Fear of Needles & the Unknown: Compassionately Addressing Vaccine Avoidance

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Agenda

❖ Competing emotional experiences regarding vaccine
❖ Anxiety 101
❖ Fear Stimuli
❖ Behaviors based on emotions/values
❖ Compassion towards struggle
Emotional Experience

❖ Finally! There’s a vaccine!
❖ Conflicting emotions
  ❖ Some felt hope/excitement
  ❖ others felt fear/uncertainty
❖ Understandable experience to want to make decisions from a place of emotion.
❖ “Isn’t this trying to tell me something?”
Anxiety Basics

- Feelings of unease, worry, doubt about an uncertainty/perception of danger
- Brain’s way of warning us of threat
  - anxiety vs. fear
  - Fear is reaction to a present danger
- Can be a helpful motivator
- Not always accurate
  - “Feelings aren’t fact”
Anxiety Basics

❖ Perceived threat stimulus leads to call to action
  ❖ Threatened by covid = safety measures (mask, social distance, wash hands)
  ❖ Threatened by covid = vaccine
  ❖ Threatened by vaccine = avoidance
❖ Both groups may feel threat of covid but one group perceives additional threat in vaccine
Anxiety Basics

❖ Negative reinforcement cycle
  ❖ Keeps threat perception alive and strengthening
    ❖ e.g. Individual with health anxiety, reads scary things on internet regarding vaccine so avoids, keeps feeling more and more scared based on avoidance and additional input of misinformation

❖ Breaking up with negative reinforcement cycle
  ❖ Resisting urge to perform safety behaviors
    ❖ e.g. avoidance, reassurance seeking, “researching”, checking, etc.
What is the fear stimulus?

- Phobias
  - Fear of needles
  - Fear of doctors offices
  - Health anxiety
  - Fear of uncertainty
  - Healthcare trauma
Phobias

❖ BII (Blood-Injection-Injury)
❖ Fear of medical equipment/doctors/doctors offices
  ❖ “white coat syndrome”
❖ Health anxiety
❖ Exposure and response prevention
  ❖ Exposing self to fear stimulus without engaging in safety behaviors
  ❖ Avoidance, checking, reassurance seeking
Quick strategies for phobias

- Mindfulness techniques
- Values based action
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Encourage yourself
  - Stadium playlist
- Treat yourself
- Allow yourself to feel anxious
- Resist google rabbit trails
Fear of Uncertainty

❖ We already function in daily uncertainty
❖ Easy access to everyone’s opinion
❖ Misinformation hits at core fears
  ❖ Health, family, future, unknown
❖ Information gathering vs. reassurance seeking
❖ Mindful consumption of social media
❖ Concept of “enough”
Confirmation Bias

❖ Confirmation bias

❖ Natural tendency to seek safety
  ❖ doesn’t feel comfortable to question what one is comfortable with
  ❖ Favoring new information that confirms already held beliefs/theories
  ❖ Seeking, interpreting, remembering information that supports already held beliefs

❖ We lose objectivity
Healthy skepticism

- Applied to all
  - things we wish/think are true
  - things we are skeptical of
- Open minded
- “I’m open to finding out that I was wrong.”
Healthcare Trauma

❖ Racial inequity
  ❖ Tuskegee experiment
  ❖ Vaccine is equitable; care in hospitals might not be.
  ❖ Many factors why racial and ethnic minority groups may not trust these institutions
❖ Bad experience with healthcare provider/medicine in past
Behavior based on emotion

- Functioning from a place of emotion/feelings
- Leaves room for regret and missed opportunities
  - “I wish I had gone to that job interview. I’ll never know how it would’ve played out.”
  - “If I had gone to the dentist when I started feeling pain, I could have avoided additional pain.”
- Shame/blame game
Behavior based on values

❖ Values are verbs and adverbs, not nouns and adjectives
❖ Values based action
❖ Allows the opportunity to do difficult things
❖ “I’m getting the vaccine even though I’m scared, because I want to protect those around me.”
❖ “I might not like how it all played out, but I can sleep at night knowing I lived congruently with my values.”
Compassion towards struggle

- Fear/anxiety/excitement are all valid experiences
- Feelings aren’t fact
  - Feeling that I’m in danger is not the same as actually being in danger
- We all know what it’s like to feel fear and distrust
- Balance of trust and healthy skepticism
Questions?

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