

Mental and Physical Health in a time of Covid-19

If you, or someone you know is struggling at this time, there may some ideas and tools here to help. This article explains how the threat of Covid-19 affects us and traumatises us mentally and physically through our inevitable stress reactions. I particularly have in mind those who find they are significantly triggered due to their trauma histories. On a broader level, it offers some pointers and resources to help us move from stress reactions to being more able to choose to respond to this crisis as an opportunity.

This event is a trauma, not in a dramatic way as a terrorist attack or a fire. But it has slow dawning reality of a crisis that builds a bit more each day, like a slow turning vice. The crisis takes away things that we are used to, things that we need like contact with loved ones, activities and our communities that we have built up, believe in and need.

We need them because they are part of our security and are fundamental to our sense of safety. We need to punctuate our lives with events that lift us, activities that soothe and enriches us and above all, we need connection with people who we know and love.

Our physical and emotional sense of security is vitally important to us and to our sense of identity. This security also gives us an ongoing sense of trust in our continuity existing through time.

Our security has been cut across through this trauma. We can no longer be sure of our fundamental security at the most basic of levels. We can no longer be sure that we will survive this or, as importantly, whether our loved ones will. Every day on the BBC, we hear the rising numbers of deaths and steadily and surely, we learn that this virus is affecting those in our local and social communities. Like the moving in of a concentric circle with us in the centre, Covid-19 steadily comes, encroaching on the our sense of who we are and our sense of what the world is. We are afraid, it is scary to lose our security and it is scary to imagine losses that we cannot know.

Our worlds are changed in such a variety of ways and we are all busy making adjustments. For some, it is about their workplace. Some individuals are either furloughed with pay and told to stay at home for the duration with no job and have to adjust to a world without it, or they need to adjust to a new working reality which is entirely conducted virtually in their homes through the internet. Others have the major anxiety of work drying up and being uncertain if their business will survive, irrespective of promised government bailouts. In addition to these worries and adjustments and without

the milieu of a team and place of work, we are deprived of the mirror of the social world which allows us interpret and make sense of it. Without this mirror, which helps us negotiate our realities, we are confronted with ourselves and our inner worlds. And, at a time of crisis, we are confronted with our most vulnerable selves.

This is be a complex and uncomfortable reality; for like dominoes stacked up on end, trauma touches trauma. How one person negotiates and responds to this situation is entirely dependent on their previous experience, particularly, their previous trauma history. We will all be traumatised. It is scary. But if you have a trauma history, you will have a double whammy at a time like this and your inner world can feel set afire with activation. It may feel like all your safety doors in the citadel of you are suddenly on high alert, fire alarms are going off all over the place and anything can happen. You no longer feel at all safe. Whatever work you have done on yourself previously, in this moment, it all goes to the wind. You will be triggered. And if you are triggered in trauma, that is all that happens, there is no argument and it is not a choice. There will only be this triggering, this powerful, visceral response of the mind and the nervous system.

Then of course, there may be a sequence of events which can follow such an experience of triggering. Most commonly, we can feel terribly guilty, shameful and inadequate and, then, very often, self persecutory. This makes it all worse and more scary.

That is a truly horrible place to be. Trauma activation can lead us down roads that we are terribly familiar with. It is like a horrible but inevitable inner prison of helplessness. Even if we do not have a trauma history and do not recognise this kind of triggering, we may notice in the crisis that old wounds or losses might resurface and beliefs that we should be a certain way or should not be a certain way; this may feel very uncomfortable.

My concern is that there may not be enough people around to help at the moment. I perceive there is a need for psycho-education to support individuals who feel taken over and at the mercy of their mind and body experiences and are alone and helpless with their triggering.

Since this crisis has begun I have been meeting virtually with such individuals and due to the ongoing relationship I have with them, we have been able to turn things around. Despite the trauma triggering, despite the activation, they are able, in a close relationship of trust and rapport, to find a way to allow themselves to be soothed, to begin to understand what is happening to themselves, to step back and to make choices.

