Mental health: Overcoming COVID-19 challenges

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While restrictive quarantine is still being enforced, the challenges of staying focused and maintaining one's sense of equanimity persist and intensify. The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued some online reminders through its website:



"It is normal to feel fearful and anxious during this time. Talking about your feelings will lessen your distress. Quarantine can lead to loneliness – especially for older people or people who live alone. Connect with other people through social media, telephone and online communities."

Excessive participation in popular social media outlets could also be sources of yet another phenomenon: Infodemic. The WHO flags this vital concern: "An infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risktaking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response."

To avoid being infected with infodemic, it is well to minimize attention to posts in Viber chat rooms that are mostly fake news. There is a simple way of detecting fake news: it is jarring, unsettling and highly disruptive.

Limiting screen time is another important guideline. Watching network news for hours on end – or binge-watching – is harmful to health. According to a study made by the University of Rhode Island "prolonged television watching decreases viewers' sense of self-efficacy in maintaining personal health."

Psychologists frame the spectrum of mental health from depression to flourishing. When we're flourishing at the peak, we have a "strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others." When we're in the valley of depression, we feel "despondent, drained and worthless."

COVID-19 lockdowns have surfaced the term languishing, defined as "the absence of well-being." One is unable to function at full capacity, neither depressed nor flourishing, but seemingly caught in limbo, with dulled motivation and reduced ability to focus.

Wharton psychologist Adam Grant attributes the concept of languishing to sociologist Corey Keyes who wrote about this in the Journal of Health and Social Research in 2002. What makes it concerning is that "it appears to be more common than major depression – and in some ways it may be a bigger risk factor for mental illness."

There are effective antidotes to languishing. First, it must be acknowledged and named. When asked "How are you?" it is better to say, "Honestly, I'm languishing" than to feign "toxic positivity." It enhances sensitivity to kith and kin that may be similarly situated.

Secondly, establish boundaries at work. Scott cites a 47 percent above average productivity norm attained in a Fortune 500 software company that adopted a no-interruption policy on Tuesdays, Tuesdays and Fridays before noon. When this company formalized quiet time as official policy, above average productivity was achieved by 65 percent of the workforce.

A third pathway is to "carve out daily time to focus on a challenge that matters to you — an interesting project, a worthwhile goal, a meaningful conversation."

Mental wellness fortifies our ability to win over the pandemic.