

Virtual VISIONS 2020

Federation Fighting Blindness Annual Conference – Zoom platform

June 27, 2020 12:00pm to 2:00pm CST

Presentation Title: ***Mental Health: Coping with anxiety, depression, and stress related to vision loss or serving in a helper role***

Presenter: Ann Wagner, PhD, LP, ABPP. Board Certified Clinical Psychologist.

Moderator: Eric Ringham, Retired Senior Editor, Minnesota Public Radio. Spouse.

Presentation Outline

Introductions

Pandemic-related heightening of isolation and effects

Distinction between natural emotional states and mental disorders

Education about the function of emotions

Unique dilemmas facing people with vision loss and people serving in a care/helper role

Social Buffering Theory – we can cope with high levels of stress if we have adequate support.

Acceptance principles

Mindfulness of the present moment; what is, is.

In this moment, claim your dignity, integrity, compassion.

Coping strategies:

Deep breathing, calm mental imagery, humor, music, spiritual resources and practices

Movement-based calming strategies, yoga, Tai Chi,

Mantras using vocal cords (ohm, ahh)

Aromatherapy

Smartphone Apps available to help with stress management, sleep, etc.

Self-care is a priority.

Meditation stances of gratitude and compassion have been found to be quite helpful.

Final exercise – Compassion-based kindness phrases

Questions and comments

Ann Wagner's notes for the presentation:

Disclaimers: This presentation does not represent any official views of the Dept of Veterans Affairs or the Federal Government. I am here today in my role of citizen psychologist and a person with vision loss.

I am also required to make it clear and explicit that I am providing an educational workshop presentation and am not entering into a mental health provider role with you.

I hope the information we provide will feel helpful and I look forward to your feedback after the presentation.

Eric will now read the outline for the presentation, but I want to let you know that the order of the topics may change as we go along.

Interactive parts – please indicate “yes” by clicking on the raised hand icon or nod head. For parts where I ask for verbal word responses, type into the chat line. There is a Q&A feature for questions. Please send a comment in the chat line at any time if you cannot hear us.

Eric reads the outline.

Introductions:

My background - RP/family hx

Eric's background – father with MD, wife with RP, serving in helper roles

ACT principles will be shared – many of the ideas I will be presenting come from a model of therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which invites awareness of truth, respecting and willingly experiencing emotions and validating their functions, and claiming valued actions and directions in one's life.

Resources: The ACT Coach App is free, and there are many ACT self-help books, including “Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life,” “The Happiness Trap” and others. Also, TED Talks by Steven Hayes, the developer of ACT, on “Psychological Flexibility.”

Interactive exercise:

Ask “Have you ever experienced anxiety, depressed mood, or any other distress related to vision loss?”

“Have you ever experienced anxiety, depressed mood, or any other distress related to serving in a helper role?”

Validation of newer stressors for low vision related to COVID and civil unrest

-- Isolation and effects --

1. Touch as a primary sense,
2. Hearing, social distancing of 6 feet when outside; hearing may be more difficult if background sounds are loud,
3. Virtual platforms, phone even more important now to stay connected, recognize not the same, not as meaningful as face-to-face interactions.
4. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, public transportation was shut down during riots; limited access to transportation for those with vision loss who use public transportation
-Also, public transportation has been on limited schedule since COVID-19
5. Fear of potential violence in metro areas experiencing civil unrest -- additional barrier to access to resources, higher stress and anxiety and helplessness
6. Medical appts, including visits for vision loss, are being postponed, viewed as not essential; feel even more marginalized

Distinction between natural emotional states and mental disorders

1. If symptoms other than emotions arise and are functionally impairing, then it would be important to seek professional evaluation and interventions.
2. Resources: Online resources; Google symptoms and disorders, call County Social Services, State Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired to inquire into mental health resources and support
3. Suicidality – please seek emergency help, call local First Call for Help, 911; call a friend, do not stay “alone”

ACT review exercises

Exercise 1: “What are some of the emotions you have struggled with? What are some names of the distressing emotions?”

- Fear, anxiety, anger, helplessness, depression, sadness, grief, loss, sorrow, guilt, shame, stress, hurt, loneliness ...many more

-Emotions show up to tell us what we care about.

Helplessness and anger education

-Society has taught us to struggle with our natural emotions, particularly the Helplessness emotion.

-Helplessness tells us two truths: the limits of our control, and that we care about something

Role of JUDGMENTS in human suffering

Group exercise: What emotions tell us about what we care about: Often, the emotions of stress and feeling overwhelmed indicate multiple values and urges to act showing up in the same moment, and you can only take one action at a time – the emotion validates that many things are important to you.

Unique dilemmas facing person with vision loss, facing person who is in helper role

Person with vision loss dilemmas:

1. Wanting help in the moment, but also caring about the helper's time and wants/needs
2. May want to learn skills to be more independent, may want to participate in rehab training, dilemma though of time away from other valued activities, cost, etc., and dilemma that it is easier at times to have the helper help,
3. Helper may also prefer to help in some ways, such as ensuring safety of woman using public transit alone at night. Though person with vision loss may want to feel independent, it is safer to accept help.
4. Dilemma of wanting to feel independent in transportation, Metro Mobility can allow for independence but can be unreliable with time, waits up to an hour or longer, so may feel more effective to accept a ride or ask for a ride from a helper.

Other dilemmas for person with vision loss?

