professional. You could begin by visiting your GP, who will refer you to the appropriate services (even though for the time being this may need to take place online).

Waiting lists for NHS talking therapy can often be long and not everyone will meet the criteria to go on the list. You can now book private video counselling sessions on Patient Access so you can access therapy safely, from the comfort of your own home.

Other options include checking your eligibility for counselling through a charity (for example, the LGBT Foundation offers therapy for people in the LGBTQ+ community in Manchester). You can also speak to your employer about mental health support they may offer. During the pandemic, you can access free 20-minute therapy sessions with volunteer mental health professionals through Therapists for Covid.

"Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a type of therapy that is particularly effective in treating PTSD," says Dr Touroni. "EMDR uses eye movements to process distressing memories that can sometimes remain 'frozen' in the brain because they were traumatic. It works to change the meaning of painful events and integrate difficult experiences on an emotional level so that person is able to move forward in their life."

McDermott adds that there are many other types of therapy, including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which have been shown to help with PTSD.

"Some of these therapies are less effective online, but CBT is just as effective online as real-world," he says. "It's also a good idea to use positive psychology approaches which look at ways we can grow from this trauma, develop self-compassion and find meaning in the struggle."

Unfortunately, this pandemic looks set to be a long-term source of stress, rather than an isolated incident, and we're not out the other side yet. It's vital that we do all we can to care for ourselves - and look out for each other - while we're still in its midst.

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