If you or someone you love is triggered and activated by our new reality, I would recommend the following for consideration:

- 1) Understand that trauma responses have a life of their own. They will be activated when triggered and when this happens it will be all-consuming. It is an act of humility to recognise this. I think of activation like having so much water in the glass that it spills over the top and down the sides.
- 2) Understand that trauma is a huge flooding of fear. And at a time of global pandemic we need to be alert to the way fear can operate in different ways. Sometimes the fear is overt and obvious and sometimes it is deep down and subterranean. This is a scary time for each and every one of us.
- 3) That is the first and most important step. Until we recognise this truth in ourselves or others we cannot begin to regulate. To regulate means employing and understanding the thinking part of our minds/brains to consider what is happening to us, recognise our fear and activation and give it space to be known and soothed. This will bring the water down the glass. As we begin to acknowledge and become aware of our fear and activation, our nervous systems will calm down. Our breathing naturally slows down and we may begin to experience a feeling of relief. Something truthful is recognised at last. This is the beginning of regulation and the emergence of a part of us that can begin to reflect on and recognise what might be happening to us. Regulation and greater calm not only feels better, there is some research to show that it will help the strengthening of our immune systems and resilience to fight infection and inflammation. If you would like to know more about developing awareness as a practice, underpinned by science, follow Dan Siegel's Wheel of Awareness <https://youtu.be/ODIFhOKahmk> and watch his video specifically about developing such practices in a time of pandemic https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYsJiao0JnUSOh_DmLDTduw

If the water is churned up and rising and there is just too much fearful stress in the system for us to cope with, we might recognise some of the following four reactions coming to the fore. They can show up as distinct parts of self or one reaction can be blended with another. People report that they jigsaw from one to another in a single day! They are strategies for survival and should be respected. They all begin with the letter F:

FIGHT

The part of us that gets easily riled and fed up, short tempered and cross with everything might be one of our places of refuge. Whether triggered by

our families or the government, or a glitch in technology, we may notice our fuse is far less and our capacity to tolerate something is markedly decreased. Those with trauma histories of abuse and neglect know what it means to be living in a scary and unpredictable world and to have no power. Their fight part, historically, might have been on high alert and might have been the thing that saved them. When under stress, their systems will revert to their fight self in a heart beat. It may be so familiar, it is almost a preferred and over-dominant 'solution of choice.' It may not feel so easy to stop when on a roll. A person might be so much 'in' their fight modality, that they may not always have awareness of the effect of this on others. Such a person will have a huge amount of the hormone cortisol in their body.

FLIGHT

The part of self that is on the run can show itself as behaviour that tries to take the edge off the fearful reality, which could be an increase in alcohol consumption, or a compulsion towards a behaviour that we are addictively drawn towards. It can have a stronger pull for us at such an uncertain time. Flight could also be a tendency to pull away from things that might slow us down and nurture us. We may feel manic about specific tasks that seem to have supreme importance for us. Flight shows up to protect us from fully knowing the painful reality that we are afraid or that we are vulnerable at the moment. As Ricky Fitts said in the film *American Beauty*: '*Never underestimate the power of denial*' and it is at times of crisis that we might want to eat, drink and be merry. There may be an increase in libido at times of crisis and we might see a spike in pregnancies! We have seen a tendency towards denial at the early stages of the pandemic, when even senior politicians were denying its existence. When in flight mode, we might be going so fast that we do not hear things we do not want to hear. That is what flight offers us, an illusion that *if I keep going like this, I will feel like I have control over my world, which is preferable to feeling that I actually have no control.*

FREEZE

The image of a rabbit in a spotlight, terrified but unable to move is a response to fear that can show itself at times of crisis. We might notice in ourselves a feeling of paralysis, not quite being able to settle on anything, to achieve anything much or feel a sense of completion and satisfaction. If someone who we love is ill or we fear may get ill, we might notice our shoulders becoming tense and going up and our breathing becoming shallow and our diaphragm and lower belly holding tension rather than flowing in

rhythm. A startled stiffness in the face or neck may be an indication of freeze and we might find ourselves actually stop breathing.

FAINT

Sooner or later there comes a slump, a flop or a feeling of depression or low mood. We might find ourselves exhausted beyond measure to a surprising level and not finding it easy to motivate ourselves. In nature when a gazelle meets a lion, its best bet might be to feign dead rather than fight or flee and its dorsal vagal nerve kicks in to shut down its nervous system to protect it and foil the lion. It is part of a survival strategy and an involuntary response of our nervous system. It helps us to understand this mechanism rather than blame ourselves for our low mood or lethargic bodies.

