

Resilience and Disease Outbreaks

SARS and other contagious diseases can be frightening. Reports focusing on the most sensational aspects of SARS and other contagious diseases have escalated people's anxiety, and it can be hard to separate the facts from the hype. The good news is that the skills of resilience--the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress--can help offset the anxiety that these outbreaks evoke.

The reality is that more people die from the flu each year--about 36,000 each year in the U.S. alone--than have died from SARS or any of the other exotic diseases making the headlines, but reports focusing on the most sensational aspects of SARS and other contagious diseases have escalated people's anxiety.

The good news is that the skills of resilience--the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress--can help offset the anxiety that these outbreaks evoke.

In addition to the physical threat these diseases may pose, they also can affect our psychological wellbeing. For those living in or traveling to a city exposed to SARS or other outbreaks, the threat of this contagious disease can lead to anxiety and stress.

These feelings may even be heightened because of other threats people must deal with, such as the recent security threats and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, which already made many feel vulnerable and uncertain about the future.

Although SARS and other highly contagious diseases could potentially affect anyone, they may be of particular concern to certain populations:

- Health-care workers may feel particularly vulnerable because their work often places them in direct contact with people who may have been exposed.
- Children may have heard stories about an outbreak and may be afraid without being able to verbalize those fears.
- The threat of exposure to a disease may worsen the isolation felt by many elderly people if the threat affects their decisions about going out for errands or visits.
- Those exposed to an infectious disease, whether they have survived the disease or are in quarantine, may find themselves lonely or depressed, especially if contact with other people is limited.

The threats to psychological well-being that outbreaks pose often can be overcome with the skills of resilience, which can serve as a kind of emotional vaccine. We all can develop resilience. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned over time. Following are tips to building resilience that can help you adapt to the threat of disease outbreaks such as SARS.

Five Tips for Resilience During Disease Outbreaks

1. Make connections

Keep in touch with family, friends and others. This can be especially true if you or someone you know is faced with a disease-related quarantine. Even if your connections can't be face-to-face and must be over the telephone or the Internet, connecting with people provides social support and strengthens resilience. Especially with infectious diseases, the fear and stigma of the disease can be nearly as devastating as the disease itself, so it's vital to maintain connections in some way if you or someone you know is faced with one of these diseases. Some find comfort in connecting with a higher power, whether through organized religion or privately. Many people find that they have comforted themselves in the process of volunteering or helping others in some way.

2. Maintain a hopeful outlook

Keep in mind that the world's best scientists are working to develop cures and vaccines to keep a step ahead of infectious diseases and that, even though some have contracted infections, many have survived.

3. Take care of yourself

Don't let your worry about getting sick be a barrier to staying well. Make time to eat properly, exercise, and rest. Schedule time to do things you enjoy such as hobbies and social activities. Caring for yourself and even having fun will help you stay balanced and enable you to better deal with stressful times.

4. Keep things in perspective

Although you should not take any infectious disease such as SARS lightly, you should realistically assess the risk of contagion. Find a credible source for your information. Because news stories tend to report the "worst-case scenarios," consider limiting the amount of time you and your family spend watching and reading disease-related news coverage. Although it's natural to seek out the news to keep informed, too much news can make you more anxious especially when news coverage sensationalizes the dangers. Perhaps limit your news intake to no more than one hour a day, and try not to watch the news right before you go to bed, when you need to "wind down." Your children also will benefit from taking a break from the news, but be honest with children's fears if they do ask questions because of something they've heard.

5. Take decisive actions

Despite SARS and other diseases, there are certain things you can and should control. Trust yourself to make appropriate decisions if you are exposed and to be strong if someone you love is exposed. Do take the precautions recommended by medical professionals, but maintain your daily routine as much as possible. Make a plan about what you would do if you were quarantined. Having an emergency plan in place that includes provisions for contacting your friends and family can be reassuring that you are prepared for the unexpected.

You probably already have some resilience skills. Recall the ways you have successfully handled hardships in the past, such as the loss of a loved one, a divorce, or major illness. Draw on these skills to meet current challenges. Resilience can be an important part of your mental preventive care. It is a psychological tool that can help us deal with anxiety, fear and distressful events such as the threat of SARS and other infectious disease outbreaks.

Developing resilience is a personal journey. An approach to building resilience that works for you might not

work for someone else. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed and unable to use the tips listed above, you may want to consider talking to someone who can help, such as a psychologist or other mental health professional. Turning to someone for guidance may help you strengthen resilience and persevere.

Information contained in this fact sheet should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care or consultation. Individuals who believe they may need or benefit from care should consult a psychologist or other licensed health/mental health professional.

[Click here to take the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory.](#)

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