PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF PANDEMICS

Charles Pilavian, Psy.D.,
Licensed Clinical Psychologist
County of Los Angeles
Department of Human Resources
Occupational Health Programs
Objectives

• This presentation will briefly familiarize you with the chronology of previous pandemics and what has been learned
• A frame of reference will be provided to facilitate understanding of various sources of pandemic-related stress and interventions
• Understanding overall population behaviors and thinking styles
• Different levels of interventions will be discussed
• Finally, available mental health resources to Los Angeles County Employees will be delineated.
Communicable diseases existed during humankind’s hunter-gatherer era, but the shift to agrarian life 10,000 years ago created larger communities where epidemics thrived and became more fatal. Malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, influenza, smallpox and others first appeared several millennia ago.
What is the common denominator of Pandemics?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. It differs from an outbreak or epidemic because it:

a) affects a wider geographical area, often worldwide;

b) infects a greater number of people than an epidemic;

c) is often caused by a bacterium, a new virus or a strain of virus that has not circulated among people for a long time. Humans usually have little to no immunity against it. The virus spreads quickly from person-to-person worldwide;

d) causes much higher numbers of deaths than epidemics; and

e) often creates social disruption, economic loss, and general hardship.
Leprosy, 11th Century. Historians believe that leprosy is the earliest recorded pandemic, dating back to 4000 BC

*De Agostino/ Getty Images*
Black Death or the Plague, 1350. Physical Distancing and Quarantine were used in Medieval times. The plague’s death toll was estimated between 75 to 200 millions.
Cholera 1817,
The first of seven cholera pandemics that originated in Russia.

*Universal Images Group/Getty Images*
The Russian Flu, 1889
Originated in Siberia and Kazakhstan, which led to the deaths of 360,000 Europeans

National Library of Medicine
The Spanish Flu, 1918
Avian Flu which originated from birds and led to the deaths of 50 million people worldwide.

*Universal History Archives, Universal Images Group/ Getty Images*
The Asian Flu, 1957
The second waive of the Asian Flu came in 1958 and was deadlier

*Ed Clark/The Life Picture Collection/Getty Images*
HIV/AIDS 1981
Believed to have originated from chimpanzees in 1920 in West Africa. This epidemic attacks the immune system. 39 million people have died of AIDS worldwide.

Acy Harper/The Life Images Collection/Getty Images
The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), believed to have originated from bats, spread to cats, and to humans infecting 8,096 people and resulting in 774 deaths in 26 countries.

*Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images*
Covid-19, 2020
The Covid-19 has spread to more than 163 countries.
STR/AFP/Getty Images
What is disrupted during a pandemic?

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory
What can be done on Macrosystem Level During a Pandemic?

Preparations for pandemics entail forecasting (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) and surveillance (Contact Tracing) to track the occurrence of outbreaks which is locally conducted by LAC Department of Public Health.

Four main methods are used to manage the spread of infection:

1. Public Education (effective risk communication without causing panic, without blaming any minority groups, or countries),
2. Vaccination (reassuring the public about the safety and efficacy of vaccines).
3. Hygiene Practices (handwashing, covering sneezes and coughs, washing surfaces, and door-knobs), and
4. Physical (social) Distancing.
Macro-Level Perspective

People differ in the way they seek or avoid information about potential health threats. Some people tend to have a Monitoring Cognitive Style; whereas others tend to have a “Blunting Cognitive Style”. Monitors, tend to seek information and scan for cues to health hazard. Blunters tend to distract themselves and minimize threatening health information. Monitors tend to be vulnerable to negative health information and as a result they tend to experience higher level of stress.
• Monitors are intolerant of uncertainty and tend to overestimate risks. When faced with uncertainty, they feel paralyzed and indecisive. A sense of **anxiety** and **disgust** is readily triggered in them.

• Blunters tend to have an **Unrealistic Optimism Bias** which is associated with persistent and unrealistic positive beliefs about one’s future (Taylor and Brown, 1988). They also tend to underestimate dangers such as diseases and other hardships. Even though they accept the potential of danger, but do not accept that danger and misfortune will happen to them.

• Blunters may become super-spreaders of contagion. Typhoid Mary Mallon who was an asymptomatic carrier (Soper, 1939); she infected 50 people, before she was involuntarily quarantined in hospital for communicable diseases in New York.
How to get the Message Across to Blun ters?

• Blun ters should be made aware that certain aspects of Covid-19 are irreversible. The virus may trigger an inflammatory response that leads to the formation of blood clots, which can cause strokes.

