COVID-19 Could Feel Traumatic

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The struggle for normalcy

If you haven't said it yourself, chances are you've heard it from someone else; "I just want things to go back to normal!" With the initial Safer at Home order, and the extension, many are struggling in a variety of ways. On a psychological level, some may even characterize their experiences with COVID-19 as traumatic.

Coronavirus as traumatic.

A trauma is described as any type of incident that causes physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological harm. Viewed that way, all of the following are just a few examples of how people may react to the coronavirus with a traumatic response: an individual who has physically contracted COVID-19; an individual experiencing debilitating anxiety about the fear of contracting it; a person who begins to question their spirituality, faith, values, or morals in relation to COVID-19; or feeling as if the psychological stress and the emotions connected to it feel like too much to bear.

No one else can determine what feels traumatic for another individual. Depending on the degree of severity that the pandemic impacts someone, and impedes their ability to complete daily functioning, a diagnosis from a professional may be given.

What makes us more susceptible to experiencing this as a trauma?

There are a number of factors that may influence how each of us copes with coronavirus. Our past experiences with stress; how we were taught to cope with distress; our support system; our willingness to put our resiliency skills into practice, etc.

The things we see on television, such as the great impact of COVID-19 in China, Italy, and New York, may lead to feelings related to secondary traumatic stress (STS). STS is the emotional duress that results from hearing (or seeing on tv) the firsthand trauma experiences that another person has experienced.

Experiences that are more personal to us, such as a family member, friend, or co-worker who contracts the virus, or someone close to you that is working in healthcare may also cause an individual to feel more susceptible to viewing COVID-19 as traumatic.

How is this different from anything else we may have experienced?
What's different about the pandemic versus a "typical" trauma is length of time. With a "typical trauma," the incident tends to be relatively short lived, for example a house fire, a terrible accident, or a natural disaster such as a tornado. The incident itself happens relatively quickly. With the pandemic, there are still a lot of uncertainties and instabilities surrounding the virus, so many people are not yet in a place where we can begin the rebuilding and healing process.

It causes us to question our belief system, or challenges our perception of how we once thought we viewed the world. We might begin to question what is fair or unfair, what is right versus what is wrong, what is safe versus unsafe, and who or what is trustworthy versus untrustworthy.

Our minds go through a state of shock (the length of time varies for everyone), and then our minds begin to process the dissonance between how we once saw things and how we see things now. Our minds begin to try to make sense of what we see and piece together how we viewed the world. We go through a rebuilding stage of re-determining what is fair, right, safe, and trustworthy. The end result is comparable to a new computer program, where the formatting looks different, but has the same functioning qualities.

What Can I Do To Begin Feeling Control In A Situation Where I'm Feeling Powerless?
First and foremost, remember that we are resilient! Each of us has gone through some form of hardship in the past and have navigated our way through it, which helped to make us emotionally and mentally stronger. Be there for one another in the best way that you can. Ask for help and let others know what you need. Implement good self-care activities. Remember that even though you may be feeling unsafe right now, there are other safe and secure things in your life and acknowledge those as well.

Remember there are resources you can reach out to for a variety of different needs. If you're uncertain where to start, contacting your EAP and visiting the 2-1-1 website are good places to begin.