How People are Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Interview with Dr. Anita-Gadhia Smith

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Each person's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic is unique. There are, however, some overriding themes and key takeaways on coping, mental health aspects, what we're learning about ourselves and how we can prepare to eventually return to work. To gain some insight into this topic, I spoke with Dr. Anita Gadhia-Smith, PsyD, LCSW-C, LICSW, Clinical Social Work/Therapist in Washington, and Bethesda, MD.

What are some of the overall mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a level of fear, anxiety, trauma, and PTSD in the culture that we have not known in our lifetimes. Uncertainty, chaos, and a sense of dread have been unparalleled. Many people have lost businesses and financial income, causing despair, hopelessness and suicidal issues.

If our culture can try to take the gifts that this experience is offering us, we may be able to make some positive meaning out of this trauma. Trauma often has a way of bringing out our greatest strengths and creating resilience. Many of us will find out that we are much more resilient than we ever thought we could be. We will make it through this, and we may come to value each other more than ever.

What are you seeing in your practice as your clients express their mental health concerns?

I have continued to work full-time with my patients during COVID-19. The need for mental health treatment at this time is as great as the need for treatment for physical health. I have seen an increase in anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and insomnia among other mental health issues since the onset of COVID-19.

My work now is mostly through teletherapy. Although many people are more physically isolated from others, there has also been more reaching out to others, including those with whom we haven't communicated in a while, and a deeper sense of intimacy. While we may be farther apart, we can be closer emotionally and spiritually.

What concerns do parents express concerning their children's well-being during this crisis?

With parents and children, there are varying issues. Parents of young children are having increased demands on their time, since they may be working at home and homeschooling simultaneously. This can lead to a great deal of stress for the parents, although many young children seem to be very happy to stay home, relax, study, and play video games to keep in touch with their friends. Gaming addiction has become a greater issue for some young adults, as they cannot have contact with their friends easily, and most of them do not talk on the phone. They get together with their friends over games, and many parents are concerned about the amount of time spent in these activities.

There also seems to be more tension among older college aged children returning home.

They had been free and independent at school, and have now had to return home to live under the rule of their parents. Parents had also gotten used to having freedom from their children, and there can be a lot of tension and stress with young adults and parents because of the abrupt change in everyone's freedom.

What are some of the positive and negative behaviors you're seeing emerge during the coronavirus pandemic?

One of the effects of COVID-19 is that it has unmasked each of us. Whatever has been lurking under the surface of the outer face we present to the world has risen closer to the surface for us to deal with. For some it is fear, anxiety, or anger. For others, it has been increased faith and trust, knowing that we will get through this, and that crisis can and will bring great opportunity. We all have the opportunity to improve the quality of our lives, eliminating distractions, and making time for what is most important in our lives. We have learned what the word "essential" really means.

Because of the level of stress on the culture, the COVID-19 crisis has caused many people to regress to more primitive thinking, i.e., black-and-white thinking, where people are all good or all bad. There is a lot of blame and hatred being expressed, at a time where most people are trying to do the best they can to cope with this and even make things better. In

psychological health and maturity, we are able to see both the good and the bad in others and able to take the good and leave the rest.

How can people best prepare themselves and their families for returning to work? Can you share some tips?

Many of the patients that I work with are eager to get back to work, not only for financial reasons, but also to have their regular routine resume and to experience the feeling of normalcy. Our routines give us inner stabilization and help us to regulate ourselves emotionally and psychologically, as well as physically.

As for recommendations, parents can prepare their kids for when they have to go back to work by providing structure and accountability for how their time is spent. Staying on a schedule, having a routine, and balancing structure in freedom will help with these transitions.

Self-care is extremely important and getting ready to return to work. This means attending to nutrition, sleep, exercise, and mental health care. Practicing safety recommendations is critical, and will continue to be so for some time to come.

As an employee, you need to be able to communicate with your employer about what your health and safety concerns are, and to be assured that the employer is taking appropriate measures to keep the workplace setting safe and healthy. This can include cleaning practices, more teleworking, restructuring certain work activities, and maintaining appropriate social distancing.

Even if safety guidelines are lifted, each of us has to practice safety measures that give us the individual peace of mind that we need and deserve. This will likely mean a gradual loosening of guidelines, each at our own pace and comfort level. We won't do this all at once, but it will happen, slowly but surely.

How has the pandemic affected you personally?

I've personally noticed these effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:

POSITIVE EFFECTS
- More quiet time
- More sleep
- New routine
- Greater reflection
- Increased spiritual activity and seeking closer relationship with god
- Less rushing
- Less overscheduled
- More clarity about what matters in life and what is essential
- Superfluous activities have fallen away
- Recognition of the preciousness of each day and life itself
- More focus on the love that I have for people in my life
- Enhanced time consciousness

NEGATIVE EFFECTS
- Fear of illness and loss of life, activities and/or loved ones
- The fear comes and goes

Any final thoughts?

COVID-19 has put into sharp focus what our values and priorities are. We have all learned a lot about ourselves and about what really matters in life. We have all learned what is essential for us.