• An explosive inflammatory response called a cytokine storm damages the blood-brain barrier. This may allow inflammatory cells and molecules—and, possibly, viral particles—to enter the brain. Patients may develop seizures, confusion, coma, or encephalopathy (brain abnormality that leads to altered mental states or behaviors).

• The two most common neurological problems seem to be stroke and delirium.
What Causes Stress During a Pandemic?

• Disruption of routine and structure
• Lack of Control
• Uncertainty, fear of the Unknown
• Concerns may include worries about family members, health (pre-existing condition), job security, the economy, and public safety
• Monotony associated with working from home, managing childcare
• Thinking about the future
• Role changes in the family
Disruptions at the Exo-System Level

Disruptions include:
• Extended family
• Workplace (virtual)
• Peers
• Neighbors
• Local houses of worship
• The school system
Interventions at the Exo-System Level

• Weekly meetings (All Hands Meeting) with Ms. Garett and Ms. Pam Missett, the executive staff. These meetings provide a sense of continuity and stability (when everything around us is changing, something is still constant and the same).

• County-wide and Departmental Announcements

• Support and reassurance about work security

• Logistics

• In addition to the above, weekly televised address by Dr. Ferrer accompanied by a County Supervisor is another source of information and safety. Weekly televised announcements by Mayor Garcetti and Governor Newsom provide us with weekly updates about the city and state-wide situation with Covid-19.
Stress at the Micro (Family) Level

• Your roles at home, work and in your community may have changed a lot during lockdown because of Covid-19. And you may be using your home and other spaces in different ways than you're used to. This can be challenging so it is important to make time to talk about what would work best for your family and check how everyone is feeling.

• Spending more time with members of your family can cause arguments and stress. More importantly, it can be difficult to keep children shielded from adult arguments when everyone is together most of the day.
Interventions at the Micro (Family) Level

• Have a family meeting, discuss the challenges you are facing, and find collective solutions. Give everyone an opportunity to present their challenges.

• Partition your day into three periods: 8 hours of sleep, 8 hours work, and 8 hours of recreational time.

• Talk about routines, chores, work, and how you can all share the spaces in your home. Establish ground rules.

• Planning, if possible, for children and adults to spend time together one on one. And, plan some time apart, even if it's just time alone with headphones, in a different room or a walk by yourself. Take time to gather your thoughts and relax.
Structure your Activities

• If you plan watching television, watch comedy to brighten up your mood. Select a program that is appropriate for children.

• Play table games with your children. Have one of your children discuss a specific chapter from their history book. Engage them in trivia and quizzes. You may also engage your children in arts and crafts. Create an atmosphere of togetherness.

• Inspire the family to be resilient and to maintain optimism.
Interventions at the Micro (Family) Level

• Look at old photographs, tell a story regarding the person, the situation taking place in the photo.

• Being kind to yourself and each other, thanking each other for the small things like keeping a room tidy, saying "good morning" or playing quietly. Research has shown that self-compassion counteracts stress.

• Connect with extended family and friends. This can counteract feelings of isolation and loneliness.

• Think about things you would like to do once lockdown ends.
Self-Care

• Establish and stick to a routine: Working from home can blur boundaries between work and personal life. Therefore, find a specific corner or room and assign it as your workspace. Once you sign out for the day, do not return to your workspace until the following day. Remember that the bedroom should be used for sleep and privacy, and therefore you should not work from your bedroom.

• Routines and structure may give you a sense of normalcy in abnormal times.
Self-Care

• Do not skip meals and eat at given times. Eating with family members is psychologically healthier than eating alone at your desk.

• Get enough sleep and exercise daily. You may sign up for group exercise online.

• Be mindful of alcohol or drug use. Remember, caffeine, alcohol, and illicit drugs interfere with deep sleep and therefore will cause sleep deprivation and fatigue.

• Learn something new. This is the time to reeducate yourself and build a new skillset.
Stress Management

The American Psychological Association, California Psychological Association, and the International Red Cross, have developed the following recommendations about emotional and physical self-care:

1. Stay informed about how to keep safe. Seek information only from credible sources such as the CDC, WHO, or LA County Public Health. Limit your exposure to websites or TV programs that fuel your fears.
Stress Management

2. Keep things in perspective: It should be pointed out that for centuries people have survived hardships (Spanish Flu of 1918). Most people are resilient and adaptive. Remember that things will get better.

3. August 25, 2020 at 8:08 a.m. PST, the BBC World Service Breaking News announced: Nigeria is the last African country to be declared free from wild polio. Thereby, Africa is to be declared free from wild polio by the independent body, the Africa Regional Certification Commission.

