

Psychologist: Stress management with Chilean miners is a tricky, but not impossible

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A psychologist and stress expert at the University at Buffalo says research on traumatic experiences pinpoints specific sources of stress that the trapped Chilean miners and their rescuers will need to manage in the weeks and months ahead, and offers ways of dealing with them.

Michael J. Poulin, PhD, is an assistant professor psychology at UB whose research and publications focus on human response to stress and adversity.

"There are few direct parallels to their experience," he says, "but we know, first of all, that the [miners](#) have been greatly deprived of control over their environment, which laboratory and field research indicates is highly stressful.

"Media reports suggest they are coping with this in some effective ways -- by taking control of what they can: organizing their living space, choosing leaders, relying on their religious faith and fashioning games and toys out of the materials available to them," he says.

Their colleagues and loved ones at the surface can assist in this process in several ways, Poulin says, "The most important of which is by insisting that the miners be kept as fully aware of the rescue progress as possible, and consulted for input whenever appropriate."

Another source of stress, he says, is their very crowded condition.

"One thing that can mitigate stress from that source," Poulin says, "is for the miners to establish minimal personal space (e.g., individual sleeping areas), and undertake expeditions into side tunnels, provided these are safe.

"As they receive supplies from the surface," he says, "I expect that a common strategy will be for miners to take a page from the subway- or elevator-rider's playbook and carve privacy out of the crowded underground room in which they're trapped by using such techniques as immersing themselves in reading material or listening to music on headphones."

Environmental issues aside, the biggest source of stress and anxiety for the miners, according to Poulin, is very likely to be the fact that they are cut off from their social world, although certainly less so than cave-in victims who had no contact with [rescuers](#).

"In response to this," he says, "they are almost certainly developing strong bonds with one another. That is a good thing, but another goal for their colleagues on the surface should be to facilitate their frequent communication with loved ones.

"Moreover," Poulin says, "as important as it is for the miners to feel connected to and supported by others, research in my lab and elsewhere suggests that their own ability to provide support to those they care for may be just as crucial for their well-being.

"With this in mind," he says, "it may be important for the miners to realize that, while they are in the mine, each of them has a responsibility to care not only for themselves but also for their fellow miners."

As a final note, Poulin says it is worth observing that those who experience any kind of stressful or traumatic event are often remarkably

resilient.

"From media reports," he says, "these miners seem to embody this truism. They have spontaneously adopted multiple strategies to manage the [stress](#) of their situation. We can hope that when they are rescued, they emerge psychologically little worse for the wear, despite having been through something most of us can barely imagine."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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