



REACTIONS TO DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES

EXPERIENCES FROM THE PANDEMIC



DISCLOSURES

No disclosures.



A NOTE ON FEELINGS...

“...as someone who has experienced depression at times in my life, I feel qualified to say that sadness is not the same thing. Depression is a medical condition, a function of brain chemistry. It can be crippling, devastating, bleak. It makes it hard to live one’s life. Subjectively, I experienced it as a dullness, a kind of lessening, or graying, of all emotion. Sadness, on the other hand, is part of being human. So is loss, pain and loneliness...they all have their own hues and characters. Unlike depression, sadness does not worsen when one yields to it; it softens, teaches, makes way. And in the yielding is some of the quality of liberation itself.”

-Jay Michaelson, *The Gate of Tears*

DSM V: ADJUSTMENT DISORDERS

- Distress that is out of proportion with expected reactions to the stressor
- Symptoms must be clinically significant—they cause marked distress and impairment in functioning
- Symptom onset within three months of stressor, not lasting more than six months after stressor removal
- Distress and impairment are related to the stressor and are not an escalation of existing mental health disorders. The reaction isn't part of normal bereavement. Once the stressor is removed or the person has begun to adjust and cope, the symptoms must subside within six months.

ADJUSTMENT DISORDERS

- Why diagnosis persists
 - Lack stigma and consequences
 - Need diagnosis for third party/legal entities
 - Describing response to stressor for which person seeking help
 - High rate of suicide
 - Stigma of potential personality disorder diagnoses/Need for Axis I Diagnosis

ADJUSTMENT DISORDER

- Problem with diagnosis:
 - Stressor often doesn't go away or is extended
 - Implication therapist has access to what is normal response

WHAT ARE RESPONSES WE SEE IN PANDEMIC?

“And now to the question of the meaning of our imperfections and of our particular imbalances: Let us not forget that each individual person is imperfect, but each is imperfect in a different way, each “in his own way.” And as imperfect as he is, he is uniquely imperfect So expressed in a positive way, he becomes somehow irreplaceable, unable to be represented by anyone else, unexchangeable.”

- Victor Frankl, *Yes to Life, In Spite of Everything*

COMMON REACTIONS TO DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Guilt
- Sadness and Grief

ANXIETY

- Danger of virus
- Isolation and loneliness
- Family interactions
- Work stresses
- Exacerbation of prior anxiety
- Danger of other feelings

ANGER

- Change in lifestyle
- Work changes and demands with little control
- Isolation
- Access to health care
- Racial/ SES differences in impact of pandemic
- Prior family dynamics
- Stigma of health care workers, police

GUILT

- Positive benefits of current situation
- Not doing what others are
- Self care

SADNESS AND GRIEF

- Loss of people close to us
- Loss of routine
- Plans cancelled we had been looking forward to
- Unclear future
- Loss of prior work and life definition –
 - I didn't sign up for this!

HOPELESSNESS

- When will this end?
- How can our lives ever return to normal?
- When will I see my loved ones again?
- Longing for personal connection

FATIGUE AND EXHAUSTION

- Don't know where my day went
- No breaks between meetings
- Overwhelmed by growing patient needs
- So many tasks to tend to – all are more difficult not
- Emotions not experienced

REACTIONS TO EMOTIONS

To Decrease Intensity of Anxiety and Associated Feelings

Experience of our emotions don't generally cause suffering – defenses against them do.

- Externalizing Behaviors
- Internalizing Behaviors
- Substance Use
- Passivity
- Detachment

DETACHMENT

- Muting of emotional experiences as coping experience
- Separation from others as protection
- Response to world without connections
 - Virtual meetings
 - Lack experience of being with people
 - Flattened world
 - Difficult to engage in humor, side conversations, before/after meeting
 - Regression of hand raising

DETACHMENT

- Exacerbated by:
 - Lack of spontaneous experiences between leaders and followers
 - Therapy with clients on virtual platforms
 - Difficulty planning for the future
 - Experiences that are overwhelming
 - Images on the news



RESPONSE

“We can’t control the circumstances of the age we find ourselves, though we can control how we respond.”



FINDING OUR VOICE TO RESPOND

- Self care
- Identification of emotions and experiencing them without judgment
- Connection with important relationships
- Learning self regulation techniques
- Do something
- Self recognition

LEADERSHIP

- Challenged by lack of hallway conversations and natural meetings
- Need new solutions often to old problems
- Find spark within us – must overcome fatigue, passivity, hopelessness, detachment
- Start working on a future – it will be there
- Reach out to others to check in who we might otherwise see

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