

A Psychotherapist's Response to the Pandemic  
By Stanley J. Weinberg, LCSW, BCD

"Life is sudden," the teenage girl Frankie says in the film *Member of the Wedding*, after a number of tragic events in her family.

Early in March, we had no idea of how suddenly and radically our lives would change by the middle of the month. On March 14th, I was returning from my home on St. Croix when I received, what I thought at the time, was an overanxious email from a colleague urging me to cancel appointments with my patients, since the City would be "shutting down" on Monday. Having been away from New York and from much of the news for a couple of weeks, I could not immediately process the information. The following morning, my partner and I went to Church as usual, where all seemed normal until our Rector told us to refrain from shaking hands and sipping from the Chalice. It was only later that day that I learned that much of the City was indeed to be in lockdown on Monday and that all but essential workers were to shelter at home.

It was then that I emailed my patients to urge them to follow CDC guidelines and the governor's new regulations, and to announce that until further notice I would be conducting all sessions remotely. "It is particularly important," I wrote, "to maintain rational cognitive and emotional responses to fear; and to discern fear, which is a rational response to danger, calling for a calm and sound response, from anxiety and phobia which are not rational."

"Anxiety is highly contagious," I continued, "and therefore you need to identify it in others and protect yourself from it. Anxiety can also compel others to share opinions and recommendations that are not necessarily factual or verifiable. Engage in critical thinking and question the authority of the source of the information."

I advised my patients to take good care of themselves; to adhere to a strict daily schedule organized well in accordance with their needs; with sufficient sleep, regular and sensible meals, and exercise being top priorities; to find ways at home to use their time creatively and productively. "Focus on what you can control for a greater sense of security and well-being," I told them, "and try to be clear and accepting of that which is beyond our control, or that which can be influenced only to a limited extent. Concentrate on and appreciate what you have and resist fretting over what is not available at this time."

This coming week, as I write, it will be five months since I wrote that email; and there is no end in sight to this pandemic. We all know the physical toll it has taken, and the staggering number of lives lost. Less has been reported about the mental health toll and casualties. Fear of contracting the virus, uncertainty regarding the development of effective treatments and vaccines, economic insecurity and social-political concerns, along with greater social isolation, particularly for those living alone, has exacerbated the mental health issues of those with pre-existing conditions and precipitated disorders in those who may previously have been predisposed but symptom free.

The rate of suicides, domestic violence and lesser, but nonetheless serious, tensions and conflicts among couples and families has dramatically increased. There is an increase in obesity, alcohol and drug abuse, and the related physical disorders which they contribute to, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Addictive and compulsive disorders, often associated with mood disorders, are subject to relapse, particularly under adverse circumstances. In short we also have a significant increase of mental health problems in our Country in addition to its health crisis, racial tensions, and economic and social-political concerns

This pandemic has and will traumatize all of us to a greater or lesser degree. As is always the case, in such crises, the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized will have lost and suffered the most. For those of us who survive this pandemic and whatever unpredictable events that will follow, there are many lessons to be learned.

This pandemic should be a humbling experience. Humankind has limited control over the course of events. Life itself is mysterious and unpredictable; but irresponsible behavior on our part is totally predictable and our actions have consequences. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves and we have not been good stewards of the planet home that sustains our life. Those of us who are privileged need to learn to appreciate and be grateful for what we have; and we must question our need to accumulate more than we need at the expense of the needs of others and our planet. Our salvation depends on our relationship to God, each other and the natural world.

We are living under many dark clouds, and often we cannot see light until it presents itself; but light is always there, since God is always with us. We can lose our health; we can lose our lives; we can lose the many earthly things that we cling to and often value to a fault; but Faith can not be taken away from us and is always there to sustain us in the darkest of times.

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