4. Stay healthy: A healthy lifestyle, including proper diet, exercise, sleep, and rest, is a good defense against disease. One thing has remained constant through multiple pandemics is practicing hand wash and covering coughs. Get vaccinated when a vaccine is available. Take time to relax. Maintain your normal routine if possible.
Stress Management

4. Having a plan with hardships can lessen your anxiety. Keep at least a two-week supplies of non-perishable, easy to prepare food, water, and other important household and other supplies including medical supplies.

5. Communicate with your children: address your children’s concerns. Discuss the flu in an open and age-appropriate manner with your children. Remember that children take their cues from adults. Try to maintain your children’s routines and schedules. Parents should not discuss financial or marital hardship in the presence of children.
6. Maintaining social networks is a valuable way of sharing feelings and relieving stress. Stay connected via social media. Remember to take breaks from actively thinking about the situation.
Structure your Activities

• Reset your biological clock, reorient it by exposing yourself to daylight and engage in physical activity.

• Wakeup and go to bed at set times. Once you stand up from bed, don’t stay in your pajamas, pretend you will go to work, do not neglect grooming. Wear your wrist watch to keep up with time and your tasks.
Challenge your Assumptions

• Experiences and studies have shown that engaging in problem solving counteracts anxiety and panic. Focusing on problem solving liberates you from fear. Remember, not all problems are immediately solvable. However, engaging in problem solving is empowering. If one solution doesn’t work, come up with another one (Action counteracts helplessness).

• Challenge your own catastrophic thinking. Ask yourself: “How many times did I believe a catastrophe was imminent, but the outcome was shown to be otherwise.” What percentage of your predictions came true?”
Challenge your Assumptions

• Remember we are fighting the Covid-19 virus collectively. You are not alone. Pandemics have been occurring for several thousands of years. Humans have always survived and prevailed. We have always outsmarted epidemics as well as pandemics.

• If you are having a hard time turning off your worries, decide a specific worry-time. Write down your worries, categorize them, rank them in terms of severity, and write a possible solution to each one of them.

• If you are a ruminator, engaging in excessive worries before bedtime, implement the same strategy as above. Make time to write down your bedtime worries a few hours before you go to bed. Apply tentative solutions to each one of them.
Structure your Worries

• Distinguish between emotional worries (guilt, grief, shame) and practical worries. Determine which one of them you need to address first.

• Remember, certain worries are collective (shared by all of us) while others are personal.

• Make time to communicate with your family members, friends, extended family. Remember how fortunate we are to have the technology, allowing us to maintain our relationship with the outside world.

• Compare the advancement of medicine, psychological science and mental health, and the resources our County, State, and our Country has. Indeed, as compared to the 1918 pandemic during World War I, we are fortunate and resilient.
When to seek Help: Some degree of fear or anxiety about the Covid-19 is normal and necessary, but sometimes people need help to cope with severe stress. Look for the following warning signs:

1) Persistent anxiety, worry, insomnia, irritability, or depression,
2) Extreme social avoidance to the point that you have become isolated; even from members of your immediate family
3) Persistently checking your body (checking vitals) or persistently seeking reassurance from doctors, friends, and family members;
4) Engaging in excessive or unnecessary hygiene precautions, such as wearing a facemask even at home; and
5) Abusing alcohol or drugs, or overeating, as a way of coping with stress.
Stress Management

• A vast body of research conducted by Neff, et al., indicated that self-compassion is a significant way of coping with emotional challenges and adversity.

• To ease feelings of isolation, acknowledge yourself, address yourself with kind words, rather than self-judgment. Recognize that millions of people world-wide are sharing your experience right now.
Stress Management

• Where to seek help?

• If any of the warning signs apply to you, then you may benefit from seeking the services of a licensed mental health professional such as psychologist, family physician, or a psychiatrist. County of Los Angeles is offering Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that can be reached by dialing (213) 738-4200 to speak with the most caring individuals.

• How to find a mental health professional? Search your health insurance mental healthcare Provider Directory online or by simply calling your health insurance.
Resources

- Los Angeles County, Employee Assistance Programs: (213) 738-4200
- Cigna Life Assistance Program www.cignalap.com (800) 538-3543
- Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health: 800-854-7771
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or text LOVEIS to 22522
- Elder Abuse Hotline Call: 1-877-4R SENIORS (1-877-477-3646)
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ivpp/injury_topics/Suicide/suicide_hotlines.htm
Resources

• National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
• http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
• 24 Hour – Local Referrals
• 1-800-273-8255
• 1-888-628-9454 (En Español)
• 1-800-799-4889
• 1-800-799-4889 PRESS “1” VETERANS