BEYOND COPING TO FIND MEANING IN CRISIS

How to take "one day at a time"

Marianne Huff, LMSW
Mental Health Association in Michigan
"An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior."
What I am hoping the “take aways” will be:

1. That you will take away what resonates with you and leave whatever does not. That is “okay”.
2. That there are no perfect ways to navigate a global crisis that impacts all of us—even those of us who are in the “helping professions”. That is “okay.”
3. Remember that you are human, too. You have needs and wants and desires. You also have your own set of fears, anxieties and responses. That is “okay.”
4. For our generation, this is new and uncharted territory. We will make mistakes along the way as we try to help others and we may have to “color outside the lines.” I am referencing the fact that the United States Department of Health and Human Services has relaxed some of its HIPAA guidelines regarding platforms that can and cannot be used for telemedicine in light of the crisis. That is “okay.”
5. Some of what we learned during our college training and in the course of gathering CEUs and other knowledge through webinars and seminars and books may not work during this time. We may have to improvise. That is “okay.”
By the way, just a few sentences about me

- I am a Social Worker with a Clinical License and I have a small private practice.
- I work primarily with individuals who have anxiety, depression and significant trauma histories. I also work with young people who have serious mental illnesses such as Schizophrenia.
- I have been a disability rights advocate for many years and I am currently serving as the Director of the Mental Health Association in Michigan, which is the oldest advocacy organization in the state that advocates for individuals with psychiatric conditions. Our work is mainly focused on public policy and influencing legislation that impacts individuals with behavioral health conditions. We advocate for individuals across the lifespan.
- I am a former adjunct faculty from Baker College where I taught a variety of classes about Human Services and Psychology.
- Most importantly, I am a human being and I have struggled with anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder since childhood. I only share that to say that while I may have done a lot of work on myself and as a professional, I don’t have clear answers about how to “deal with” the current pandemic.
- PS: I LOVE QUOTES! YOU WILL SEE A LOT OF THEM IN THIS PRESENTATION
Before we get started, let’s make sure that everyone is ready and seated firmly in their seats or chairs or on their sofas.

- Because of the collective trauma all of us are experiencing, before we begin, let’s follow the suggestion of Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk and make sure that we are grounded and safe as we talk about coping within the context of the current pandemic.

- Let’s begin by taking in a short breath followed by a longer exhalation. If you are okay with a longer inbreath, please do. But try to follow it by a longer exhalation. Let’s do this about 4-5 times.

- Now, beginning at the top of your body, notice any bodily sensations or feelings. Notice your head, your ears, your face and your neck moving down through your body. Are your arms comfortably at your side? Do you feel your butt in the chair? On the couch? Are your feet touching the floor? If so, good. Focus on feeling and being safe in your body and in your home or office or wherever you happen to be.

- Take a moment now to simply pay attention to your surroundings. Notice the clock if you have one; notice the sound of the furnace or just focus for a few moments on your own breathing.

- Repeat this affirmation a few times to yourself, “I am safe in this moment.” Now we can begin.

- Taken from the work of Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, MD and his work.
Let’s talk about being a social worker at this time—is it hard? Yup. It is.

- Here are some things that are probably obvious to all of you as social workers, but they are worth repeating anyway:

  - The role of social workers and the values of social work are best summarized by the Preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics:

  - The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.

  - Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. "Clients" is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems. [https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English](https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English)

  - We are, by nature, caretakers, nurturers and empaths who want to help others. Sometimes we “help” to the detriment of ourselves.

  - This current coronavirus crisis may be one of those opportunities to learn that, unless we care for ourselves, we will be unable to help anyone else.
Let’s talk honestly about fear.

We do not fear the unknown. We fear what we think we know about the unknown.

Teal Swan
Some thoughts about anxiety and fear

What makes the anxiety and the fear about this current pandemic so difficult for all of us?

Some possible answers:

This is uncharted territory. We have not had a pandemic of this magnitude since the Spanish Flu in 1918-1919.

Many are concerned about the impact that the prolonged quarantine will have upon the economy and the possibility of a recession.

