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COVID-19
Coronavirus
Vaccine

Pandemic and Its Vicissitudes

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Redefining Life's Merry-Go-Round

ONE OF MY BIGGEST STRENGTHS IS MY ETERNAL OPTIMISM IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY. On March 17, 2020, my world as I knew it, as a person and as a therapist, changed forever.

It was St. Patrick's Day, and I found myself running home from a dinner party down the street at my neighbor's house to call my daughter in Denver to plead for her to fly home immediately. A Secret Service officer at the dinner party had told me that state lines across the country were going to start to shut down and we should get our kids home or they may not be able to get home for a long time.

I have three emerging young adult children; two thankfully live close by. As I ran home to call my daughter Mary to come home from Denver – explaining to her that I had no one there to help her—there was no way I could even start to understand how our world would change forever. On March 19, 2020, I closed my office in Alexandria, Virginia, and asked the therapists who work with me as contractors to move to a virtual platform.

My suggestion to the therapists who have been in the practice I began in 2007 was that this would probably carry on for a couple weeks, but we needed to be ready with a virtual platform that was HIPAA compliant to ensure confidentiality to get through this. We went fully virtual on Google Meet. Then we began to meet as therapists on Google Meet every Wednesday to support each other as we worked through the pandemic, and we continue to do so today. Never in my wildest dreams did I think we would still be struggling with COVID-19 more than 18 months later.

Two of my daughters (23-year-old twins) came home

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and lived and worked virtually with me for 6 months. I cherish that time living with and working with my twins and watching them as they have become successful emerging young adults. Mary, the twin from Denver, decided to quit her job, applied to get her Masters in Social Work, and will be done in December. The other twin, Maggie, decided to go to law school and has been working through the pandemic as a paralegal.

Playing a part in their lives in this way was a wonderful time for me. In addition, they saw me finish my PhD virtually, move the class I was teaching at The Catholic University of America to a virtual platform, and work with clients and therapists totally virtually for several months. My hope is that watching me helped in their decisions to go to graduate school and their desires to help others.

Embracing A Reset

This was some of the upside of COVID-19. I heard similar stories from clients of mine that mirrored the time I had with my grown children in various ways. Clients spoke of the time they have been able to spend with their parents, children, siblings, and families as a whole. The world slowed down, and everyone began to have family dinners together, watch movies, go for long walks, enjoy each other, and find mutual respect for each other going through this uncertain and unprecedented time. I call this a reset and have seen progress, in particular, for adolescents and emerging young adults. I have observed the biggest negative impact of the pandemic on the children and adults.

In June 2020, we hit Phase 3 in Alexandria, my home for 20 years and the place where my private practice would eventually open its doors again. At the time I had no idea that my practice would be one of the first in the area to open back up to see clients in person.

I couldn't wait to get back to the office. Teletherapy was grueling to me; I missed the energy in the room to pick people back up, and performing play therapy virtually was exhausting. The majority of my clients needed me back in the office. I wasn't afraid of COVID-19; I was more afraid for my clients and the deep depression, despair, loneliness, and isolation I was seeing and hearing.

We put precautions in place and everyone came back—in droves. Suddenly, we had a waiting list four pages deep. I couldn't keep up with the need for help. Especially for the children: those who already had depression and anxiety saw it go through the roof, and those who never had those symptoms suddenly did, from fear of getting the germ, as they referred to the virus. I went from seeing 20 clients a week to 37. My heart was breaking for all the children, adolescents, and adults in my practice and especially for those on the deep waiting list.

Interestingly, the population that I feel has really embraced teletherapy are adolescents and emerging young adults. In some ways I was seeing this population in a whole new way. Adolescents and emerging young adults put their phones on their pillows and talked to me, sharing thoughts and insights that I really didn't think would have ever come through in an in-person session. The comfort and ease with which they spoke to me made me think this is how they are used to talking to people. In-person therapy was actually harder for many of them.

