

Maria Cruz Flores, Ph.D., LMFT

65 No. Madison Ave., Ste. 411; Pasadena, CA 91101

(626) 622-3512

**Personal notation: Please contact Dr. Flores for permission to utilize any of the information provided in this article.**

## Coronavirus: Psychological Dynamics and Coping Skills

By: Maria Cruz Flores, Ph.D., MFT

### Brief History:

When a new mysterious respiratory virus began in early December, originating from central China in the city of Wuhan, it appeared innocuous because the virus was identified as a strain of pneumonia. We probably viewed the virus as a phenomenon occurring in a distant country, but in January the Chinese authorities identified the cause of the disease as a new type of Coronavirus (COVID-19). A virus within the family of being minimal, similar to symptoms of a common cold, or more lethal similar to the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) or SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). What began as reported 200 cases of the Coronavirus in the Hubei province of Wuhan in China on January 20, 2020, increased exponentially the following month to more than 24,000 confirmed cases to 490 deaths in China. The transmission was no longer thought to be from animal-to-human, but instead a mutation was from human-to-human.

As the Coronavirus spread outside of mainline China (Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau) to other countries (Australia, France, Germany, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore and Vietnam) with deadly consequences, our world view began to change. During that period, the virus had spread, mutating from one continent to another. Eventually it reached the United States and our denial of depersonalization that it could not happen to us, changed as the number of deaths from the virus were reported. That change of denial through depersonalization to one of personalization began to evolve. During late January, the World Health Organization changed the terminology from a centralized country of an epidemic to a global health emergency of a pandemic. Travel restrictions of a travel warning alert began to be implemented of travelers from China to the United States.

Psychological Dynamics of Change and Loss:

Other changes initially began from self-monitoring of taking personal responsibility by staying 6 feet apart from others when outdoors to a societally-imposed quarantine of people required by staying indoors. As in this case when multiple changes psychologically and physically occur, people attempt to ascribe meaning of those events. Those changes are similar to ones having experienced a loss. Any type of change or loss can be experienced from a negative or positive perspective. When death or the loss of a job is experienced, it is viewed as a negative event. But loss due to a life altering event, such as the birth of a child or job promotion, can be viewed as a positive event. The current changes of the quarantine can be viewed as a negative event, with continual newscast reminders of physical restrictions. When isolated @ home from others, one may become subsumed by symptoms of anxiety and depression; these two of several responses to the Coronavirus, may appear to predominate ones thoughts and feelings. Thus the anxiety one experiences can be overwhelming, whereby an attempt is made by individuals to gain some semblance of normalcy.

#### Psychological Effect of Anxiety:

But the normalcy we seek in our daily environment continues to change. Current studies on anxiety with generalized anxiety disorder is diagnosed at 7 million in the United States, with numbers projected to increase. Especially as more constrictions are placed upon the family, that results in “social isolation” from others. Our children can no longer attend school and are “homebound,” with most of their lessons being conducted on the computer at home. Some parents work schedule, similarly changed to working @ home, with others continuing to work outside the home. If required to work at the office, contacting the Coronavirus from coworkers heightens ones anxiety level. Our senior citizens are viewed as secondary should medical equipment, such as ventilators be limited in numbers. A governmental official (Dan Patrick, Lieutenant Governor of Texas) and medical professionals (bioethicist) are discussing the quality of life for the younger generation, being provided at the expense of the elderly.

The anxiety experienced is further heightened when one leaves the home to shop for home necessities. The stores are no longer shelved to capacity, but instead are substantially empty. The visual effect of the store resembles a science-fiction, apocalyptic-scenery backdrop. When products are available, they are limited, with several attempts to purchase those items. The dynamics to secure those items and/or any other items is a need to gain some semblance of control. That need for internal-intrapsychic control one seeks is cyclical. Through the physical act of shopping, with hoarding of those items, they are able to secure an internal semblance of control with a “by product” of normalcy.

#### Psychological Effect of Depression:

The desire for normalcy when feeling anxious is “somewhat” similar in feeling helpless or depressed. Depression appears to be on the increase, with a previous study in 2005 to 2015 from 6.6 percent to 7.3 percent, with the rate of increased depression in the youngest (12-17 years) to oldest age (not specified) groups. The feelings of depression may be an attempt to gain control of their physical environment, which in effect controls their internal-intrapsychic affect. In order to compensate for feelings of depression, sleep acts as an analgesic in experience any negative feelings of isolation through “social distancing.” The coping mechanism includes oversleeping to numb their affect, and/or overeating to compensate for an emotional void they are also experiencing.

#### Coping Skills for Anxiety and/or depression:

When one is experiencing anxiety and/or depression, physical activity is an aide in helping to reduce those symptoms. An increase in physical activity releases neurotransmitters, which is manufactured in the brain and elsewhere in the body called endorphins. Those endorphins interact with receptors in the brain, resulting in positive feelings, similar to experiencing a positive-energized physical and psychological effect. These can be activated through various activities

These activities include engaging in regular exercises to decrease ones symptoms of mild to moderate anxiety and/or depression. That regular-structured regime could be inclusive of moderate-low impact exercises (walking, jogging, aerobics, yoga, dancing, etc.) or housework (sweeping, vacuuming, mopping, etc.) preferably for 20 to 30 minutes, three to five times per week. Also outdoor activities, mindful of social distancing, will provide benefits of an increase of vitamin D. In addition to the physical exertion, and psychological benefits of social interface through a website, a social support of another individual would augment those feelings of loneliness. Should you have underlying medical condition of diabetes or a heart condition and are over the age of 50 years, please contact your health care provider to begin an exercise regime.

Thus beginning a regime on a daily, weekly, and/or monthly basis is inclusive of formulating daily, short-term goals. The daily goal should be viewed from a short-term goal (daily) to a long-term goal (weekly and eventually monthly). In working on these goals, formulation should incorporate one’s **Personal, Environmental and Vocational (PEV)** goals (Flores, Activities When Quarantined @ Home). When formulating these goals, one’s personal needs should be considered, in addition to one’s environment @ home and also an occupational or vocational goal in returning to work. In working on these goals, a structure can be provided, during the quarantine to an otherwise unstructured schedule. Therefore one or two goals from each of the PEV sections should be incorporated to your scheduled activities. It is essential to vary

activities on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. If not, it could exacerbate feelings of anxiety and/or depression.

Personal Notation: Albeit the negative effects (death, illness, etc.) of the quarantine, this can also be viewed from a positive perspective. The quarantine provides the opportunity to engage in activities, otherwise unable to engage in because of time constraints of your previous schedule.

#### References:

Flores, Maria C. Activities When Quarantined At Home. 23 March 2020:

<https://drmflores.com>

Hui, Mary. What We Know About China's Coronavirus Outbreak. 4 Feb. 2020:

<https://quartz.com>

Mendeley. How to Cite a Website. Available at: <https://mendeley.com> (Accessed: 27 March 2020)

Ponte, Katherine. Coronavirus: Mental Health Coping Strategies. 20 March 20.

<https://nami.org>

Journal of Psychological Medicine. Depression is On the Rise in the US, Especially Among Young Teens. 17 Oct. 2017. <https://science daily.com>. (Accessed: 29 March 2020).

Safai, Yalda. Anxiety and Depression Likely to Spike Among Americans as Coronavirus Pandemic Spreads. 23 March 2020. <http://google.com> Contributor to: ABC News Medical Unit.

Web MD. Exercise and Depression: Endorphins, Reducing Stress, and More. 18 Feb 2020.

Available at: <https://webmd.com> (Accessed: 29 March 2020)