

Welcome to COVID-19: Preparing Yourself and Your Family. This module will discuss disaster psychology, what it means, how we all fall victim to it, and how we can move forward. My name is Sam Lushtak, owner of Absolute EHS.

What is disaster psychology? It is the study of how humans cope with disasters and catastrophic events. For children we tend to see very physical manifestations such as fear, lack of appetite, hiding in closets or under the bed, regress – such as toilet or sleep regression, and verbalizing a fear of a disaster repeating itself. We may also hear our children discuss superstitions and lucky charms more often during these times.

In adults, we may see some of the same symptoms but we are also prone to seeing anxiety over resources such as food and hygiene supplies, an increase in alcohol or drug consumption, completely shutting down social interactions (remember, we can still use our phones and computers to have social interactions).

Finally, disaster psychology can also present itself as a complete exhaustion or somatization of symptoms. For example, for many people if you mention 'lice', they will automatically scratch their heads. If you mention having a cough or the flu they will reflexively cough. It's natural. For our healthcare workers, therapists, and others on the front lines, not only are they dealing with their own personal psychological effects but they are also getting bombarded constantly by people who have questions, are actually sick, and/or 'just want to know'.

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Let's talk about optimism bias. We saw this a lot in America before COVID-19 was confirmed on our soil. This tends to manifest in the phrase "it won't happen to me" or "I'm very healthy" or "I never get sick". What many people fail to recognize is that 80-90% of the population thinks this way about one thing or another (such as driving, finances, sickness, or smoking). We tend to see optimism biases when things are unknown or there is a chance of something happening. We know smoking leads to cancer but not everyone who smokes gets cancer. Driving can lead to fatal collisions but not every driving expedition leads to an accident, let alone a fatal one. Coronavirus has a total average of 3% mortality – why would I assume I'm part of that 3%?

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Optimism bias can change as a situation changes. As we learn of people we know, or people in our hometowns getting affected, these biases can morph into one of two reactions. The first reaction is, and this would be extreme – my neighbor died of coronavirus so the chances of me dying are lower – think of the general feelings toward being struck by lightning. A far more frequent change we see is when we know someone affected and we realize the threat is real. It puts us into panic mode and we go into 'fight or flight'. In this fight or flight stance, we, as humans, go through a mental rolodex of what this scenario reminds us of and how we survived last time.

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In reverting to what we know, we are most commonly affected by, what insurance companies call, 'acts of god'. This is usually a hurricane, earthquake, flood – that type of thing. Acts of God tend to result in loss of electricity or infrastructure so we generally prepare by getting hygiene products, flashlights, and batteries. This is the crisis we are reverting to – this is why everyone is buying toilet paper right now.

When it comes to preparing for a pandemic, our infrastructure, while possibly slowed (transit is a good example here), we really need to stock up on items such as food, over the counter medications so we can try to alleviate symptoms of illness at home, prescription medications, and things needed to encourage hydration (think electrolyte-rich drinks, your faucet will still work). If you would like to see an example preparedness shopping list, please look at the one posted on my website.

To compare timelines, a city or person tends to see approximately one act of god per year. In contrast, the last pandemic was the HIV/AIDS pandemic that went from 2005-2012. Before that was the H3N2 Flu in 1968. These pandemics are not top of mind in our mental rolodexes.

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It is also human nature to want to do something concrete, especially in a disaster. On top of that, we want something novel since the disaster happened while we were doing what we normally do so a new disaster clearly cannot be helped by something we do everyday, such as wash our hands.

When the CDC pointed out that hand sanitizer is effective against coronavirus, people ran out to buy this item that is not commonly on our shopping lists. As a society, we ignored the other part of what the CDC said which is that soap and water are far superior. That isn't new, we (hopefully) wash our hands with soap and water regularly. This is why there was a mad dash for hand sanitizer. There is another module on my site that further discusses the differences between hand sanitizer and soap and water should you be interested.

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While we are on the subject of what the CDC said – masks can be helpful but only if the person who is sick and coughing is wearing them. In addition to hand sanitizer, this is a new thing we don't normally buy but is easily found at most hardware stores. The problem is, N95 and higher rated masks need to be fit tested and you must be medically cleared to wear them and ensure you don't cause a different problem. With a surgical mask, while you don't need clearance to wear them, they are more likely to have gaps around the side of the mask and aside from protecting your mouth and nose from your own unconscious touching – will not help someone who is not sick. Please note, if you do find that you need a mask, you should not be going outside anyway. If you are directed to wear a mask by a medical professional, know that you should never sleep in it.

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Some take away thoughts that I wanted to share are listed here. Shopping locally regularly is important. This helps small businesses not only stay afloat but it also helps them with inventory counting purposes. Many stores are completely out of stock because they don't have a real idea of what their neighborhood needs. If we shop locally throughout the year, next time we have a disaster or pandemic, they will be better prepared. Additionally, your neighborhood store is literally your neighbor. They will not and really

cannot artificially inflate prices without guaranteeing a boycott later. Your corner store will not charge \$400 for a \$5 bottle of hand sanitizer. Ecommerce platforms can and have proven that they will.

If you know of someone who relies on school lunches, public transit, is food-poor, or is elderly and lives alone, consider helping them stock up on food and supplies and checking in with them by phone. If you do drop off supplies, you can leave the items in front of their door and they can sanitize items before bringing them into their own homes.

Remember that this is nobody's fault, we're all equally affected and in this together. Assume you will be affected – this way you will be ready mentally as well as literally, and if you aren't affected then you have helped your community by containing contagion and will not need to go grocery shopping for a while.

As a final thought, there is an urge, when we're stuck at home, to do spring cleaning and sell items person-to-person online (or give them away for free). If you are able, consider stopping this practice. If you are self-quarantining, this practice goes against that security measure. If you must participate, disinfect items before you put them in your car.

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Thank you so much for listening to this module on disaster psychology. Feel free to email me if you have any questions, personal or about this presentation, at [Samantha.lushtak@absoluteehs.com](mailto:Samantha.lushtak@absoluteehs.com). Feel free to also check out my website for a full length, 45 minute, webinar that was previously recorded with a lot more information in it or check out one of my other short modules on the topic.

Finally, please consider supporting my small business at this time, particularly if you found this information or the worksheets and documents on the website helpful. Donations can be made via PayPal or through Venmo to Samantha-Lushtak.

Stay safe out there and wash your hands!