Coping in the Pandemic...what helps

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Coping the pandemic
..what helps

- Understanding and identifying responses to the pandemic
- Ways of psychologically preparing for these responses
- Ways of coping with these responses
  - Mindfulness
  - Gratitude
  - Self compassion
  - Radical acceptance
  - Resilience
  - Social connection
  - Professional support
  - Self care
Families with genetic conditions may be coping with multiple graphs at once and be at different points in each graph.

Where do you think you are now?

The graphic above illustrates the general progression of the disaster effects and reactions on communities from the pre-disaster or warning phase through the reconstruction phase. You can read more about each phase by clicking on the phase titles.
Household impacts of COVID
March to April 2020
Australian Bureau of statistics

• Twice as many Australian reported nervousness (37%) and tension (42%) compared to pre-covid times
• 1 in 3 financially worse off
Families with disabilities

...have rates of stress, family conflict, mental health conditions and financial hardships that are higher than in the normal population
Common Responses to Pandemic threat

- Stress (the body’s reaction to change) response is common.
- Fear and anxiety are normal responses to an unpredictable threat.
- Feeling isolated and financial stress are also common.
- Anxiety about the future and fears of infection are normal and some people continue to feel anxious about the future.
Additional issues arising from Disability-Carer

- Isolating more difficult due to reliance on external help or the need for other family members to function outside the home
- Services responding more slowly due to pandemic crisis
- Home based life leading to lack of carer “time out”.
- Social supports and respite possibly less available
- Financial strain increased
- Uncertainty about severity of COVID illness on child due to lack of medical information
- More overall stress-possible negative impact on relationships
- Guilt that some aspect of child’s care is not occurring or not occurring well enough
Additional issues arising from Disability-Child

• Potential higher susceptibility to a more serious illness from COVID due to underlying health conditions (known or unknown).

• Isolating more difficult due to reliance on external help or the need for other family members to function outside the home, which heightens chances of Covid exposure

• Necessary items unavailable due to pandemic crisis can cause problems due to issues with diet or sensory sensitivities.

• Changes in normal routine more unsettling

• Difficulties in maintaining good hygiene practices when not at home
It's important to recognize the level of stress we are experiencing as we need stress, but not too much.
How to recognise the too much stress response

- Hyperarousal
- Hypervigilance
- Excessive busyness
- Defensiveness / reactivity
- Excessive judgement and over-reaction
- More controlling behaviours
- Responses can be divided into
  - Physiological
  - Cognitive
  - Emotional
  - Behavioural
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physiological responses to stress</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Changes in sleep patterns (insomnia, nightmares)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Impaired immune response (colds, flu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Nausea</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Fatigue/exhaustion</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Shortness of breath/hyperventilation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Gastrointestinal problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Headaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Palpitations (racing heartbeat)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Chest pain</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Numbness, tingling</td>
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</tbody>
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| - Tense muscles |
| - Changes in appetite |
| - Anxiety attack |
| - Aches and pains |
| - Startle response (jumpy) |
| - Agitation |
| - Dizziness |
| - Sudden onset of menstruation |
| - Lethargy |
| - Decreased libido |
| - Vulnerability to illness |
Cognitive responses to stress

- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory impairment
- Disorientation
- Confusion
- Preoccupation/worry
- Indecisiveness
- Intrusive or irrational thoughts
- Absentmindedness

- Flashbacks
- Unwanted memories
- Poor problem solving ability
- Reality distortion
- Revert to ‘native’ language
- Slow reactions
- Impaired decision-making ability
- Poor attention span
Possible emotional reactions to stress

- Fear
- Panic
- Frustration
- Guilt
- Shock
- Terror
- Grief/sense of loss
- Confusion
- Bewilderment
- Irritability
- Helplessness
- Insecurity
- Crying
- Anxiety
- Disempowerment
- Feeling Inadequate
- Dependence
- Depression
- Withdrawal
- Apathy
- Lethargy
- Anger
- Compassion
- Uncertainty
- Humility
- Euphoria
- Numb/disconnected/detachment
- Empathy
- Odd humour
- Uncertainty
- Hypersensitivity
- Embarrassment
- Highly charged
- Feeling isolated/abandoned
- Hope
Behavioural responses to Stress

- Freezing
- Doing nothing
- Panic
- Nervous activity
- Heightened vigilance
- Some changes in behaviour may include:
  - Withdrawal
  - Avoidance
  - Loss of interest in usual activities
  - Increased smoking, alcohol and other drug use
  - More controlling behaviours
Tri-brain model
Dan Siegal
The ‘window of tolerance’: maintaining optimal arousal for trauma-focused therapy

