Understanding the Pandemic as a Shared Traumatic Experience

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Our Shared Experiences

- Please, share your experience with the pandemic since last March
- Please, write in the chat section how you are coping
- Please, name specific tools and skills you have used
- Please, indicate if these skills are new or you always had them
Self-Care & Self-Awareness

- Topic may cause distress
- Liability (non-counseling relationship)
- Crisis hotline: NAMI St. Louis (314) 962-4670
- Deep breathing exercise, awareness of one’s body, counting till ten and back with each breath
What is Trauma

- **Trauma** is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel a full range of emotions and experiences. It does not discriminate and it is pervasive throughout the world. ([https://integratedlistening.com/what-is-trauma/](https://integratedlistening.com/what-is-trauma/))

- Individual response to trauma varies from person to person

- When someone experiences a **traumatic** event or experiences extreme fear, brain chemistry is altered and the brain begins to function differently--this is called the "Fear Circuity" and it is a protective mechanism which we all have inside of us.

- Trauma impacts how our brain functions, it has neurological effect and response

- Traumatic events can lead to heightened vigilance, increased fear, and challenges to individual identity
Brain Structure

Frontal Lobe
Amygdala
Memory Processing

The *prefrontal cortex* is the decision-making/choice-making part of the brain; it’s the part of the brain responsible for rational thinking, planning effective responses, remembering important information, etc.

Trauma impacts our basic emotions, *Amygdala* is activated, Prefrontal Cortex is de-activated, people go into “auto-pilot” mode, we go back to what’s familiar.

Memories are impacted: brain doesn’t track memories in chronological manner, memories of trauma are fragmented and lapsed.
How Can Trauma Be Shared

- Trauma that is shared by a larger group rather than experienced by an individual is called collective trauma.

- Collective trauma is a psychological trauma experienced by a group of people of any size, up to and including an entire society in response to a mass traumatizing event such as natural disasters and man-made disasters impacting collective identity.

- Hirschberger (2018) describes the collective traumatic event as “a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. Aside from the horrific loss of life, collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning.

- Researchers & mental health professionals anticipate major collective trauma among first-responders who were on the front lines of COVID on daily basis and call for proactive measures to address their mental health needs.

- Based on our knowledge of trauma & collective trauma, we can anticipate that many of these individuals will experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression and substance use disorders. The impact of these disorders will include absenteeism, disability and unemployment, which compounds health care and mental health care access issues, personal suffering and suicide.

[https://mhanys.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/05/POL_20200429_LegIssue-CollectiveTrauma.pdf]
COVID as a Collective Experience of Trauma

- There are different types of collective traumas. Some are immediate and relatively limited in duration. Examples include natural disasters such as Hurricane Maria. Others are less immediately dramatic, but much more prolonged, such as an extended pandemic, economic downturn, or military conflict.

- The current global pandemic falls within the parameters of a collective trauma experiences by individuals across the globe.

- The immediate effects are of the utmost concern, but it's also important to consider the longer-term collective trauma of the pandemic.

- The COVID-19 pandemic is a global event that will result in both individual and collective mental health effects. The social and economic impacts are still accumulating, and it is likely there will be long-term societal mental health consequences.

Impact of Collective Trauma

Studies have shown that on societal level some of the potential lasting impacts on future generations include:

- Increased individual and collective fear
- Damaged national pride
- Feelings of humiliation
- Identity crisis
- Increased feelings of vulnerability
- Heightened vigilance for new threats
- Re-experiencing past collective trauma
Pandemic Impact on Individual

- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Depression
- Sense of Isolation
- Increased interpersonal conflict within the unit “locked” together, expectations
- Loss of identity, career, future goals, opportunities for growth and development
- Gender-based experience of collective trauma (equity issues)
- Child-care stress
- Employment (stress, impact on efficiency, loss)
- Isolation
- Disrupted routine, sense of disorganization and loss of focus
- Changes in sleep and eating habits

Earlier, you identified some experiences related to COVID. Compare to this list and note all that apply to you.
Identity Crisis

James Marcia (1980) has further developed Erikson’s (1902-1994) stages of psychosocial development & noted that the balance between identity & confusion lies in making commitment to identity. He developed a method to measure four different identity status types. This method looks at three different areas of functioning: occupational role, beliefs and values, and sexuality.

- **Foreclosure** status is when a person has made a commitment without attempting identity exploration.
- **Identity achievement** occurs when an individual has gone through an exploration of different identities and made a commitment to one.
- **Identity diffusion** occurs when there is neither an identity crisis nor commitment. Those with a status of identity diffusion tend to feel out of place in the world and don't pursue a sense of identity.
- **Moratorium** is the status of a person who is actively involved in exploring different identities but has not made a commitment.

Which category do you identify with the most?
How has the pandemic impacted you within this identity status?
COVID’s Impact on Individual and Collective Identity

These are some of the common symptoms of individual and collective identity crisis:

- What am I passionate about?
- What are my spiritual beliefs?
- What are my values?
- What is my role in society or purpose in life?
- Who am I? (This question may be in general, or in regards to your relationships, age, and/or career.)
- Where are we moving as a society?
- Where do we belong on the global scale?
- What does the future hold for humankind?
- What’s the meaning of life and existence?
- General, heightened questioning of humankind, heightened mistrust and fear
Impact of COVID on Marginalized Populations

Even though, COVID is a shared traumatic event globally, the impact of this public health crisis is anything but equal, and disproportionately affects communities of color and other vulnerable populations, such as ethnic minorities, undocumented migrant workers, elderly populations, individuals with disabilities, individuals/families in extreme poverty, individuals with no health insurance, homeless youth, incarcerated individuals, etc. IPV is another major area that has been exacerbated.

Such vulnerable populations are typically those who have experienced a history of discrimination and marginalization.

The most vulnerable populations are those with less access to resources, which makes life more complicated for them, this includes safe shelter, health-care services, mental-health services, food, drinking water, access to AC/heat, access to wifi (to continue to work/study), etc.

People who are low income and people of color are also statistically less likely to have health coverage which makes it even harder to access services during a global health crisis.

People in communities of color often suffer from the kinds of chronic health conditions that during this pandemic have been described as “underlying” which are however the result of structural social violence that increases rates of trauma among this population

Empathy

While mental health services ought to be provided by licensed professionals, we all can be a part of communal healing practices:

- Empathy, active listening, non-judgmental presence
- Kindness
- Understanding that everyone is going through something even if it’s not visible
- Patience
- Compassion
- Extended grace (vs lowered expectations and standards)
- Inclusion
- Virtual meets for social interaction
- Letter-writing (pan-pal programs)
- Self-Care
- Referring to low-cost or pro bono services
Personal Commitment to Wellness

- What are you doing to keep hope and optimism alive? How is it working?
- How are you committing to take care of yourself?
- Write down one coping strategy that you can realistically commit to as a weekly exercise to help reduce anxiety, depression and sense of isolation and increase sense of well-being, optimist, renewed sense of meaning, connection and growth.
- Write down one act of kindness you can extend to others with respect to own boundaries and wellness.

Share Time

What is one take away you got from this presentation? (please, leave in comments)