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Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) Pandemic - Self-help Strategies to Stay in Good Mental Health

Key information

- Epidemic in psychological sense affects all people and requires additional psychic energy and strength to adapt.
- In most people, an immediate stress reaction is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- Each of us has psychological defence and coping mechanisms to help us face life's challenges
- Self-help tips (strategies to strengthen psychological defence and coping mechanisms):
 - ✓ Keep yourself informed using reliable sources
 - ✓ Avoid excessive exposure to media pandemic-related content
 - ✓ Be connected to others using modern technology
 - ✓ Take care of your body and needs
 - ✓ Strive to identify, name and express emotions as best as possible and share them with others
 - ✓ Be present here and now
 - ✓ Don't make conclusions based on assumptions and influenced by strong emotions, search for evidence
 - ✓ Consciously strive to be as calm, compassionate, solidary, kind and courteous as much you can
 - ✓ If you are unable to cope with or have difficulty coping with mental problems, seek professional help.
 - ✓ If you have the urge to hurt yourself or because of severe psychological problems, you have the urge to hurt others, you need immediate psychiatric care and share your problems with your loved ones immediately

Why is it important to think, speak and work to maintain mental health?

Epidemic in psychological sense, affects all people and requires additional psychic energy and strength to adapt

The general population are subjected to isolation, self-isolation or quarantine, restricted movement and physical contact, and are uncertain about their own infection and the infection of others, including close ones. COVID-19 patients suffer unpleasant symptoms, their families worry, and some unfortunately lose family members. People in any way associated with the corona virus may be exposed to social stigma, which increases their suffering and isolation. Work, education, life certainty and economic sustainability are changing. With numerous bright examples of appropriate and expert reporting, we are exposed to an abundance of misinformation, bombastic headlines and predictions that heighten feelings of insecurity. Healthcare professionals and other public services are under heavy strain and high stress. Everyday lifestyle is changing.

Because of all this, the corona virus epidemic has the characteristics of a frightening, dangerous, threatening stress event, or as we usually call it, a traumatic event. Such events and situations affect all people who are exposed and they can experience a wide range of reactions to exposure to stress and trauma.

What are the immediate reactions to exposure to psychological trauma?

In most people, an immediate stress reaction is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation

Common symptoms are:

- ✓ Fear and concern for your own health and the health of your loved ones
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Sleep difficulties
- ✓ Eating difficulties
- ✓ Concentration difficulties
- ✓ Exacerbation of chronic health problems (physical and mental)
- ✓ Increased intake of alcohol, tobacco and other addictive substances

Almost everyone, after being exposed to a traumatic event, experiences some of these reactions. Some people have a stronger and some of them milder stress reactions. To react in this way is not a sign of weakness, but a natural response to stress. This is why most people do not need professional help and they manage to get back in balance in a relatively short time. Prolonged exposure to stress makes the situation more complicated. The type and severity of the stress response depends, in addition to exposure to the traumatic event, on the combination of risk and resilience factors. Some of the risk factors are present before, some during, and some after exposure to a stressful event.

Self-help strategies to stay in good mental health (strategies for strengthening psychological defence mechanisms and coping mechanisms)

Each of us has psychological defence and coping mechanisms to help us face life's challenges

Our psychological defence mechanisms and coping mechanisms are activated automatically and unconsciously in situations that we experience as dangerous, unsafe or unprepared. Strategies that help to strengthen them:

- ✓ Be well informed and focus on key information and recommendations of the National Headquarters for Civil Defence of the Republic of Croatia. Getting information from reliable sources contributes to a sense of security and control in the crisis.
- ✓ Limit exposure to epidemic-related content in various media. Try to take breaks throughout the day and not be engaged all day watching, reading, and / or listening to new stories and epidemic-related information. In particular, avoid sensationalist views and unreliable sources of information. Repeatedly and constantly hearing about a pandemic can be distressing and make it even more difficult to function disproportionately to the situation.
- ✓ Connect with others using the benefits of modern technology and strictly avoiding direct physical contacts. Through the available media, contact your loved ones, family, friends, acquaintances, talk about how you feel and how you cope with your new situation, highlight strategies you have been able to adapt to and help you feel more secure. Support one another. With close people in isolation, try to use a video link if it suits them and, if necessary, a continuous video link to reduce the sense of exclusion from everyday family life.
- ✓ Take care of your body. Exercise regularly, stretch, practice abdominal breathing, or perform other physical activities, avoiding direct physical contacts as recommended by the Headquarters. Viruses spread most rapidly in crowded, heated spaces. Regularly eat multiple meals a day and drink plenty of fluids, the best water. Sleep at night for 7 to 8 hours because sleeping in the dark is better and more beneficial to our psyche and body. Avoid alcohol and drugs as much as possible.
- ✓ Try to identify and name your emotional states as much as possible. Talk about them with your loved ones. Some of us find it difficult to recognize our emotions, so we express ourselves through physical symptoms (I have headache, I'm sick, I feel dizzy...) or only recognize two conditions (good and bad). Emotions do not come out of nowhere, the better we recognize them and talk about them, the better we will deal with them. Fear is a response to the experience of danger, anger to experience the denial of some rights and something that belongs to us, sadness is a response to the experience of loss, etc. Expressing emotions is not a sign of weakness. Brief suppression emotions can be useful in critical situations, but in the long run it prevents you from accepting and adjusting to new circumstances. Share emotions with

each other, rely on each other, cheer up and give each other comfort and hope.

- ✓ In the time of crisis, due to emotional and other strains, we may fall into the trap of interpreting the situation through a "mental filter" with the consequence of "cognitive distortions" such as "black and white" thinking (*our system is bad, it cannot cope with this epidemic / our system is the best and we will solve the situation easily and very quickly*) or catastrophization (*no salvation for us*) or generalization (*the virus is deadly and if I get infected I will surely die*) further enhancing emotional reactions in a crisis. Most of these opinions are incorrect, if any, and they are certainly not useful and functional. One has to wonder what evidence and facts support such thinking, whether such thinking is useful and helpful. In this way, we more realistically experience the situation, reduce excessive emotional exhaustion, and reduce the likelihood of discrimination and stigmatization of others.
- ✓ Be present here and now. Land in the present moment, in this day, month, and season. Land in the space you're in, the chair you're sitting on, the floor you're standing on, the apartment, the floor you're on, the building, the address. Strive to become aware of your own presence, breathing, other people's presence (real or virtual). Name a few items you see, try to listen to and discern the different sounds you hear, have a lavender, rosemary or other pleasant scent with you, put a piece of your favourite food in your mouth and enjoy the taste. These strategies are so called cognitive and sensory grounding and help you to calm, regain sense of security, improve concentration and focus attention.
- ✓ Try to be as calm, compassionate, solidary, kind and polite as you can. In crisis situations, most often because of fear, we push the boundary and exhibit less and less of these behaviours. This is also the reason why we admire ourselves and others when we manage to contain and express these behaviours in crisis and difficult situations. They enhance self-esteem and a sense of self-control, and like concentric circles on the water, they extend to the environment. These behaviours greatly contribute to reducing discrimination and stigmatizing others.
- ✓ If you feel overwhelmed with emotions such as anxiety, sadness, fear, anger, you have the feeling that you are on the edge and that you cannot cope with and / or have difficulty functioning yourself, share it with your loved ones and seek professional help. If you have the urge to hurt yourself, or because of severe psychological problems, you have the urge to hurt others, you need immediate psychiatric care and share it immediately with your loved ones.
- ✓ Persons with previous mental disorders should continue treatment and seek professional help in case of worsening of existing or new symptoms. It is best to first contact the institution where you are being treated by telephone, and then you will be provided with information on how to proceed and receive appropriate psychiatric care. In an emergency, seek immediate and immediate help from an emergency psychiatric service.

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