Hyperarousal: too much arousal to integrate
- Emotional reactivity
- Hypervigilance
- Intrusive imagery
- Obsessive/cyclical cognitive processing
- Tension, shaking, ungrounded

Hypoarousal: too little arousal to integrate
- Flat affect
- Inability to think clearly
- Numbing
- Collapse

‘Window of tolerance’
Optimal arousal zone

(Adapted from Ogden and Minton 2000)
How to cope and re-establish some sense of safety. The fundamentals

- Employ psychological preparedness
- Use emotional regulation via strategies such as mindfulness, radical acceptance, gratitude, and self compassion
- Use physical strategies such as exercise
- Increase resilience
- Increase supports: medical, professional, peer and social
- Self care
Psychological Preparedness

• Important in the warning and impact phases
• Realistic understanding of risk
• Perceptions of self efficacy
• Ability to manage negative thoughts such as “I can’t cope”
• Proactive planning and preparing
• Perceived social support
Psychological barriers to Preparing

- Anxiety and worry trigger feelings of helplessness and stops people from preparing as the reality and possible consequences of the pandemic suddenly become more real.
- Thoughts that the pandemic is an uncontrollable 'Act of God or nature'. These feelings of helplessness and futility may cause people to do nothing.
- A lack of belief in the effectiveness of preparedness behaviour negatively influences preparedness.
- A false sense of security. People think that modern technology will fix things.
- Gamblers Fallacy’. People tend to under-estimate their personal risk and over-estimate their personal control over events.
Preparedness

• Value and utilise how you have coped before in difficult situations
• Make sure you obtain medically verified information about your risk. Good sources are Australian Government Department of health and your GP.
• Make plans with your health providers to support your special needs during the crisis
• Advance planning: what you will do, where you will go if you or family members get sick.
• Specifically, how you will keep contact with important others, who will care for whom, arrangements for pets and animals, storage of important documents, supplies in your home. Ideally, involve all members of the family with the plan.
• Talk to children about preparedness in an open and honest way. Let them know that you are prepared and have a plan helps them to feel safer and more secure.
• Connect to professional and social supports including finding local emergency services.
Emotional Regulation: Mindfulness

- Mindfulness is both a principle and a state of consciousness.
- It is part of the meditative and contemplative traditions.
- Focuses on present experience, without trying to change it. More about being curious about it.
Why is mindfulness useful?

• Helps clients to stay in experience longer and to get more information from it

• It activates the insula, a region that relates to perceiving bodily sensations. The anterior cingulate cortex is also activated, which is a region central to switching attention to what is happening in the body and the environment in real time.

• It can help emotional regulation as when these regions are activated they down-regulate the medial prefrontal cortex, the brain circuit involved in thinking about personal history, the future and all the people you know, and how this web of information weaves together. If this circuit is the only one used, all information will be seen though its lens.
Mindfulness activities

- Grounding: Back to the wall
- Moving around room mindfully
- Grounding: Bare Feet on the floor and engage the quads
- Quick Fixes: Smelling Essential Oils
- Heat packs
- Mindful eating
- Cold shower
- Checking mindfully what coping strategies right for you
Breathing exercises

• Noticing in-breathe and out-breathe

• Wiggly breath exercise. Breath into the belly, pulling hand up, breath out wiggling hand down

• Three phase breath exercise. Breath in then let breath out from the bottom, middle and top of chest.

• Draw your breath. Use a pen and paper and just draw the exhale and inhale patterns in a continuous movement

• Check what feels better
Emotional regulation: Kirsten Neff’s: Self Compassion.

- Offers the same protection against harsh self-criticism as self-esteem, but without the need to see ourselves as perfect or as better than others.
- Entails three core components that must be combined.
  - *Self-kindness*, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental.
  - It requires recognition of our *common humanity*, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering.
  - It requires *mindfulness*—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it.
Emotional regulation: Practicing gratitude

- It is an instant mood booster and feels great in the moment
- You’re likely to feel closer to friends and family
- You’re likely to enjoy your life more
- It is good for your physical health
- Makes it easier to cope with tough times
- A reminder of good things in life as they are not remembered as easily as bad events
- Can be easily done by jotting down only 3 things a day you are grateful for (e.g. I’m not alone in limbo land, since my life is slower I can enjoy it more), tell someone you are grateful or do a symbolic gesture of gratitude.
What is radical acceptance

- Radical Acceptance is accepting what is – exactly as it I and letting go of unproductive efforts to control the uncontrollable.

- Accepting that there is nothing one can do to change the situation.

- This is not the same as becoming a victim and passively being overtaken without choice. Rather, you make the decision to let go of things that you cannot control and focus on the things you can control.