For social workers, many of us are concerned about the poor; the disabled; the elderly; the infirmed; children who are living in poverty, fear and with unstable family situations. We know that the most vulnerable among us are already struggling but we ask ourselves: Is the coronavirus going to make things worse?


- *anxious*: apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill : a state of being anxious
How does our FEAR “inter-fear” with our ability to help others?

- We might feel ill-equipped to know how to help our clients or our families or friends or even ourselves because of how we feel.
- We might feel as if we don’t have the answers to much of what is going on because we don’t have the answers. Reference point: Even leaders at all levels of government are struggling with knowing “what to do”.
- I don’t know about you, but my undergraduate and graduate training (although, admittedly, it has been a long time) and my experience has not necessarily prepared me for “this.”
- What about you? Do you feel equipped or ill-equipped? If so, how do you feel either way?
Fear or anxiety is a normal part of living. It's the body's way of telling us something isn't right. It keeps us from harm's way and prepares us to act quickly in the face of danger.

~ Author: Abhijit Naskar
WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES FIRST?

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

You are the experts so I would like to hear from all of you.
Some difficult truths and realities:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Not knowing when the pandemic will end or when the coronavirus will be contained adds to our collective fears.</th>
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<tr>
<td>We are isolated and some of us cannot work from home.</td>
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<td>The ongoing nature of the “event” causes anxiety and fear because no one can predict the end. We also don’t know how devastating this event will be to our world because it is not over yet.</td>
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<td>For many who have a history of trauma, this can be a time of increased anxiety and fear and it can also be a time in which old wounding can be resurrected.</td>
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<td>For others who have a history of trauma, however, this can be a time to recall all that has been survived during life experiences.</td>
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<td>For others, looking back at the history of other pandemics that have threatened the human species can be helpful because we know that human beings are resilient</td>
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<td>But right now, all of those things may not quell the sense that this may go on for a long time and we fear what we don’t know.</td>
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The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.

William James
Let’s focus on what we can control right now as we consider the “tools” we have available to us to help ourselves and our clients.

- What is under our control right now?
- What is happening in the present moment?
- Are we safe now? Are we okay now?
What is in your toolbox?

◦ How do you cope with uncertainty and anxiety?
◦ What are your tools?
◦ Do you have a regular routine?
◦ Do you have social supports?
◦ Do you have the ability to take a break from your work?
◦ Are you limiting the amount of time that you spend listening to the news reports about the coronavirus?
◦ Are you getting regular exercise; sleeping well; and eating healthy?
What is in your current toolbox?

- We will explore:
  - What tools do you have in your toolbox?
  - How do you use those tools to work through the uncertainty of the current pandemic?
  - How do you take care of yourself so that you can be of service to your clients? To your organizations? To yourself?
  - What role do our beliefs about ourselves and others play in the way in which we cope?
  - What tools do we need that we do not have right now?
Cognitive reframing means that we look at a problem or a situation from a different perspective.

For example, someone who is not able to leave the house right now due to being quarantined might be upset that he/she cannot go out. However, what are some ways that the person can look at this situation differently?

Suggestions?

Cognitive reframing means that, in order to avoid catastrophic thinking, a person may consider what is happening in the “now.” For example, if you are safe and your family is safe, you can say, “I am safe now.”

Facts can also be helpful right now. I talked with an individual who said that she was fearful that every time she coughed that she was getting sick with COVID-19. We then talked about the facts: 1. She has not been out of the house in almost 14 days. 2. The average time for onset of the virus is about 5.5 days. 3. Anxiety can cause physical symptoms like shortness of breath; chest pain; dizziness; and fatigue. 4. I reminded her that she is smart and capable. Her fear is that she would not know what to do if something “bad” happens to her boyfriend or her family. We came back to the “now.” I asked, “Are you safe, now?” “Yes.” “Focus on that,” I said.
Cognitive Reframing helps us to look at a situation from a different perspective.

For example, it has been suggested that the current “lockdown” that limits our ability to “move” may be an opportunity to “sit still”.

It may be an opportunity to read a book or to take an online class.

Write in that journal that has been sitting empty for the past five years.

Start that exercise program that you were too busy to begin.

It may be an opportunity to meditate or to practice mindfulness.