WHAT TO DO WITH TRAUMA ACTIVATION AND STRESS REACTIONS

STEP UP OUR SELF CARE

All of the above responses are the way which the body and the mind try to save us. When trauma is activated, we need extra care both from ourselves and from others. One of the heartening responses to the crisis has been the new creative networks and initiatives that have sprung up, with so many individuals connecting up and supporting one another. Old rules are needing to be relaxed and governments and landlords are recognising the vulnerable positions so many people are in and responding with compassion not punishment. Those living alone in the community are particularly needing our support and care, but this trauma will mean that each of us has a needy and frightened child inside to take care of. This is less understood but very important. In my sessions with individuals, we might work on how self-touch can soothe, a simple action of a hand on the belly and heart at night, or a tight body hug, coupled with the awareness practice mentioned earlier. The feel of a soft blanket round the shoulders pulled tight can help our ratcheted up nervous system to help relax a couple of notches and the water will come down the glass. We know when we are soothed because there can be an involuntary breathing out and it can help to focus our attention on our out-breath and even to slightly elongate it, waiting for a couple of moments before breathing in again. (There will be some additional breathing exercises to try as a resource at the end of this article.)

Focussing in these ways, we begin to consciously regulate our nervous systems, bring down our activation and pull the pendulum back the other way. Along with the breathing focus, we may practice focussing visually on one

beautiful object for some seconds and be curious about what we notice inside as we do it. All this of course needs repetition and practice to become most effective. I have spoken to individuals about the idea of *yielding* which is an old fashioned concept. If we tend to physically move forwards and up in response to fear, our conscious counteracting of that tendency may mean allowing ourselves to lean back, opening up to the sunshine and allowing a fresh awareness of the good things and beauty in our lives with a sense of gratitude. In a time of isolation, we may consciously imagine and sense our connections to loved ones far or near and our connection to nature; taking time to observe the inner responses as we do so.

This special self-care will be enormously important for those who are concerned for and actively caring for others at a time of pandemic. Just a few weeks ago, we had no idea of this. Now we are in the thick of it. Part of self-care is really letting ourselves know that it takes time to assimilate new experiences. Our responses may, in the shock of a crisis, be knee jerk, but we need time to reflect and maybe need more time than we might appreciate.

Dan Siegel has the acronym COAL to help develop an inner practice: Curious, Open, Accept and Love. Sometimes choosing one or all of these words as part of a meditation practice can help us grow towards them mindfully.

TAKE BACK THE PROJECTIONS

Like an old fashioned projector, it is so human to focus on the image on the screen, the projected image, rather than the originating slide. Someone who is needy of care might be someone who tends to be frenetic about attending anxiously to the needs of others. We all need to pull together and care for the vulnerable, especially now, but we also need to give space to reflect on what is going on for us and attend to that first. This is rather like the airline instruction to attend to your own mask before helping a child. It has been said that social isolation may be an opportunity for retreat, to discover what is most important in our lives and begin to actively nurture those things. A person who tends to deflect or externalise their feelings, might use this time to develop the opposite tendency, to be more thoughtful about their feelings and perhaps take risks in sharing with those they love. I heard a story of a person I heard about, an introvert, who reported that he took the opportunity to tell his partner '*There is no-one else I would rather be hauled up with but you*' and noted the pleasure this sharing evoked and the increased intimacy and bond that came from taking this risk. People who are with families feel the intensity of living closely in lock-

down and also know the trust and huge responsibility of holding other people's lives in their hands. With far less distraction and dispersal outside the home, it may be an opportunity for families to have a weekly 'lockdown check in', a time set aside to share their feelings without interruption where space to speak is respected and listened to thoughtfully. If you have young children a nice calming family time before they go to bed is to dim the lights, and sit in circle around a candle. Everyone shares a "thorn" - a not so nice thing in their day, and a "rose" - one good thing.

UNDERSTAND THE TRAP

The Chinese character for crisis has two parts, fear and opportunity; the implication being: *'Do not waste a good crisis'*. There is a sense of the crisis being a test and we are all being tested in a variety of ways, and perhaps the particular ways we cannot be sure of yet, as the concentric circles come closer. Relationships can become closer and more intimate, but at the same time the trauma fight reaction mentioned earlier can be so triggered that relationships can very quickly fall under great strain. We may push people away when activated. Knowing this and that we are activated even more by those close to us might help us to be less critical about our reactions but understand them. We may need to draw on reserves of kindness and compassion towards ourselves and others and drink deeply from these wells and the resources we have.