- This helps as fighting reality does not change reality; it just increases your emotional suffering, and human pain is unavoidable

- Pain + resistance = suffering
  Pain + radical acceptance = peace

- Good for things that you really cannot change at the present time
Steps towards Radical Acceptance

• The first step towards radical acceptance is awareness that you are resisting reality.
  • Feeling bitter or resentful
  • Thinking your life shouldn’t be this way
  • Regularly unhappy or frustrated with life
  • Thinking that if X just changed, you would be happy
  • Trying to force other people to change their behaviors
• Second next step is to turn your mind toward acceptance.
  • turn away from resisting reality and turn towards acceptance.
  • If that’s too big a leap just make an internal commitment to stop fighting what is and become willing to accept.
• Third step is to full accept reality for what it is.
  • In a non judgmental way
  • Feeling all emotions associated with it
  • Not looking for an out
“A moment of radical acceptance is a moment of genuine freedom.”
~ Tara Brach
What is Resilience?

It is the “knowledge that we can handle challenges, difficulties and hardships in our lives” Michelle Duffy.
What is Resilience?

Some people have more naturally than other but it can be increased by:

• Having a positive view of yourself (self-image) and confidence in your strengths and abilities (self-knowledge).
• Being able to regularly make realistic plans, and then being able to regularly carry out your plans.
• Being able to effectively and in a healthy manner manage your feelings and impulses.
• Having really good communication skills (or you’re actively working to improve them).
• Having really good problem solving skills (or you’re actively working to improve them).

https://positivepsychology.com/resilience-activities-exercises
Resilience is the norm

- Only a minority of people develop significant mental health problems (mainly PTSD, depression, complicated grief).
- It can be expected that up to 15%-20% of direct survivors may initially develop PTSD, but this decreases to about 10% over time.
- Depression initially occurs in 15-20% of people after disasters and tends to persist longer than PTSD – especially where there has been marked loss of property, community, and life, but drops to about 10% over time.
Resilience: Identify and Use Your Strengths

- Describe a time when you were able to overcome or handle a major challenge in life.
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What personal strengths did you draw upon?
- Draw upon an image of when you were the most resilient.
- How might you apply this strength now?

https://positivepsychology.com/resilience-activities-exercises
Physical Strategies:
Eat healthy food

Dr. Laural Parnell
Physical Strategies: Get Regular exercise

• Walk or run... especially in nature

• Play noncontact sports such as tennis or golf or table tennis

• Do online Yoga
Physical Strategies: Get Enough Sleep and Rest

- Remember to get enough sleep
- and practice good sleep hygiene
- Regular sleeping time
- Darken room and make the bed
- Don’t use communication devices in bed
- Don’t eat late
- Don’t overheat
- Use sleeping apps (Calm app).
- Medicate if necessary

- Take breaks during the day
Physical Strategies: Play and dance more

- Have home dance parties
- Play board games and do jigsaw puzzles
- Do some virtual gaming
- Go to another world with some 3D virtual games
Social Support: Connect

• Get creative with how you interact. Set up a gratitude tree – where every member posts a message or sends a text to other members to share something they are grateful for or set up zoom dinners.

• Find a buddy, or group of, to set daily challenges with. These could include a healthy habit, a mindful practice, a creative pursuit. Be sure to encourage and check in daily to stay motivated.

• Set dates and times to watch the same TV shows/movies with someone and message each other your thoughts along the way... kind of like a virtual Goggle Box

• Join a local community social media group or a meetup or Facebook group. (e.g. The kindness Pandemic) or make a group yourself. This will keep you up to date with what’s going on directly around you. It may also include ways you can perhaps reach out and connect with someone less fortunate than you and ways to assist them.

• Create a social bubble of people you can have face to face time with that are also self isolating
Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.

(Carl Jung)
And when things get difficult
Professional services

• Make sure you have a GP that you feel comfortable with
• Discuss with GP issues around pandemic and make a plan
• Ask other health care providers for possibility of home visits, home deliveries, early morning sessions
• Be creative with trying to get needs met by the NDIS. Ask.
• Also make plans if using specialist appointments. Factor in transport, waiting room issues, time of day and day of week, plan ahead.
• Use counselling services to download stress and problem solve issues
Self care..
It is not selfish

- Self care can be especially difficult in times of social restrictions
- Create mini time outs
- Create a personal time out space in the home
- Watch your favourite TV, or do some craft, have a bath, in the middle of the day instead of a task
- Get takeaway
- Call friends
- Give yourself a one-off gift of help
- Ask for help and go get some
How to get fast Psychological Support

Suicide and crisis support
If you are in an emergency, or at immediate risk of harm to yourself or others, please contact emergency services on 000.

Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service

For immediate support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

You can use the BeyondNow app to create a suicide safety plan. Find out more about safety planning here.