It may be an opportunity to take care of ourselves and to rethink “where” we are going.
This is the only thing we can control

You cannot always control what goes on outside. But you can always control what goes on inside.

Wayne Dyer
Cognitive Reframe of COVID-19

C – Courage to face adversity
O – Opportunity to go within
V – Validation of our humanness
I -- Inner-work leading to healing and empowerment

D – Demonstration of resilience

Crisis is an opportunity to rethink and to redo and to revise.

What does this experience mean to you?
Other tools for the toolbox

Recall times when you dealt with a traumatic situation and found a gift in the trauma.

Were gifts in the trauma? If so, what were/are the gifts?

Do you believe that there are gifts in challenging circumstances?

What meaning do you attach to those circumstances?
Ways to maintain a sense of balance and normalcy

Finding ways to incorporate physical exercise into your daily routine is important. Walk. Run. Get out an old exercise DVD—remember Richard Simmons?

Keep a daily schedule. Get up at the same time.

Make sure you have balance and boundaries between your work (many of you are probably doing telemedicine from home) and your personal life.

The key to good mental health is:

BALANCE AND BOUNDARIES
Meditation

https://chopra.com/articles/whats-the-difference-between-meditation-and-mindfulness  Melissa Eisler, Chopra Center

- Meditation
  - Meditation typically refers to formal, seated meditation practice. There are many types of meditation—those that focus on opening your heart, expanding your awareness, calming your mind, experiencing inner peace, and the list goes on. Here are some examples:
    - Breath-awareness meditation
    - Loving-kindness meditation
    - Mantra-based meditation
    - Visualization meditation
    - Guided meditation
Mindfulness
https://chopra.com/articles/whats-the-difference-between-meditation-and-mindfulness by Melissa Eisler, Chopra Center

- **Mindfulness**
- Mindfulness is all about being aware, which of course includes the practice of meditation. When you are being actively mindful, you are noticing and paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and movements, and also to the effects you have on those around you.

- You can practice mindfulness *anytime, anywhere, and with anyone* by showing up and being fully engaged in the here and now. Mindfulness is the simple act of paying attention and noticing and being present in whatever you’re doing. When most people go about their daily lives, their minds wander from the actual activity they are participating in, to other thoughts or sensations. When you’re mindful, you are actively involved in the activity with all of your senses instead of allowing your mind to wander.

- Mindfulness means you focus on one thing.
- Meditation means you focus on nothing. Deepak Chopra
Other tools

YOGA
ONLINE/VIRTUAL SUPPORT GROUPS ARE POPPING UP ALL OVER THE PLACE
INDIVIDUALS LIKE MEL ROBBINS AND OTHERS ARE HOLDING ONLINE/VIRTUAL TALK SHOWS

YOUTUBE HAS A LOT OF GUIDED MEDITATIONS AND YOGA AND OTHER SUPPORTS
STAYING CONNECTED WITH FAMILY AND LOVED ONES AND YOUR COMMUNITY IS THE MOST CRITICAL FACTOR IN BEING ABLE TO MANAGE THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA
I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD SAY THIS (I AM A TECHNOPHOB) BUT “THANK GOODNESS FOR TECHNOLOGY” RIGHT NOW.
Research and finding meaning in suffering

- Post-Traumatic Growth: First identified in the mid-nineties by the psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, post-traumatic growth is when a person experiences positive changes resulting from a major life crisis. According to the research, post-traumatic growth goes beyond resilience; by actively searching for good in something terrible, a person can use adversity as a catalyst for advancing to a higher level of psychological functioning. Survivors of sexual assault report post-traumatic growth as early as two weeks later, but the timeline and nature of growth varies from person to person.

- Useful insights from research on “post-traumatic growth”
- By Kasley Killam on December 15, 2015
- [https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-find-meaning-in-suffering/](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-find-meaning-in-suffering/)
Other tools in the toolbox

- Spirituality
- Religion and rituals
- Journaling
- Taking a long walk in nature
Helping others allows us to get “out of our own head” and away from our problems.

There are lots of opportunities right now to help others if you are in a space and a place to be able to help out.
We know that there will be an end to this crisis

- Some thoughts to consider for you and your clients: What will you have learned about yourself as a result of this crisis?
- What, if anything, has changed for you in terms of your view of yourself, the world or life?
- What are you going to do differently as result of what you have experienced?

