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Coping with the emotional aftermath of Covid-19

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The impact of Covid-19 has been widespread and far reaching.

The world has been turned on its head as countries introduce measures to restrict movement as part of efforts to reduce the number of people infected.

The new realities of working from home, unemployment, educational challenges, lack of physical contact with family members, friends and colleagues, and not being able to travel and move freely are challenging lifestyle changes. Coupled with the fear of contracting the virus and anxieties about the future, it is mentally and emotionally challenging.

Fortunately, there are lots of things that we can do to look after our own mental health and reduce mental illness during these trying times. Several lifestyle changes are needed to deal with the emotional impact of the virus, necessitating huge changes to our daily routines. Mental health is an important part of overall health and wellbeing.

Destigmatise mental illness and Covid-19

There is absolutely nothing wrong with feeling anxious, depressed, irritable, moody or angry during these difficult times. Covid-19 is one pandemic. The second major world wide pandemic is mental ill-health. There is literally no one who has not been emotionally affected by Covid-19. It is okay to not be okay. If you are not okay, there is absolutely nothing wrong with seeking professional help. Taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and react to the urgent needs to protect yourself and your family. Knowing the facts about Covid-19 and stopping the spread of rumors can help reduce stress and stigma.

Don't Discriminate

Fear is a normal reaction in situations of uncertainty. But sometimes fear is expressed in ways which are hurtful to other people. Be kind. Don't discriminate against people because of your fears of the spread of Covid19. Don't discriminate against people who you think may have coronavirus. Covid-19 has affected people from many countries. Don't attribute it to any specific group. There are many simple measures that can be taken to minimise the effects of Covid-19:

- Stay healthy by eating a lot of fruit and vegetables and drinking a lot of water. Avoid junk food , fizzy drinks and alcohol. Supplement your diet with Vit C, Vit D, zinc and iron, all of which boosts your immune system and reduces the impact of the virus.
- Exercise frequently and daily, even for short periods. Besides keeping you fit, exercise also improves well being and is de-stressing.
- Keep yourself occupied, maintain routines and engage in pleasurable activities like reading books, listening to music and watching old family videos.
- If you are still being consumed by anxiety and depression, the next step is to talk to someone you trust: a family member, friend, educator, employer, doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist. There are community health clinics near you that can advise you. You can also contact organisations like Life line, Love to Live, Gift of the Givers and South African De-pression and Anxiety Group.

- If your movements are restricted, keep in regular contact with people close to you by telephone and online channels.
- Use your social media accounts to promote positive and hopeful stories. Correct misinformation wherever you see it.
- If you are able to, offer support to people in your community who may need it, such as hamper distribution or helping them with food shopping.
- Be prepared: Think of the possibility of needing to self-quarantine or isolate a family member at home and how to manage it (separate bathrooms, separate utensils, etc).

Prevention is better than cure. At this juncture, it is imperative that each and every one of us follow necessary protocols obsessively. Wash hands and sanitise frequently, maintain social distancing and wear masks.

Stay home and go out only if absolutely essential. Restrict number of visits to supermarkets and malls. For the elderly and those with co-morbid conditions and at high risk, stay home always.

- One of the most difficult changes to adapt to is not being able to visit a family member or close friend who has been hospitalised because of the virus. Keep in regular contact with loved ones by telephone or social media offering moral support, encouragement and prayers.

But all is not doom and gloom. There is a definite need to understand that mental illness is a medical illness, much like high blood pressure, diabetes or heart disease, and that most mental ailments are treatable with medicine and psychotherapy, and by addressing appropriate social factors. Some people have a mistaken belief that they should never use medication, such as antidepressants, but psycho pharmacological treatment in conjunction with psychological counselling and therapy, is an important and necessary part of treatment. Psychotherapeutic ally, a good therapist may be able to help you make more progress in changing your life than you would alone. Therapists have experience in helping people and you have the assurances of confidentiality.