

## **Management of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)– Psychological Aspects**

### **I. Basics**

- a. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a new disease. It is understandable that people will have lots of fear and anxiety.
- b. Acknowledge and remind ourselves that things have been done by various parties to deal with the problem. There has been progress and we need to have patience to wait for the positive results. Emphasize on the need to follow existing guidelines made available by the authorities on how to prevent the disease from spreading, and on how to protect ourselves. It is our duty and responsibility to help ourselves and others.
- c. Acknowledge that while the anxiety is real and understandable, part of it has gradually taken on more psychological than real significance. While on the medical side, new solutions are coming out as time unfolds, our own anxieties, if not properly managed, can prove to be detrimental to our health and immunity to the disease too.

### **II. Relationship between stress & physical resilience**

- a. We become anxious when we feel that we have lost our control, when we are faced with uncertainties, when we feel threatened, and when we have to deal with novel experiences that we have not dealt with before.
- b. Remember that the initial anxiety serves a healthy and normal function to help us cope with the threat, loss, and uncertainties, etc. Optimal anxiety heightens our bodily senses, increases our motivation and helps to prepare the body to deal with the situation. To be completely free of anxiety is pathological in itself.
- c. Too much anxiety, on the other hand, will bring us down and can even immobilize us. There is no hard and fast rule to determine when anxiety is “too much” but one useful guide is to see whether it interferes with or impedes our normal functioning. It is “normal” to feel anxious even after we have taken all the precautions and we may still feel vulnerable. However, if because of this anxiety, we have sleep problems, we feel depressed for a long period of time, we think of giving up, and we withdraw ourselves from social encounters, we can be pretty sure that the anxiety is not helping us.
- d. Anxiety is part and parcel of stress reactions and stress is known to be closely related to our physical well-being. The more anxious we get, the higher stress our bodies will

experience and our general resilience or immunity to disease could be lowered. In other words, the more anxious you are, the more likely you are to succumb to illness of all types. Therefore, apart from doing what needs to be done to protect ourselves (washing hands frequently and staying away from possibly contaminated areas), we need also to manage our anxiety in order that we can stay healthy.

- e. The anxiety can be very individual and it can also be a group feeling. When not managed properly, it can spread and behave like a contagious disease!

### **III. Strategy to manage our anxiety in an epidemic**

- a. Follow what the medical professionals advise:
  - i. The first and foremost of all actions/ strategies must be to take all the necessary precautions, preventive measures to protect ourselves and to stop the disease from spreading. In this connection, we must take the suggestions from various guidelines issued by a credible source seriously. The guidelines issued by the Government bodies such as the Department of Health are the ones we can trust.
  - ii. There are people who may have resistance towards the guidelines/ instruction. Such resistance may stem from over-complacency, lack of trust, or previous experiences of not getting hurt even without following guidelines. For these people, there is no point in forcing them (unless when they pose actual threats to him/herself or others). However, they should be encouraged to regularly reassess their needs for taking up precautionary measures. For those who are not following guidelines because of the worry about the labeling effect or about others' reactions to their taking up precautions. For these, it is helpful to remind them that they should base their behaviour on their own needs, and they should not let the comments from others dictate their behaviour.
- b. Psychological Strategies
  - i. Taking care of ourselves and others. Make time to eat properly, exercise, and rest. Schedule time to do things we enjoy such as hobbies and social activities (if environment permits). Caring for ourselves and try to have fun will help us stay balanced and healthy. It will also enable us to better deal with stressful times.
  - ii. Keep up the routine at work or at home. Do not change our daily schedules. Keeping the usual patterns of work and family life would help us to develop a sense of stability. Structure is for chaos as Panadol is for fever! At home, adherence to the routine is also helpful for our children to feel safe as well.
  - iii. Managing our anxiety
    - Take a break from watching the news or talking about SARS all day long. Although it is normal and necessary to keep us informed, we can be

overwhelmed by the news. Limit the amount of time watching related news every day. Avoid watching the news before we are ready to wind down and go to bed. Remember that it is okay for us to think about other things in our lives!

→ We will feel less anxious when we have a plan to deal with the situation that may come up. This applies to the office and the home. Meet with your family/ coworkers to discuss and develop plans to deal with emergency situations. What should we do if a family member/ colleague is taken ill? How can we work together to make the home/ office a safer place? How can we help the children to spend their time meaningfully now that the schools are closed? Knowing what we can do in such situation will increase our sense of control and lower our anxiety.

→ Practice relaxation. Deep breathing is very helpful but unfortunately this may not be the most popular choice given the characteristics of the SARS. Still, when permitted by the environment, try deep breathing. Thought-stop is a behavioural technique of consciously giving ourselves the instruction to stop certain negative thoughts and refocus our attention to more pleasing and relaxing ones. Muscular relaxation techniques are very helpful but it will take some sort of instruction. Even without new tricks, we can recall what we did in the past that relaxed us and make us feel comfortable. The saying goes, “different folks, different strokes” – relaxation can be achieved through any means that we find relaxing. It can be anything we found effective in the past: Tai Chi, music, reading, physical exercises, prayers and even just finding a comfortable place to take a rest. Do this a lot. Even in work settings, take time out to relax and to get re-energized.

→ Positive thinking and maintaining the right perspective

→ cognitive restructuring, give examples, e.g. focus also on the hard facts about the illness,

#### iv. Social support/ making connection with others

→ Whether in the office or at home, social isolation is undesirable when managing anxieties. Connect to others through safe means. With adequate precaution, social interaction is safe.

→ Share the worries and depressive thoughts with someone. Write them out, send an e-mail to others...stay in touch and keep communicating.

→ Be understanding and sympathetic. Do not reject or belittle feelings expressed by others. We can, however, stay calm and provide alternative perspectives if we feel we have more balanced ones.

→ As a rule, being able to help others gives us a feeling of being in control.

Therefore, helping others is helping ourselves.

**Caution:** Whatever strategy we choose, we need to remind ourselves to be flexible. We have to assess our own situation rationally and adopt the strategy which best fits our needs.

#### IV. Help Seeking

- a. Despite all the effort, anxiety cannot be eliminated completely because the threat is real, no matter how remote it may be. We must all allow time for changes to take place. We feel we can wait when we can see the positive signs and look at the facts.
- b. We will know that our anxiety is “over the limit” when despite the anxiety begins to interfere and affect our daily functioning. Insomnia, appetite loss, social withdrawal, phobic reactions and of course bodily symptoms. If we feel that we are constantly agitated, we are losing our concentration and sense of control, and we cannot sort these feelings out and control them after talking to our family members and friends, we should consider seeking professional help.

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