

My Turn: Recognize the shared trauma we are experiencing

By Carlene Casciano-McCann, LMHC

A world-wide shared crisis like the coronavirus pandemic is a rare occurrence. Understanding and treating it as a traumatic event is important now and in the aftermath of this crisis.

Trauma is a response to a deeply distressing event or multiple events that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Fears about one's own health and that of loved ones, disrupted routines, social isolation, and financial strain cause stress in most families and exacerbate stress levels in at-risk and vulnerable families.

Many people are experiencing symptoms of trauma in this moment. Acknowledging our collective experience is the first step to mitigating the impact of this crisis on our mental health. Our experience in the world is not what it was two months ago. The pandemic has created upheaval in our homes and communities. We have had to adjust to a new and completely unfamiliar normal.

For those of us providing mental health services, we anticipate an uptick in symptoms of anxiety and depression, increased difficulty concentrating, focusing, and communicating, changes in eating and sleep patterns, and, sadly, an increase in substance use, domestic violence and child abuse.

At-risk families are especially vulnerable to increased stressors due to this pandemic. Parental stress is a major predictor of physical abuse in children. Resources that at-risk families rely on are not as accessible to them right now. Children's access to teachers and other mandated reporters is limited due to sheltering in place. School is often a lifeline and safe haven for vulnerable children and school personnel are often the first to notice a child's emotional pain and observe physical signs of abuse.

The stress and anxiety many people are feeling is a normal reaction to a profoundly abnormal event. Here are some ways to take care of your mental health:

- **Connect:** Combat feelings of isolation by finding ways to connect with family and friends through video chats or the telephone. Share your frustrations; find a sympathetic ear. Ask for help if you are concerned about harming your children. Shared experiences, even if difficult, can be validating.
- **Stay informed:** Absorb enough information to get the facts but take breaks from social media and the news. The 24-hour news cycle is unrelenting and can have a negative impact on your thoughts and moods.
- **Follow guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19:** Following the Department of Health's recommendations is, in a small way, an opportunity to exert some control over a seemingly uncontrollable situation.

- **Maintain healthy habits:** Our doctor's preach healthy eating, exercise, and good sleep hygiene during "normal" times. These habits are more important now.
- **Develop mindfulness:** This is a mental state achieved by focusing on the present moment and acknowledging one's feelings as calmly as possible. Not always easy, but worth the effort. Meditation, arts and crafts, reading, and being outside with social distance are all ways to work on mindfulness.
- **Help others:** This can be empowering. Check on an elderly neighbor or family member, offer to do their shopping, make face coverings for essential workers, donate to a charity or volunteer remotely. Helping during the crisis can conquer those feelings of helplessness.
- **Contact a professional:** Trauma-informed therapists are available to you. Many agencies, including St. Mary's Home for Children, are providing tele-health services. Reach out if this is all too much.

Overall, be easy on yourself. You're not going to be the perfect home school teacher, employee, parent, or spouse right now and that's okay. Acknowledge your feelings and recognize that you're doing the best you can under the circumstances. Connect with others and find humor where you can and don't forget to be silly with your children from time to time. Eventually we will get back to some semblance of normal. We need to do our best to keep ourselves safe and healthy in the meantime.

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