

THE ROLE OF COACHES IN A PANDEMIC

Deputy Editor **Dr Jocelyn Lowinger** reviews a useful resource that can help coaches understand people's emotions and psychological risks during the pandemic, including practical strategies to help their clients through the Covid-19 crisis.

We are now four short months into the Covid-19 pandemic, with most of us across the world in some type of isolation and economic and societal disruption. From the ten plagues of Biblical fame, epidemics have recurred commonly throughout history. In the 20th and 21st centuries alone we have experienced Spanish flu (1918-20), HIV/AIDS (1980s), SARS (2003), Swine flu (2009), Ebola (2014-16) and Zika (2015-16). However, Covid-19 seems unique in bringing economies, health systems and our usual ways of living to their knees so quickly across the whole world.

As Sigmund Freud wrote to a colleague following the death of his daughter from Spanish flu: 'The undisguised brutality of our time is weighing heavily upon us.' This seems as true today as it was then. We are all grappling to varying degrees with issues such as:

- Fear and anxiety about illness in ourselves and our loved ones
- Loss of work and associated loss of income
- Work overwhelm with sudden increases or changes in responsibility
- Changed work circumstances and contexts, with a rapid shift to online work
- Loss of identity through rapidly changing (or loss of) work
- Loss of contact and connection with social and spiritual supports
- Disruption to our daily routines

There is much cause for hope in the way the world is responding together with kindness, and even laying down their arms in response to the United Nations call for global ceasefire.¹

Nevertheless, the rapid change, uncertainty and disruption of normal life can be traumatic for individuals, families, communities, countries and the world as a whole – and we all

need support in this time to remain hopeful and positive, and prevent mental health impacts such as anxiety, depression and traumatic stress responses. Through supporting leaders and coaching clients, coaches have a golden opportunity to contribute through this time. To best help their clients, coaches need an understanding of the psychological challenges people may be experiencing, to be able to recognise people in distress who may need psychological or psychiatric help, and have a toolbox of practical strategies to help support their clients.

Psychiatry of pandemics (Springer, 2019) is a compendium of twelve essays edited by Damir Huremović that will help coaches understand people's emotions at different phases of the pandemic and provide useful insights into practical strategies coaches can use to help themselves and their clients.

Some of the psychological risks of the pandemic are: disruption, uncertainty, trauma, isolation and social disconnectedness, and emotional and behavioural contagion. Disruption of 'normality' is itself traumatic, as people must rewrite their assumptions about life and way of life in a short time frame. This may also be associated with feelings of grief over the many losses this change brings about. The isolation of quarantine cuts to the core of our human need for connectedness, and can contribute to loneliness with resultant impacts on mental health. Emotional contagion involves the spreading of anxieties and fears, while behavioural contagion results in phenomena such as mass toilet paper purchasing. Social contagion means it may not be possible to respond rationally even though we like to think we would. Sometimes anxiety based on rumour and fake news may cause more harm to society than the infectious agent itself.

1. news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972

Perhaps the most serious consequence of these psychological risks is the emergence of new (or exacerbation of pre-existing) mental illness – including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicidality. Coaches have an important role to play in mitigation of psychological risks to help prevent serious mental health consequences; early recognition, intervention and referral for appropriate psychological and/or psychiatric management.

USEFUL COACHING STRATEGIES

Coaches can support their clients to develop constructive and ritualised communication and connection strategies: these help coaches' employees maintain some sense of normality and ease some of the negatives of isolation – particularly when working from home is a new thing to someone's life. Although the overall picture is one of uncertainty, ensuring clarity around any communication to staff will be very helpful to many people.

Although coaches are not mental health professionals in the traditional sense of the word, they can certainly support their clients in many ways:

- Psychoeducation: helping people understand their own responses to grief, loss and uncertainty
- Empathic listening; supporting and normalising the range of emotional responses
- Helping coaches develop practical problem-solving strategies
- Address cognitive distortions; if trained, you may use cognitive-behavioural techniques
- Empowering clients by encouraging autonomous decision-making where possible
- Encouraging clients to develop daily routines and maintain healthy diet, sleep and exercise
- Promoting gratitude, hope, humour, and deliberately seeking the positive
- Supporting people to embrace cultural, spiritual or religious beliefs that promote resilience and coping.

RECOGNISING MENTAL HEALTH RED FLAGS AND REFERRAL

While a range of emotional responses are normal during a pandemic, coaches are well placed to look out for and recognise signs of mental illness. It may be helpful to use a validated psychometric measure to assess levels of stress, anxiety and depression. And don't hesitate to refer clients you are worried about to their GP or a psychologist for assessment.

USEFUL FURTHER RESOURCES

ICD-11 for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics (ICD-11 MMS) 2018 version: icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en
See particularly section 06: *Mental, behavioural or neurodevelopmental disorders*

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5): www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales: warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs

Warning signs of mental illness: www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/warning-signs-of-mental-illness

WHO Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) Pandemic: www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Dr Jocelyn Lowinger has an Honours degree in Medicine (1994) and a Master of Science degree in Coaching Psychology (2019). In 2018 Jocelyn started Coach GP, a coaching practice focused on medical professional development including helping doctors build leadership skills, confidence and manage career transitions. Jocelyn coaches doctors from a broad range of medical backgrounds including specialists, GPs, doctors in training, and doctors working in metropolitan and rural settings.

