

## Thoughts and Hope On Our Mental Health During COVID-19

Dr. Andy Johanson April 14, 2020

I was asked to write a blog on mental health during the age of COVID- 19. Many thoughts and feelings are being experienced during this time of our confinement.

- Will we be safe; will our love ones be safe?
- What could happen if we get the virus, will we survive?
- What will our loved ones do without us?

So many questions and so many thoughts during this anxiety producing time.

Fear of the unknown raises its head, and we keep wondering, “what if”? The what ifs are laden with our fears, creating more anxiety.

Fears are a normal response to the unknown; let me repeat: fears are a normal response to the unknown. Our knowledge of the emotion of fear has been enhanced by the field of Evolutional Psychology. Evolutional Psychology has stated, in a nutshell, without fear the human species would not have survived. During the evolution of human species we needed to have fear, for without it the human species’ would have been destroyed by ever present predators. Fear is an instinctual way of protecting the human species’ so it can survive. Let us incorporate that into our thinking process, that fear is an asset not a liability.

During this period of confinement, there will many times when we have thoughts that we don’t want to entertain in our mind. All thoughts are acceptable if we will understand them as messages, which are communicating our struggles at this time. Thoughts are neither bad nor good they just are, they are thoughts which have been stimulated by the events of the time.

A healthy way of experiencing these thoughts is to accept them as messengers. Accept that all our thoughts are our way of expressing what is happening at this time. I believe this is a time when we should be good to ourselves and not beat ourselves for our thoughts.

In order to help maintain a healthy self, it is positive to share our fears, anxiety and thoughts with our family and friends. It is a positive way of getting these feelings outside, relieving our anxiety and tensions. Now, it the time to be kind to ourselves and accepting that we are doing what we can.

A small note on how we can be a therapeutic partner to our spouses, families, and friends. We can each be a therapeutic partner given two basic considerations:

1. Listen with a non-judgmental attitude (this gives the speaker a chance vent and explore their feelings),
2. Listen to connect and not listen to correct (Dr. Wendy Axelrod). There is no right or wrong feelings, they just are.

During this period of confinement, I have personally found exercising to be very helpful. It allows the mind to concentrate on the body's activity. It also gives you the opportunity to have new insights. In my neighborhood I have been seeing a large surge in walking. Walking is an activity which only requires putting one foot in front of the other...it is magical how it helps the body and mind. If you are not able to walk, you can contract your hand muscles holding them to a count of 5 seconds, then relax them ( a set of five times each time you do this exercise).

Linda Graham a Marriage & Family Therapist presented a workshop entitled "Resilience: Bouncing Back from Disappointment, Difficulty, and Even Disaster". She presented three exercises which focus on reducing anxiety on the mind and body. Here they are:

### **The Miracle of Breathing**

Sit in a comfortable chair with your hands on your knees

1. Take a deep, deep breath in through your nose for 4 seconds holding in your chest
2. Slowly letting the air out through your mouth for 4 seconds
3. Rest for 4 second
4. Then repeat four times for five a day

When you are engaged in the breathing exercises your mind is concentrating on you breathing and reduces your tension.

### **Hand on Your Heart**

Sit in a comfortable chair with your hand over your heart

1. With your hand over your heart think about pleasant things of the past, as you breath in and out
2. Let you mind wander, allowing it to have pleasant memories
3. You will find your breathing become slower and your body experiencing waves of relaxation

### **Share Your Rose of the Day**

Sharing Your Rose of the Day with your family and friends. This is a metaphor for both the thorny stem that can hurt and the beauty and fragrance of the flower.

1. As you are sitting with your family or friends either face to face or virtually
2. You share your rose of the day...First share your thorns of the day...that pricked you...what hurt you, sharing your thoughts that are painful
3. Secondly share your rose bud of the day...What are you looking forward to

These exercises can be helpful in lifting your spirits...You are allowing your body and brain to be in sync, creating some relaxation. You are involving yourself with your family and friends, and are actively supporting each other. You are allowing yourself to be vulnerable in sharing your fears and anxiety during your confinement. Remembering that there are no bad or good feelings...they are just feelings.

I would like to end with two quotes:

“If there is life, there is hope” Stephen Hawking

“What you have ...make the best of it” Paul Johanson

I would like to end by saying be good to yourselves...this is a new experience for each of us. Be thoughtful of others as well as yourself.

Warmest regards,

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