



### **Greetings CoCWA**

I trust this message finds you and your household safe and well. In my role as a Clinical Psychologist and running mental health clinics across the city of Perth, and specifically, during COVID-19, there are several observations I have reflected on in recent weeks that I would like to share with you.

Many report their experiences of adjusting to new realities and grieving the loss of old ones. All of us are simply trying to manage our daily lives taking care of our children or parents, dealing with financial stresses, and adjusting to a new way to live; and pondering on what the future may look like. I have found that once the initial adrenaline hit (or acute stress response) wore off, people mostly became exhausted and fatigued with their new normal. The sense of weariness, anxiety, loneliness (despite attempts to stay connected), and irritability became additional hurdles to negotiate.

Researchers have studied how the mentally strong may behave through adverse experiences. This information may help you reduce the likelihood of mental health issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the mentally strong and resilient may eventually display post-traumatic growth versus post-traumatic stress symptoms. Post-traumatic growth is understood as positive psychological changes that result from traumatic and highly stressful experiences. Although we are in the middle of this crisis, individuals have the potential to rise to a higher level of functioning when the pandemic ends.

Most of us know the basics: it is vital to create daily habits, to exercise, and to connect with our social supports using virtual meetings and social media. However, here are some suggestions based on evidence of how mentally strong people respond to crises. They may help you or someone you know, not only manage your wellbeing, but decrease the likelihood of long-term mental health issues as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

#### **1. They limit news and media exposure**

Research suggests that there are two main predictors to how well a person will respond in a crisis (like a pandemic). The first is how vulnerable they were in their own lives before the crisis, and the second is how much news they consumed during the crisis. Media exposure and the 24/7 news cycle can activate 'fight or flight' responses, which can lead to traumatic stress. Mentally strong people limit their news exposure, choose reliable and responsible print/media, and limit exposure to distressful images shown on the news.

#### **2. They accept their feelings as normal**

Mentally strong individuals accept their feelings as normal because this is a time for both personal trauma and collective trauma. A resilient individual understands that feelings such as fear, anxiety, hopelessness, anger, and sadness are normal because the information is too overwhelming to process at once. Based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (APA-2013), the diagnosis of 'Adjustment Disorder with Anxious or Depressed Mood' is applied to any person who is experiencing symptoms and has had a major life event occur in the last 90 days. While this is a diagnosis that is assessed and assigned by a mental health professional; many of us will have an exacerbation of stress-related phenomena because we are amid a pandemic that has changed

our lives: whether the loss of a job, homeschooling children, the inability to attend a funeral or see a loved one in a nursing home or otherwise. To be assessed as to whether these reactions are within normal limits, consult your GP or mental health professional.

### **3. They carefully choose the leaders they follow**

Mentally strong people follow those who display healthy leadership skills and mental health.

### **4. They limit social media and exposure**

Mentally strong people understand how social media operates and limit their exposure. Algorithms are used to give you the news that you will most likely consume, and news that is skewed toward your preferences. This increases bias and the propensity to start rumours that increase distress.

### **5. They display self-compassion for lack of productivity**

There may be self or societal pressure to 'be productive' with the increased time you may have at home. The question to ask yourself is, "Is it reasonable to be productive when we are at war?" It is important to understand that lack of focus, concentration, and overwhelming feelings are common during this time.

Most of us are temporarily housed in - the result of needing physiological and psychological safety at this time. Mentally strong people realize that when their physiological and safety needs feel threatened—such as during a pandemic—they don't put pressure on themselves to produce or achieve.

### **6. They focus on facts**

Mentally strong individuals are acutely aware of when their emotions are 'getting the best of them.' According to Marsha Linehan, Ph.D., creator of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), we all have three states of mind: an emotional mind, a rational mind, and a wise mind. Our emotional mind is where emotional statements rule; the rational mind, where facts and logic prevail; and our wise mind is a blend between the two. Being emotional is natural during times of crisis, but consciously moving to a rational mind by listing facts and logic can decrease unnecessary negative states.

### **7. They continue with prayer, meditation and devotional practices**

The benefits of these include anxiety reduction, reduced stress, increased attention span, decreased depression, and improved emotional health and well being. Studies have found that long term meditators are able to return to baseline quicker (state of calm) versus non-meditators after exposure to stressful stimuli.

### **8. They limit toxic people**

Mentally strong people understand toxic people and behaviours and limit their time with them. Behaviours such as gossip, being demanding, being self-centred, are quite negative and take a toll on your well being. While you may be able to tolerate some toxicity with friends, family, and colleagues during non-pandemic times – moderate it!

### **9. They focus on self-care**

Mentally strong people consistently use self-care and attempt to be flexible with new routines. As many gyms are closed, they may choose other exercise options while remaining socially distanced, such as running, walking, or biking. They prioritize things that will help them through the pandemic such as using humour and connecting with their family and friends, coupled with rest and good sleep hygiene.

## **10. They know their personality needs: Introvert vs. extrovert**

Mentally strong people know themselves and what they need to feel supported. Those that are introverted focus on internal states of being and small gatherings versus external sources of stimulation (a lot of socializing). Both personalities may have different needs to promote well being – validate them!

**God Bless**

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### **Disclaimer**

*The contents of this article are not prepared as definitive statements or prescribe instructions for your personal circumstance and no guarantee can be given that today's discussion is free from error or omission. The diagnosis and treatment of mental illness requires the specific attention, or a GP or properly qualified mental health professional engaged to treat your personal circumstances, in the appropriate setting. Masters & Co, all employees and agents shall accept no liability for any act or omission occurring as a result of reliance on the information at this article and for any consequences of such act or omission. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact lifeline.*

### **References**

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