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Halifax psychologist explains the scars we'll carry post-COVID-19

Stuart Peddle, March 16, 2021



Simon Sherry, psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, said we will adapt but will have psychological scars post-COVID-19. He's pictured at his clinic in Halifax on Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. - Nebal Snan/Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

HALIFAX, N.S. — With the light of hope provided by COVID-19 vaccinations glimmering on the horizon, clinical psychologist Simon Sherry says the future may be a bit different post-pandemic.

We may be carrying some psychological baggage with us after a year of self-isolation and other coronavirus mitigation efforts, the Dalhousie University professor and director of clinical training said in an interview on Tuesday.

We'll be all right

Approaching the topic with humility because it's hard to find comparable research for the circumstances, Sherry has two main messages. One is that we'll be all right. The second is that we will carry some scars.

"The majority of people will be fine, but there will be a subset of people who have lasting, meaningful and even lifelong impacts from this pandemic," Sherry said.

"But in general, on average, the vast majority of people will bounce back from this pandemic," he said. "Humans are adaptive and resilient and we would expect the vast majority of people to not suffer long-term negative mental health impacts."

That's the good news. He said that research has shown that after a disaster like 9-11, most people's emotional distress subsides after a matter of weeks to months.

He also said it's important to realize that there's no one particular path to recovery. We should let each person recover in her or his own way.

Red flags to seek help

"And there might be a few red flags for lingering pandemic-related distress," Sherry said. "For example, if the duration of your distress seems to be longer than those around you, that's a red flag. If your level of distress seems to be higher than those around you, there's another red flag. And if you're starting to get impairment in your function, like your social relationships aren't going so well, or your workplace behaviours are struggling, there's another red flag for this lingering pandemic distress.

"And then – very important – there's a subjective sense of being stuck, when you get mired in the muck of something like recovering from a pandemic."

If a number of those red flags are up for you, it may be time to seek some help, he said.

It might also be reasonable to predict that the pandemic may change personalities and personality development far into the future, Sherry suggested.

Some who might have some issues include people with universal personality traits that are usually considered positives, including extroverts and people who are open to experiences.

Change in personality development

Extroverts are cheerful excitement seekers who are outgoing, gregarious and positive.

"From the perspective of COVID-19, it's also a disease-promoting trait," he said. "I'm not trying to pathologize extroverts in any sort of a way, but if you think about the basis of

extroversion, extroverted people prefer social contact, and social contact is associated with the transmission of COVID-19. So one scar from the pandemic may be a lasting change in levels of extroversion because extroversion is associated with social contact, which is in turn associated with the spread of COVID-19."

He said at a societal, parental and policy level, we're going to favour lower levels of extroversion after what we've been told to do for the past year.

"On a day-to-day basis, we're told to avoid others, to reduce social contact, and in cultures that have been subjected to epidemics before in other parts of the world or other periods in history, lower extroversion tends to be a scar."

Similarly, someone who is open to experiences is curious, exploratory, experimental and willing, traits that are also associated with transmission of COVID-19.

Sherry doesn't dispute the Public Health guidance as anything other than necessary to mitigate the spread of the virus.

He feels that some of the adaptations to deal with COVID-19 will become part of everyday life.

"I think we're going to have, as a scar of this pandemic, fewer interpersonal contacts ... and greater interpersonal distance going forward."

Recalibrating personal space

He suspects we're going to "permanently re-calibrate" the acceptable personal distance between one person and another.

Sherry said when mandated space requirements came into effect, in his practice, he moved the chair where he sits during a therapy session to 2.4 metres from the couch where his patients sit.

"And at the start of that work, that distance felt psychologically awkward. I questioned whether I could even do my job at that psychological distance. And, about a year later, that distance now feels normal. And it may be unusual or even uncomfortable for some if I were to move back to my usual closer distance."

He pointed out that culturally, North Americans already preferred a larger personal space bubble than other parts of the world like South America, where interpersonal distance was smaller.

"But this pandemic may lead to a more or less permanent recalibration of the degree of space that's considered acceptable between one person and another. And that may be

especially true of public distance where we're interacting with strangers as opposed to an intimate distance where we might be interacting with friends or partners."

He added that when the first wave hit, he saw "a constellation" of symptoms in people he'd be helping or studying as a clinical psychologist and a scientist that had to do with obsession, worry, anxiety, contamination and fear.

A year later, however, "... the symptoms of anxiety that were once so prominent seem to have largely given way to something that feels much more depressive."

Those mired in such serious symptoms should seek help.

"And our government should recognize that our COVID-19 mitigation efforts have been very detrimental to the mental health of Nova Scotians and provide funding to mental health that corresponds with the amount of damage done," Sherry said.