Sometimes our fight part needs an outlet to be mitigated. To temper our fight part it can be helpful to notice our impulses and study this sensation in the body. Or how about writing down our angry thoughts in an uncensored way. We can honour the feeling and energy of fight in the body. It is only letting us know that something is not OK. We can give space to the feeling of being trapped and frustrated by lockdown, by having to be distant from others and not being able to do things that are important to us. A feeling of protest due to confinement is natural and acknowledging our wish to push out against the trap can be liberating and people can report surprise at the relief this can bring.

THE POWER IN A CHOICE

A hallmark of trauma is lack of choice. And in a global pandemic we are at the mercy of an invisible killer, a very nasty disease. We do not have a choice about this reality and how things will go as the days and weeks go on. We have clear government guidelines to follow to mitigate its spread and we are learning to accept and live with these strictures. Ultimately, we are powerless in the face of an enemy, so we are all at war, altogether. There is a power and even comfort in the levelling nature of this, and some with trauma histories feel that comfort, saying: 'now everyone else knows

how I feel all the time!’ How soothing on a deep level to say to each other: ‘Me too!’ There is a comfort in the choice we are making as individuals and nations to adhere to these guidelines for the common good. This is a communal choice of profound importance as is choosing to clap and cheer for the NHS together. Choice, moment to moment, is an antidote to trauma and an antidote to fear.

NOTICING WHAT IS

There is also a power in our capacity to live in the moment. It may be triggering to think about how long this will go on for. Perhaps we can only manage one moment and one day at a time. Some report that with less stimulation and distraction, we give more space to notice and truly appreciate more deeply what we have, whether the beauty of a sunset or the spring flowers opening up each day. Individuals also report that when space is given to think and regulate, creativity springs up. And the human capacity for adaptability, humour and creativity is awe-inspiring. A friend told me that her local pub, closed for normal business, is still providing take-away meals and beer and wine for customers who bring their own containers. The pub is opposite the church. One or two regular customers were seen sitting, with appropriate social distancing, glasses in hand, enjoying a pint while sitting in the graveyard!

We can choose to regulate. We can choose to step back and think. We can choose to develop awareness and mindful practice each day. Even if physically distancing, we can choose to reach out socially and creatively form bonds that soothe. We can choose to give space to the tangled ball of wool that we may feel we have inside. These may be some of our opportunities in a time of Covid-19. As the poet David Whyte said: ‘*This time will be a measure of our resilience in dealing with loss*’ and loss is where we are, individually in innumerable ways, as families, organisations, societies and as a world. Our challenge is to face our losses, to give space to them respectfully and thoughtfully and then fathom out what our choices are going forward.

Philippa Smethurst
April 2020

Breathing Exercises to try:

Some may find the following visualisations helpful in focussing on breath to regulate.

1. Imagine you approach a child's slide. And you begin to climb it. With each step, you take in a tiny sip of air through your nose, stopping as you imagine placing your feet on each step. Notice with curiosity the sensations inside as your ribcage expands. Keep ascending the steps until you are at the 'top' of your in breath. Hold for a moment. Then, in a long out breath through your mouth allow yourself to descend the slide, elongating it to reach the very end pushing out with your diaphragm and lower belly right along, enjoying the sensation of release.
2. Imagine you are drawing a square. Start at the top left with a full breath and holding your breath for a count 4 or 5 and imagine you are drawing left to right the top of the square, then on an out breath you are descending on the count of 4 or 5 while imagining drawing the right side of the square until you reach the bottom of the breath. Holding for 4 or 5 you draw the bottom of the box, right to left. Then finally, on the same count of 4-5 take in a breath in as you complete drawing the left side of the square.
3. For children imagine taking a big breath, wait, then slowly blow out the candles on a birthday cake. Or imagine you are blowing away a dandelion clock very slowly.
4. Both adults and children might also like to try calm-smile breathing. As you breathe in think the word calm. As you breathe out think the word smile. Notice what happens to your face when you breathe out.