REMAINING RESILIENT DURING A PANDEMIC

Expert commentary from George A. Bonanno, a professor of clinical psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, who is responsible for introducing the idea of resilience to the study of loss and trauma. He is known as a pioneering researcher in the field of bereavement and trauma.

WHAT DOES PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE SAY ABOUT THE HUMAN QUALITY OF RESILIENCE?

Resilience is one of many possible outcomes to life challenges. We consider people to be resilient when they are able to maintain stable mental health despite being exposed to a serious stressor. This resilience to stress can be part of a person's intrinsic nature, but it can also come from external factors, including support groups and social resources.

HOW DOES RESILIENCE RELATE TO EPIDEMICS?

Generally, in the case of an epidemic, resilience is about dealing with the ongoing stress and distress in order to keep them at a minimum during a time of crisis. This is especially true for people who fall ill. In these cases, resilience is being able to maintain a trajectory of good mental health—keeping spirits up and minimizing depression, worry, and anxiety.

Looking back on the 2002/2003 SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, this disease did not spread as rapidly as COVID-19, but it was much more lethal. (People over 65 in Hong Kong had a 50% mortality rate.) By tracking hospitalized SARS survivors for 18 months, researchers found that although many people showed chronic distress afterwards, the majority of survivors were resilient and remained free from chronic distress.

HOW DOES RESILIENCE RELATE SPECIFICALLY TO COVID-19, CONSIDERING THE COURSE OF EVENTS TO DATE?

As our nation and the world deal with COVID-19, the key psychological objective for most people is to keep stress at a minimum. Everyone is adapting to the new reality, which includes the fear of viral spread and contagion, self-quarantine, and supply shortages. More seriously, some are coping with illness and fear of death. To overcome the stresses of these situations and remain resilient throughout, it is important to use the tools we already have at our disposal, including:

- Staying optimistic
- Relying on the support of others
- Bonding with those close to us
- Keeping informed but not overindulging in media consumption
- Distracting oneself
- Finding ways to laugh and have fun through things like watching movies and reading
- Most especially, finding ways to minimize isolation with joint family activities, and keeping in touch with friends and colleagues by phone, video, email.

People should understand that there is no magic bullet. Research has shown that no single factor determines resilience for a population. It is therefore up to each person to try different ways to cope to see what works best for them.
WHAT ARE THE MOST RELEVANT PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE FINDINGS THE PUBLIC SHOULD KNOW AND UNDERSTAND?

1. We can cope with this. My research (and the research of others) has shown repeatedly that the majority of humans cope well and are resilient to just about any adversity.

2. There is no single best way to cope for everyone. Often, we see popular articles about the 3 or 5 or 7 keys to resilience. Research has shown many different factors predict resilience, but the effects of all of these factors are small because they don't always work or they don't work for everyone.

3. Research also shows that we need to be flexible and adapt. This means paying attention to what is happening to us and being nimble so we can adjust to what the situation is calling for. Each person should try different ways of coping and adapting to see what works best for them.

WHAT IS THE ONE MESSAGE PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW THAT PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE TEACHES US?

This is not easy, but we can do it. Human beings have shown abundant psychological resilience in the face of just about any adversity imaginable.

ARE THERE ANY PUBLISHED ARTICLES THAT ARE PARTICULARLY INSIGHTFUL ON THESE TOPICS?


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