

## Summary Notes

### McGill University Webinar: Managing Anxiety during a Pandemic

March 26, 2020

Speakers:

Dr. Jason Harley, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University, and Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre

and

Dr. Tina Montreuil, Faculty of Education, McGill University, and Director of Childhood Anxiety and Regulation of Emotions Laboratory, C.A.R.E. Research Group

The webinar was focused on coping with anxiety and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The speakers commented on the occurrence of pandemics about every 100 years. A difference now compared to 100 years ago is that today the media connects us all with the result that our awareness of what is happening the world over raises our anxiety. In addition, we now live longer and healthier lives, so that death is less familiar to us. One hundred years ago, people were less reactive to death. Only people who are 102 or more years old have lived through the last pandemic!

Today, there is a vast amount of information available, including misinformation. To discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information, people need a reasonable level of media literacy, as well as health literacy about different types of medical treatments.

The speakers discussed research on reversing the effects of anxiety and harnessing emotions to manage stressors. Parents can model resilience so the child learns how to cope with adversity. Training in emotion regulation can help with psychological readiness.

They also discussed the concerns about the wellbeing of healthcare providers, particularly regarding the following items:

1. Burnout, exhaustion that leads to a loss of sense of well-being while the healthcare providers are concerned over their own loved ones, their own families.
2. Healthcare workers, like everyone, have emotions and it is normal to be anxious. It is important that clients do not let their own emotions overwhelm communications with the healthcare workers, who are themselves anxious.
3. Visitors of hospital patients should read the visitation rules before going to the hospital.
4. The public must not hoard resources that healthcare providers need.

#### **Anxiety**

Dr. Montreuil commented that anxiety serves a purpose. Feeling no stress and having no anxiety lead to poor decisions, such as gathering on beaches with friends during the pandemic. On the other hand, too much anxiety also leads to poor decisions, as well as to irritability. Parents can model behaviour so that children see how to deal with anxiety.

### **Intolerance to uncertainty**

Although many people have an intolerance to uncertainty, it is necessary to be able to sit and live with a certain level of uncertainty. Being mindful and well rested will make one better able to deal with uncertainty. To avoid being overwhelmed by the media, people can set a time each day for consuming media and do other activities at other times.

### **Control – Emotion Regulation**

What can we do now?

1. Identify activities that we can do that will align with advice from Health Canada and other government sources
2. Be strategic and effective in what we do – there is a difference between knowing something and understanding it
3. Pay attention to our own emotions – headlines can create anxiety
4. Ask questions – pay attention to our own understanding

In responding to a question about whether excess fear can lead us to feeling unwell, Dr. Montreuil commented that fear can lead to panic accompanied by chest pain, hyperventilation, increased heart rate, and other symptoms. Anxiety attacks can lead to difficulty breathing. Although we fear the sensation of hyperventilation, we can accept and normalize that we may experience these sensations under the circumstances. Considering that there is a great deal of speculation about what could happen, people need to acknowledge and normalize their emotions. By shifting their attention elsewhere, others will see this as modeling good behaviour.

### **Media**

The media would be helpful if they balanced stories of increased occurrence and death by highlighting recovery and positive stories. Nevertheless, people can live a day-to-day mindful life. There are lots of amazing stories of resilience and hard work, especially in the healthcare system, which is adapting to a new situation, and in government, which is working very hard to put good policies in place.

### **Self-Isolation and Social Distancing**

Self-isolation and social distancing compromise our ability to give (and to receive) any physical sense of comforting. To build resilience, we can find something positive in adversity that we experience. We can connect by telephone. Parents need to deal with their own anxiety with the awareness that too much support of others may be interpreted as intrusiveness and lead to withdrawal so that others can lead their own lives.

### **Remote Work**

In response to questioning about managing remote workers, Dr. Montreuil suggested that remote workers, and their managers, be mindful of how they feel and focus on expectations. Ambiguity can be a source of anxiety. Managers should set goals with employees collaboratively. Remain kind to each other. Being irritable and short-tempered can cause others to be irritable and short-tempered.

### **Routine**

Because unstructured time can lead to increased worry, stress, and anxiety, we need to set up a schedule to the extent that it is possible to do so.

Children especially need routine. They are accustomed to a very structured environment in the school system.

### **Resources for Children**

There are great resources in French and English on how to explain to young children what is happening and actions to take; e.g., why it is important to wash hands frequently, why cough in the arm, and why maintain social distancing. Explaining so that children can understand will help to increase our children's resilience.

*Fake News and Dinosaurs, The Hunt for Truth Using Media Literacy*, by Jason Harley and Daniel Beaudin, is a book for children with messages on emotions, emotion regulation, and how we consume information in the face of fake news. It is helpful if communications with children are funny.

*Healthy Minds, Healthy Schools, Strategies and Activities for Happy and Successful Learners*, by Tina Montreuil and Micah Tilley, is a book describing a universal, curriculum-based program for elementary school children aimed at improving children's social, emotional, behavioural, and academic functioning. The book provides elementary school students with practical, everyday strategies to combat stress, anxiety, and depression. The components integrated throughout the book include: emotion regulation and expression; mindfulness; link between thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations; acceptance and self-compassion; goal-directed behaviours; problem solving; and conflict resolution.

### **Benefits, Bright Spots of the Present Situation**

There are ways for us to look at the present situation through a different lens to see benefits; e.g., loss of control, opportunities to connect with others, and do other activities (such as knitting, hobbies, etc.). Emotions have a role in the biases that we have, rigid patterns of thinking, and difficulties making major changes.

The pandemic is expected to result in future developments that include:

1. Changes in the health care system to include triaging remotely
2. Increased role of telemedicine for physicians and health care workers
3. Psychological readiness of the system to deal with future epidemics and pandemics
4. Increase use of high fidelity actors and mannequins for virtual reality demonstrations and training
5. Preparations for future health care challenges
6. Increased emphasis on preventive medicine; less reactive, more preventive
7. More access to psychotherapy