The PAST is where you learned the lesson
The FUTURE is where you apply the lesson.

Don’t GIVE UP in the middle!
Five positive changes signal post-traumatic growth and provide a useful framework for how to make the best out of the worst situations.

The first is personal strength. Tragedy exposes our vulnerability in an unpredictable world and therefore may cause us to feel weak or helpless. But, paradoxically, it can also boost our self-confidence and lead us to view ourselves as stronger.

The second is relationships. Whether bonding on a deeper level with friends and family or feeling connected to strangers who have gone through similar difficulties, suffering can bring people closer together. Social support is especially important for healing; discussing and processing hardships with other people assists with meaning-making.

The third way to grow from trauma is through greater life appreciation. Tragedy can shift our perspective, inspire us to value good things more, and renew our intention to make the most of our lives. One approach to focusing on gratitude is to sit down once a week and write a list of things for which you are grateful from the week prior.
Five positive changes after trauma
Useful insights from research on “post-traumatic growth”

By Kasley Killam on December 15, 2015
https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-find-meaning-in-suffering

- The fourth is beliefs, which may change or be reinforced as a result of grief. As researchers explain, people may evolve existentially to see themselves and their role in the world differently or to feel a new spiritual connection, which can influence their sense of purpose or their faith, respectively. For instance, religious parents whose child is diagnosed with cancer might understand their struggle as God’s will, consistent with their previous beliefs. Conversely, they may question whether God exists at all, thereby challenging their previous beliefs. Research suggests that individuals benefit from attempting to reconstruct or reaffirm their sense of meaning in this way.

- Lastly, the fifth positive change is new possibilities. In the aftermath of trauma, people may perceive that new opportunities are available and pursue them. Consider a man who gets fired, feels ashamed and depressed, but soon after starts working on what he is truly passionate about, which wasn’t possible at his former job. One method of identifying new possibilities is to envision your ideal life in the future and strategize about bringing that vision to fruition. A study showed that people felt significantly happier after spending twenty minutes each day for four days writing about their imagined best possible selves or planning their goals. Plus, this activity can increase optimism.
VIKTOR FRANKL EXPLORED
MEANING AND TRAGEDY

Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.

— Viktor E. Frankl —
Maybe at the root of our fears is change and not knowing what that will be.
THE GOAL IS TO ARRIVE AT A PLACE OF ACCEPTANCE OF THE SITUATION

"Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today."

— Hanh Nhat Thich
What are some global lessons from the pandemic?

- We are all interconnected and interdependent.
- We are all important and we all matter.
- One loss of a human life is one life too many that is lost.
- What we do in one part of the world impacts individuals in other parts of the world.
- What is the global community going to do differently as a result of the pandemic?
- What are other lessons?
Resources for you and your clients

- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has some great resources that are available to behavioral health professionals that speak to helping others and one's self cope with the traumatic impact of a disaster. Here is a link to the resources that includes podcasts and many other types of information: https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/recovering-disasters

- For people experiencing emotional distress related to a disaster, SAMHSA offers toll-free crisis counseling and support through the Disaster Distress Helpline, 1-800-985-5990.

- SAMHSA also has a “technical assistance journal on disaster behavioral health” that addresses how to care for individuals with serious mental illness and substance use disorder during disasters. Here is the link:

Who is the Mental Health Association in Michigan?

- The Mental Health Association in Michigan was founded in November of 1936.
- We provide public policy advocacy at the state and level on behalf of individuals with behavioral health disorders (both mental illness and substance use disorders) across the lifespan.
- We publish a monthly electronic newsletter called, “Letter from Lansing” that is free and contains updates about public policy and other issues related to individuals with behavioral health disorders in Michigan. If you send me your email address, I will add you to the list.
- CONTACT: Marianne Huff, LMSW  EMAIL: mhuffmham@gmail.com
- Cell phone: 313-641-1109
- Address: 1100 West Saginaw, Suite 1-1B in Lansing, Michigan
Most people talk about fear of the unknown, but if there is anything to fear, it is the known.

Deepak Chopra
THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!