Call 1800 512 348
Reputable sources of information

Australian Department of Health – http://www.health.gov.au

World Health Organisation – http://www.who.int

Other resources

- Tara Brach’ Radical acceptance youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFr_zQCUMD4
- Happiness hub: https://www.happinesshub.org.au/oranges?gclid=EAIaIQobC_hMlx6Pi4cbJ6QIVi3ZgCh0KdApOEAAAYASAAEgKUoPD_BwE
- Reach out: https://au.reachout.com/
- Kirsten Neff Self Compassion YOUTUBE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUMF5R7DoOA
- Families with special needs: https://www.friendshipcircle.org/
- Menline, lifeline, beyond blue, salvation army
- SWAN website https://swanaus.org.au/
Issues for Children in the Pandemic

- Children are often afraid that something will happen, someone will get ill or they will be separated from the family they will be left alone.
- Children may also appear to be coping better than they are.
- But...children are generally resilient
Possible behavioural changes in Children

- Restlessness
- Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- Regressive behaviour – children behaving younger than they normally do
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about sleeping alone
- Trouble getting to sleep
- Tantrums
- Fussy eating
- Withdrawing
- Wanting to stay close to a parent
Ways to help children with COVID anxiety

- Manage your own nervous system
- Be honest but not alarmist
- Teach kids what they can do
- Reassure them that the grown up are on it
- Reduce anxiety with exercise and fresh air

Jennifer Cohn Harper
Helping Children in the Pandemic

- Parents should explain clearly what is known about the situation. This includes education and discussion that increase a sense of feeling of control and knowing that actions will lead to certain results.
- Older children can help their younger siblings and peers feel less anxiety by reassuring them that they are not alone in the situation.
- Encourage children to talk, draw and play about what happened, and respond simply and clearly to their questions.
- Let them help with things around the house.
- Avoid exposure to excessive television replay of events.
- Psychologists who researched responses after 9/11 found that if parents were distressed about terrorism, they conveyed that information directly and indirectly to their children, which in turn raised the distress levels of their offspring.
Types of Meltdowns

- **Temper tantrum**: caused by a feeling of powerlessness. Big tears explosions of frustration, sadness and anger, cries of “NO!”

- **Sensory meltdown**: happens when the brain has difficulty processing one or more types of sensory input. Cries are whining and pained, behaviour include covering ears, hiding eyes, recoiling from touch or gagging on a food’s texture. Speech does often not make sense.

- **Panic attack**: Triggered by a fear reaction. Fight flight or freeze response is triggered. Speech disabled, eyes wide.
Meltdown Management

- For all meltdowns try to keep your nervous system calm and talk in a calm voice. You need to be their frontal lobe.

- Temper tantrum- first try to avoid by giving limited choice. If unavoidable, stay close calm, try distracting and wait it out.

- Sensory meltdown- try and avoid by sensory friendly environments. If unavoidable remove child from the trigger, use weighted blanket, quiet space and sensory emergency kit, keep explaining what you are doing.

- Panic attack- avoid by being aware of triggers and preparing child. If unavoidable, make eye contact, reassure and use a soothing voice and touch. Distraction with rhythmic behaviour or counting good.
And what about couples?

- Lockdown can be stressful as pandemic magnifies how much we rely on partners

- “cracks in their relationship will be amplified or the light that shines through the cracks will be amplified” Ester Perel.
And what about couples?

• Try and understand your partner’s coping mechanisms
• Communicate clearly, state what you feel and what you need
• With difficult conversations start with a gratitude of the other for who they are
• Reduce pressure on the relationship by creating boundaries, routine and rituals
• Find time to talk together about the relationship
• Do some online therapy if things are really not going well
Strategies to cope with social distancing, self-isolation or quarantine

• Going into a period of social distancing, self-isolation or quarantine may feel daunting or overwhelming, and can contribute to feelings of helplessness and fear. In addition to the above, we encourage the following:

• Perspective – try to see this time as unique and different, not necessarily bad, even if it something you didn’t necessarily choose

• Connection – think of creative ways to stay connected with others, including social media, email and phone

• Be generous to others – giving to others in times of need not only helps the recipient, it enhances your wellbeing too. Is there a way to help others around you?

• Stay connected with your values. Don’t let fear or anxiety drive your interactions with others. We are all in this together!

• Daily routine – create a routine that prioritises things you enjoy and even things you have been meaning to do but haven’t had enough time. Read that book, watch that show, take up that new hobby.

• Try to see this as a new and unusual period that might even have some benefits.

• Limit your exposure to news and media. Perhaps choose specific times of day when you will get updates, and ensure they are from reputable and reliable sources.