

Coping with COVID-19: The Stressor and the Stress Response

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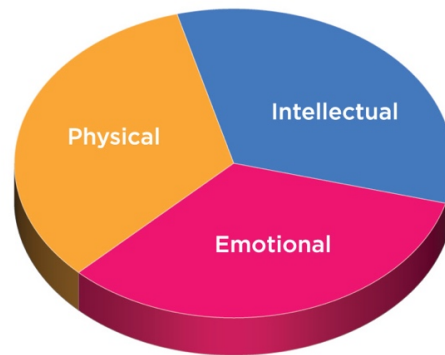
Our mind/brain is closely related, similar to the physical hardware of a computer (brain) and the software applications (mind) that run on it. Our mind/brain is composed of different parts that make up our individual being. The sum of these parts creates an entire individual.

I like to think of our mind/brain as divided into parts of a pie. This pie is made up of the Physical part, or part that deals with our body and survival; the Intellectual part, that deals with knowledge and problem solving; and the Emotional part, which deals with what we love and care about, or what is most important to us. Physical, Intellectual, Emotional = PIE.

Each part has a function to play in keeping us healthy, and this can be disrupted by stress. The COVID-19 problem is a major stressor for us all. There is a real threat to our health and safety (survival) that needs to be addressed, but if we don't take care of our mind/brain, the stress of the situation will take a toll on us as well.

So there is the stressor of the virus being out there and the stress response of anxiety that is a natural response to the threat. But, when it's not managed, the anxiety becomes a problem in itself. So, how does anxiety affect each part of the PIE, and how can we manage it?

PSYCHE OR MIND/BRAIN



Physical Intellectual Emotional

Physical part: Anxiety in our body is the fight or flight response. There is a real or perceived threat to our safety, so the body goes into fight or flight mode, to either fight the enemy off or run away from the enemy. The problem is, COVID-19 isn't an enemy we can see and fight directly or simply run away from. That initial anxiety (fight/flight) response is helpful if we can do something about it. If we can't, then we just feel irritable (fight) and/or scared (flight). This extended stress response becomes very unhealthy, as it makes our immune system weak, our blood pressure high, interferes with sleep and appetite.

What can we do about COVID-19? Wash our hands, wear masks, social distance. These actions don't require the high energy of the fight/flight response, so we need to calm that energy down. But how? Breathe and relax. As simple as that sounds, it is true. The best way to calm down anxiety is by paying attention to our body, make sure we are not tense and holding our breath or shallow breathing. So stretch, relax, and breathe. Also, take care of your body by eating well, exercising, and getting enough sleep. Oh yea, and wash your hands, wear a mask, and social distance until the threat subsides.

Intellectual part: Anxiety in our intellect causes us to worry. Worrying isn't thinking. Worrying isn't learning. Worrying isn't planning and making decisions. Worrying is when our thoughts are going round and round, over and over the same information and not getting anywhere but more worried. If our Intellect is worrying, guaranteed our body is not relaxed. So again, breathe and relax.

Then think about other things. Your Intellect is thirsty for knowledge. So get educated on the COVID-19 situation; stay updated, but spend just enough time to get the information you need. Then come up with a plan of action which you follow: wash your hands, wear a mask, and practice social distancing. Remember before COVID-19? There were other things you needed to attend to, and that you found interesting. Attend to those things, think about those things and learn new things too.

Emotional part: Anxiety and feeling/processing our emotions don't go together. Anxiety in our bodies interferes with feeling our emotions. Happiness, anger, sadness, and regret are the four emotions that we feel in response to what we care about. What do you care about? Your family, friends, pets, hobbies, goals, etc. When we have good things happen to those we care about, we should be intellectually aware and physically feel our emotions. When we are anxious, tense and worried, we don't feel our emotions, and we are separated from what we care about the most. Suppressing our emotions will also cause more anxiety, because we need to feel.

The people and things most important to us are being impacted in various ways by COVID-19, which can make us sad, scared, and angry. People we know may die, which would be heartbreaking. Processing all of our emotions may make us irritable toward the ones we love, which will in turn make us have regret. The fastest way to get rid of emotions we don't enjoy - such as anger, sadness, and regret - is to feel them and express them. It is extremely helpful to give words to our feelings, especially to those who cares about us. We usually don't suppress happiness, but if we are worrying about COVID-19, we aren't engaged with the things that make us happy. So take time to care for yourself. Talk to people you love and do things you enjoy that don't take you outside.

Mind/Brain PIE

Physical:

- a) Relax and Breathe
- b) Get good sleep, exercise, and nutrition
- c) Wash hands, wear mask, social distance

Intellectual:

- a) Learn about basics of COVID-19, make and implement the plan
- b) Think about other things
- c) Learn about other things

Emotional:

- a) Feel and express your sadness
- b) Feel and express your anger
- c) Feel and express your regret
- d) Feel and express you happiness