Helper role dilemmas:

1. Want to help the person with vision loss, but may have other plans for the moment, feel guilty if say "Can I help you later?" Or even "no"
2. Feel like a martyr if put the person with vision loss's needs consistently above your own, resentment can build?
3. Helper offering help when the person with vision loss has not asked for it, feels rejected or hurt if the offer is declined, dilemma is that the helper also wants to support the person with vision loss being self-sufficient

Other dilemmas?

Solutions: clear communication, empathy for the other's position and wants, self-care supported by both – helper supports what the person with vision loss needs to do for self-care and values/balance, person with vision loss supports what the helper needs to do for self-care and values/balance

Struggle/Avoidance patterns:

Most impairing aspect of distressing emotions is not the emotion itself, but AVOIDANCE or STRUGGLE behaviors.

What do you do to try to get rid of or avoid the distressing emotions? Typically, avoidance behaviors

- Isolation, decline invitations, stay home, don't answer phone, don't talk or share
- Withdrawal – leave or escape a situation
- Alcohol/drugs
- Aggression or yelling, raising voice
- Rumination – what ifs, If onlys, why? Over thinking, “shoulds”
- Intellectualization – stay “rational” and ignore emotional world
- Invisible wall or guard up, keep people at an emotional distance
- Eat
- Sleep, stay in bed
- Distractions -- TV, video games, computer, excessive involvement in hobbies – only you can determine whether it is a valued balance, or is functioning as avoidance of emotions
- Staying in your “bubble”
- Suppression/ignoring the emotions, “burying” them

Ask: Are these avoidance behaviors consistent with your values? Probably not.

Effects of the struggle:

- Negative effects on relationships and sense of connectedness
- Increased loneliness, increased distress
- Physical health can decline
- Mental health can suffer, increase in anxiety, depression, etc.
- Cognitive or brain functioning is not optimized
- Work or productivity can suffer
- Self-respect, self-esteem can deteriorate

- Lower energy, feel exhausted
- Quality of life, out of balance
- Not feeling understood – invisible wall effect

*****The struggle behaviors, NOT the emotions, cause the suffering and negative effects on quality of life. Mental health rule – the more unwilling you are to have it, the more you have it. The very thing you are trying to get rid of becomes bigger if you struggle with it (referring to private experiences of emotions, thoughts, memories etc.) Don't think about a pink elephant...

Willingness/acceptance as new relationship to private experiences

Goal is to step out of the struggle to control the emotions.

Invite new relationship of SELF-VALIDATION and SELF-COMPASSION for the emotions showing up in the moment

Mindfulness and acceptance principles: What is, is

Authenticity -- sharing from core self, claim values and dignity

YOU are the driver of your bus.

ROLE of JUDGMENTS in Human Suffering – These are the problem, the struggle is the problem, not the emotions themselves. The emotions are innocent, just trying to tell you about your own heart, what you care about.

Observe the mind's chatter, notice how many thoughts are judgments/evaluation – no truth or reality in ANY judgments, no such thing as “good/bad, right/wrong, better/worse”

What is, just is. In this moment.

Social Buffering Theory:

We can cope with high levels of stress if we have adequate support.

- Profound loneliness - need to feel heard and cared about at an emotional level

Your emotions matter. You matter.

- Community and connectedness are natural, healthy yearnings. NEED, not a want.
- Seek support – EMOTIONAL support, feeling heard, understood, not alone with your pain. Other types of support may be advice, information, help accessing resources. You can “set the frame” for

what you need by telling the listener up front – I just need to feel that you are with me and care about my pain, I do not need advice or ideas right now”

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Other Coping strategy ideas:

- Deep breathing
- Calm mental imagery
- Humor
- Music
- Spiritual practices
- Movement-based calming strategies, yoga, Tai Chi,
- Mantras using vocal cords – OHM, AHH, CALM
- Aromatherapy
- Many apps available to help with stress management, sleep, etc.

Self-care is a priority.

Meditation stances of gratitude and compassion have been found to be quite helpful.

Compassion Kindness phrases mindfulness exercise:

Sit in position that invites stance of dignity and ease.

Close your eyes, or other centering practice.

Invite in a slow deep breath, let it out slowly.

Experience these words of loving kindness:

- 1. May I be well. May you be well. May all beings be well.**
- 2. May I have peace and serenity.
May you have peace and serenity.
May all beings have peace and serenity.**

- 3. May I have compassion for the suffering of others.
May you have compassion for the suffering of others.
May all beings have compassion for the suffering of others.**
- 4. May I have compassion for myself.
May you have compassion for yourself.
May all beings have compassion for themselves.**
- 5. May I stand with dignity in the face of life's adversities.
May you stand with dignity in the face of life's adversities.
May all beings stand with dignity in the face of life's adversities.**

Invite in slow deep breath, let it out slowly; and when you are ready, open your eyes.

End with:

YOU MATTER. Your pain matters. Who and what you want to be matters.

What might FFB be able to do? Not sure what is possible.

- Virtual support groups? To help with connectedness and emotional support?

- maybe idea of providing the virtual links for people to connect and share?

- Years ago, MN State Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired had a list of local support groups for people with vision loss, not sure what resources are available today. Check with your local State Services...

If time:

Able-ism and other isms, racism, sexism, classism

Social justice: Social change is an inherently emotional process and cannot be just at an individual level.

Importance of "community"