

THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS ON THE MOST VULNERABLE

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During this pandemic, people who have survived catastrophic illnesses, such as cancer, and HIV are facing heightened vulnerabilities. They are alive after experiencing life threatening odds and often treatments that weaken their immune systems and may have serious side effects. Having defied the odds, an estimated 10 million people in the United States, (Bulletin for Atomic Scientists) encounter the unexpected threat of a killing virus. Every day, they scrutinize normal activities reviewing and implementing them carefully. Taking precautions becomes extremely important, more so for them because of their continuing exposure to potential infections.

Washing hands, avoiding crowds, wearing masks, cleaning door handles and keys, sanitizing surfaces and other precautions take on added importance.

Underlying these reactions is the hidden pitter patter of death which has a powerful hold on our daily responses. Scrutiny, hyper alertness and constant vigilance about news, updates, possible causes and treatments take priority, and become an exhausting preoccupation which also provokes and sharpens one's sensibilities. In addition, for many, restless sleep and nightmares sap energies painting uncertainty and chaos. Such a consuming preoccupation often results in grumpy, anxious moments in the day. There is more to attend to.

We all face these complicated questions. We ask: have I done enough? Should I have avoided going to the grocery store, seeing another person, walking at the crowded park? Tuned in to friends' activities we listen more carefully to what actions and contacts others partake in for two reasons: one is to contrast with our own risk taking, as we are bound to do with each other and

the second is to decide if they take too many risks, and how risky it is to see them. It naturally applies to family they live with, a focus of concern. The questioning and constant anxiety about actions taken or omitted accentuate the sense of danger and thresholds of endurance are constantly tested by the changing and at times conflicting theories and information. Who can answer those questions about exposure with certainty, anyway!

Safety seems to reside in isolation, avoidance of contact, distancing, which may lead to dithering about how much to risk; that may become exhausting. It is even worse for those that are currently undergoing treatment. Keeping appointments in medical settings has to be unnerving. The danger scale would feel triple, compounded by judgements about whether procedures and care are essential or can wait. A few may defy the threat and maintain their pre-corona lifestyle.

There is potential impact on finances. For some, to continue work means taking a chance, risking their own health and survival. It is safe to work from home but essential workers, such as those in hospitals, the food industry or delivery services have to come in contact with the public. For these workers, it is a difficult compromise to make, because it potentially involves endangering self and others in their own family setting. Health versus economic straits, potential poverty and hunger is a terrible dilemma. Another implication, as often work is tied to insurance benefits, is the importance of maintaining employment because it provides ongoing health coverage, essential for those with complex medical histories.

The multilayered dilemmas of living under such conditions create a daily cloud that may invoke not only anxiety but also night terrors and new trauma of living under the constant threat of

illness and infections; knowing that life is too short and taking a heightened risk is unwarranted.

The dilemmas of self-preservation are scaled up exacerbating pressures, creating self-debates and the reevaluation of choices. The good news is that there are advances in therapeutics and multiple efforts to identify a vaccine. Such news increase hope that the pandemic does have an endpoint and in the foreseeable future, if everyone follows basic precautions.

Meanwhile, in light of the new reality, it is important to focus on self-care and develop routines that are healthy outlets. There are many options available and it may be as easy as keeping with or return to old habits, such as walking, exercising, a healthy diet and engagement in loved hobbies. Countering anxiety and fear, with daily meditation routines, stillness, focused breathing, and greater access to our core strengthens the development of successful adaptive behaviors.

While self-care is vital, engaging with community is equally important. The sense of isolation is a dangerous companion. Thankfully, technology has given us new ways to communicate, from zoom to skype to cell phones that most people take for granted. In person, socially distanced get togethers help maintain our relationships and sense of balance. It is a time when mutual supports help build up strengths and we see and admire human resilience and tune in to how to better stand by each other.