

In a pandemic-stressed America, protests add to mental strain

June 3 2020, by Dennis Thompson



Just as Americans are emerging from COVID-19 quarantines, hoping to

resume normal life but still fearful of infection, protests against police violence are raging in cities across the country.

And millions remain unemployed, as a shaky economy attempts to restart.

How are folks expected to cope with all of this?

"For a lot of people, we might be reaching the breaking point in terms of the amount of stress and uncertainty we are experiencing," said Vaile Wright, the American Psychological Association's senior director of health care innovation.

Keeping your cool in times like these requires a lot of self-care and self-reflection, mental health experts say.

One of the most important steps is to accept that you're stressed out, and parse out the source of your anxiety or depression, said Dr. Renee Binder, a past president of the American Psychiatric Association.

"It's just a huge powder keg of [feelings](#)," Binder said. "Whenever people feel anxiety, whenever they feel depressed, it's very important to sort out what is realistic and what is unrealistic. What is a normal reaction and what is catastrophizing, feeling that the world is coming to an end when it's really not."

It's normal and natural to feel confusion, fear, sadness and outrage related to peaceful protests being met with police violence and violent protests causing destruction in their wake, Wright said.

"Even though these feelings are uncomfortable, there's nothing wrong with them," Wright said.

It's also crucial that you accept that folks around you might not feel exactly the same way as you do, she added.

"It's important people feel validated for how they're feeling right now, even if it's not an experience that you can relate to. It's really important that we not use our own experiences to unintentionally invalidate somebody else's," Wright said.

People feeling overwhelmed by the rush of events would do well to take regular breaks from social media and the news, Wright and Binder agreed.

Families might want to set strict limits on when members can go online to check out the news or read social media.

"It's increasingly challenging to disconnect when you're got notifications going off on your phone with every late-breaking item," Wright said.

People also can help themselves feel better by controlling what they can in their lives—for example, by wearing a mask when shopping and regularly washing their hands.

Other forms of self-care are also important, including exercise, relaxation, eating healthy and getting enough sleep, experts said.

People feeling helpless might want to find constructive ways to contribute to their community—by working for a campaign, getting involved in a cause or volunteering, Binder said.

"Whatever we can do to try to change this situation is a very good thing to do, and in the meantime maintain our own health and safety and security," Binder said.

Kids likely are feeling very stressed now, with few means of understanding the cause of their anxiety, experts added.

"Children are really attuned to the emotions of adults around them," Wright said. "It is really important that parents do their best to model good stress management. If you freak out, your kids are going to freak out."

Parents should be ready to answer kids' questions about the protests or COVID-19, in language appropriate to their level of development, Binder and Wright said.

"Kids need to know they're getting honest information and parents are being trustworthy, and they believe what their parents say," Binder said. "Most kids want to know they're safe, but they also want to understand what's happening. It's important to have a lot of empathy and understanding of what the child is really asking, and give them honest information to decrease their anxiety."

Wright said, "Try to create a safe space for your kids to feel their feelings, to ask questions, and then engage in pleasurable family activities that help kids find some stability in what are very uncertain times."

More information: The National Alliance on Mental Illness has more about [managing stress](#).

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