The children seemed to need in-person sessions, while adolescents and emerging young adults seemed more comfortable online. Adults seemed to desire in-person ses-

sions as well. Could it be that the children and adults in our population have suffered the most with social isolation, depression, and anxiety in this pandemic time, while the adolescents and emerging young adults were just carrying on in a comfortable and familiar format they were used to—socializing virtually? It's too soon to tell without reliable research. What I can say is that on our Wednesday team calls, the consultant therapists at my practice are seeing the same results. Adolescents and emerging young adults are more engaged in treatment, and they aren't skipping sessions.

The emerging adults, especially the college-aged young adults I see, are for the most part continuing on in life with little regard for COVID-19. As they began college in fall of 2020 most were online and didn't mind; many actually liked it better than in-person learning because it meant they could sleep in and roll out of bed to class. Their biggest complaint was how to sneak around the rules of COVID-19, and most found a way. Even in isolation after contracting COVID-19, many didn't complain to me; it gave them time to catch up on binge-watching their favorite show. Their resilience is quite astonishing, but again, this population has grown up on the Internet and iPhone and talking on FaceTime or through their video games.

It's a very different story for children. For them, going back to school has been very trying. Most children in Alexandria started hybrid learning in the spring of 2021.

I have a common mantra that I use with the children I see: I tell them, "It's not real, it's just a fear." But suddenly I couldn't use this anymore as a technique for children to talk back to the voice inside their head telling them they aren't safe. At school they were now sitting at individual desks surrounded with plexiglass and spaced 6 feet apart. Their teachers were also behind plexiglass, and everyone was masked. Going outside to recess meant they were to find a seat and sit there until recess was over. If they played on playground equipment, they were monitored and spaced out so no one touched. Is this what jail is like? It's what it looks like to me on TV and when I visit adolescents in the Fairfax County Juvenile Detention Center.

One day during the spring of 2021 a 7-year-old child recalled this memory to me and spoke of his fear of getting the germ. When a child approached him on the merry-go-round at the park where his parents took him every afternoon, he ran and hid under the slide, curled up into a ball, and wouldn't move. In therapy he expressed to me that he was afraid of the children coming to the playground and giving him the germ. It was really hard for me to find words for him to use to talk back to the fear inside his head, so instead I processed his fear with him and helped him to work through it. We worked on starfish breathing, an emotional regulation technique to help him when he feels afraid and to tell himself he will be OK.

At the time I worked with this child, few children had contracted COVID-19. Currently, however, children have died from the virus since the Delta variant appeared. Their struggle with fear is real.

Using A New Tool

Virtual therapy has provided access to more people than ever before. It may be at the forefront for how we engage clients going forward by removing treatment barriers such as driving to appointments, finding child care, or transporting resistant adolescents to sessions. While it has been really difficult for me to use a virtual platform for therapy, it

has helped me to grow as a clinician by teaching me how to listen more closely to words and tone since body language is harder to decipher on a virtual platform. This has helped me to find more understanding and insight into my clients' struggles.

I really prefer to see all children in person; the process of play and the nonverbal behavior are essential to me in working with this population. The children I see are not cognitively developed enough to be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings in many regards. They often need me to be present in person to hold their anxiety and depressive symptoms so they can find relief. With relief they are able to play and find more emotional regulation that they can transfer beyond the office.

Working with adolescents and the emerging adult population virtually on an ongoing basis for the last 18 months has helped me to feel confident and less self-conscious in front of a camera. I now feel as much at home in front of a camera as they do. Further, I have found this to really help me when teaching virtually, working with the therapists in my practice on our Wednesday calls, and finding myself more comfortable with technology overall. It's like—I can do this! We can do this collectively as therapists and be flexible to see clients virtually or in person. I faked it 'til I made it, and now I love the flexibility I have with virtual and in-person sessions. This flexibility and confidence have given me the ability to see and help more people. For me, that is the big upside of COVID-19 in psychotherapy. ▼

When the world is running down, you make the best of what's still around.

—Sting