

Positivity in a pandemic: It is possible to cope and maintain a sense of hope

April 1 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

With alarming statistics and bad news about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic dominating network news, social media and even advertising, many people might struggle to maintain a positive outlook. But it is

possible to cope and maintain a sense of hope, a University of Mississippi psychologist advises.

Stefan Schulenberg, a professor in the UM Department of Psychology, is director of the university's Clinical-Disaster Research Center, an integrated research, teaching and training center that focuses on mental health related to [disaster preparedness](#), mitigation, response and recovery. He also directs the Ole Miss interdisciplinary minor in disaster sciences, a joint effort across the departments of Psychology, Criminal Justice, Social Work, and Sociology and Anthropology.

Schulenberg has written and co-authored more than 80 articles in academic journals and has edited or co-edited five books, most recently "Positive Psychological Approaches to Disasters: Meaning, Resilience, and Posttraumatic Growth." His research interests include clinical-disaster psychology, posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth, and he has conducted research on the effects of Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, among other events.

To help people manages the stresses of riding out the pandemic, Schulenberg offers some insights and tips:

Q: What are the greatest psychological challenges for people facing disaster?

A: Disasters threaten and, in many cases, violate our worldview. We have an expectation of how the world works. Do we live in a safe world? A predictable world? We expect to be able to go to a grocery store or a gas station without worrying about contracting a potentially life-threatening condition.

Disasters—COVID-19 being no exception—challenge our assumptions,

threaten them and, in some cases, shatter them. How we reconstruct our new reality goes a long way in terms of whether and how we adapt to our circumstances.

Q: How is experiencing a viral pandemic different than going through, for example, a tornado or a flood?

A: No two disasters are alike. We as a culture have a common understanding of what a tornado or a flood is, how they look, and how they affect people in the short and long term. We've seen their impact, in terms of resilience, posttraumatic stress and post-traumatic growth. And we've even come to understand what to expect from such events.

We have not experienced the amplitude of the COVID-19 pandemic, so that makes it more difficult to process. A tornado is quick by comparison. What we're experiencing now is insidious. It unfolds over a period of time. And it's also different because this is an event that affects everyone, whether they objectively realize it or not.

While there are some groups that appear to be more vulnerable than others—the elderly, those with underlying medical conditions—COVID-19 doesn't care where you live, what your socioeconomic status is or what your political beliefs are. It's a human issue.

Q: What can we do to make it easier to wrap our heads around what's happening now?

A: First, you have to be sure that you are getting [accurate information](#), so that you are responding to data-driven science and not someone's opinion. In times like these, misinformation is everywhere.

We need to look to the experts at the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization and other established research institutions for guidance. This is why we have scientists—folks who do this for a living—and we should be listening to them. The less accurate information people have about COVID-19, the higher the risk for individuals and their loved ones.

Misinformation also contributes to the anxiety they will experience. A proactive, positive response begins with it good, accurate information.

Q: What are some of the psychological qualities that help people withstand disaster and come out OK on the other end?

A: Evidence-based research has shown that people who have a strong sense of meaning are more likely to be resilient and experience the best outcomes. Meaning has to do with how people understand and process a given event, whether and how they incorporate it into their worldview.

Meaning also has to do with one's sense of significance in life, whether a person believes their contributions matter and whether their behaviors are purpose-driven and consistent with their values. We have to understand why we get out of bed in the morning. We need to have a "why" to the "how."

In other words, we need to understand and appreciate why we are doing what we are doing.

Meaning is essential to human health and well-being. There is nothing like a disaster to make us question what is significant about our lives and shake us to the core. We ask ourselves, "Am I living significantly?"

Q: What happens when our sense of meaning is challenged?

A: It can be overwhelming to have that kind of doubt, but it's helpful to ground yourself by knowing what is most important to you on a daily basis. If it's family, for example, you can ask yourself, "What have I done today to reach out to family?"

Just liking a post on Facebook is not a deep connection. You have to reach out personally. It's also important to remind ourselves that regardless of circumstances or suffering, we have the ability to choose an attitudinal stance.

There is a great book, an essential read, called "Man's Search for Meaning," published in 1946 by Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. A central theme of the book focuses on how to find a purpose in life, no matter what you are going through—and how to feel positive, regardless of one's circumstances.

It's a heavy read in terms of subject matter, but I could not mention a more important piece of literature, given what's happening in the world today.

Q: How can someone protect or increase their resilience during a continuously stressful time?

A: There is psychological first aid that is analogous to medical first aid. The most important thing is to access your social support systems such as friends, family and neighbors. People without support are very vulnerable during a [traumatic experience](#).

Fortunately, we can use technology to connect to each other even if we

are practicing social distancing.

It's also important to keep up routines. That helps with stability. People are used to established routines, so it's important to stick to a schedule of sleeping, eating and exercising. Even during this pandemic, we have to find ways to work, love and play every day.

If you do something you really enjoy that makes you lose track of time, such as playing an instrument or baking, it's especially helpful. Researchers call this a "flow" state.

Resilience ebbs and flows. You may feel up to the challenge one day and oversaturated the next. That is normal.

Q: How can we best help other people?

A: Not everyone will experience stressful things in the same way, so try to offer help that will be most supportive to a particular person. If someone is isolated, call them regularly. If someone literally cannot come out of their house, such as elderly people or people with underlying conditions, offer to pick up groceries or a prescription for them.

The most important thing is to take care of yourself first so that you will have the energy to help others.

Provided by University of Mississippi

Citation: Positivity in a pandemic: It is possible to cope and maintain a sense of hope (2020, April 1) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-positivity-pandemic-cope.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.