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Covid And The Importance Of Resilience

A mental health pandemic is raging. But strategies to cope and fight back exist

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The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown our world off balance. Our daily lives have been restricted as never before in recent history. Uncertainty, illness, fear, social isolation, loss and grief, financial insecurity and unemployment have resulted in loneliness, anxiety, depression as well as sleep and appetite disturbances. Now, it is time for us to bounce back.

ALancet study estimated anxiety disorders among 298 million individuals and major depressive disorders among 193 million individuals in 2020 without the pandemic. But over these big numbers, an additional 76.2 million individuals with anxiety disorders and 53.2 million individuals with major depressive disorders were expected due to the pandemic. This led the director of mental health, WHO, to designate a 'parallel pandemic' of mental health.

We must brace for an uncertain end to the pandemic. Resilience is the capacity to tolerate setbacks and adapt constructively. Research shows that individuals with low resilience are prone to feeling overwhelmed or powerless and are inclined towards negative coping mechanisms. In contrast, resilient individuals bounce back and even grow stronger through adversities. Fortunately, emotional, cognitive and behavioural strategies are available to develop resilience.

Dealing with emotions

In adversity, emotions can overwhelm us. Training ourselves to deal with them effectively builds emotional resilience. We cannot always control our immediate reactions to a crisis, but we can train ourselves to calibrate our responses.

Acknowledging emotions: Acknowledging stress is always the first step. Doing so allows us to consider what to do next. Understanding what we are feeling and why prepares us to use available resources and this helps manage stress and emotions in a healthy, constructive way.

Breathing, relaxation, mindfulness: Deep breathing helps soothe the central nervous system. When stressed, breathing becomes faster and shallower. Stress reduces with a few deep breaths. Being mindful allows us to relax. Notice what you're eating, feeling and thinking. Being mindful, even for just one minute, helps focus on solutions.

Distracting ourselves: When emotions overwhelm us it becomes difficult to respond to the situation. Distracting ourselves can help calm down momentarily so that we recover and prepare to respond to the crisis. This of course, is not an effective long-term strategy.

The cognitive strategies

One of the most consistent findings in resilience studies is the relationship between experiencing a sense of control and effective coping. In the pandemic, knowledge can help increase our sense

of control. Arming oneself with evidence-based steps from reliable sources is therefore critical in feeling in charge and exerting as much influence as is possible over our situation.

Thinking rationally: Getting a better understanding of our thought processes can help us during stressful situations. Else, we may be unable to deal with the facts and let our beliefs and assumptions cloud our judgment. In some individuals, stress can lead to delusional thinking which in turn can amplify stress.

Maintaining perspective: Unexpected crises can play havoc with our perspective and optimism. We often replay the experience in our minds, and re-experience the suffering over and over. Discussing our concerns with friends helps maintain perspective. Research indicates that writing down thoughts forces us to structure and address them individually resulting in effective problem solving.

Behavioural modification

We can modify our behaviour in adversity to develop resilience. Covid-appropriate behaviour has entered our daily discourse. In its narrowest sense it involves the triad of masking, distancing and hand washing. In its broadest sense it deals with a paradigm shift in etiquette and in our social interactions.

Differentiating between physical and social distancing: We are intrinsically a social species. Solitary confinement is often considered crueller than a death sentence. Robust social ties are associated with improved psychological wellbeing and increased longevity. The pandemic has curtailed physical connectivity. Yet, technology has helped sustain relationships warding off loneliness during isolation.

Initiating self-care, creating routines: Sleep and diet substantially impact mood and health. Creating a sleep schedule, designated time for meals, work, exercise, family and friends as well as creating physical spaces in the house for certain activities like work can help us feel in control at a time when we have little control.

Despite the pandemic, it is vital to realise that we can have some control over our circumstances. At one time our numbers on Earth had reached an extinction level of 10,000 individuals. Yet we survived and thrived. Above all we are all survivors. Resilience exists at the collective and individual levels. As a society, we may gain strength from the awareness that our social structures have held intact. Besides, we have constantly been in problem-solving mode. At the individual level, by developing emotional, cognitive and behavioural strategies for resilience, we can not only cope with the stress caused by this pandemic and other adverse circumstances that likely await us, but master them all.