

# Pandemic blues

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## Community support and cohesion can mitigate the negative effects

The past year of pandemic has brought to the fore the weaknesses of society and family life. The mirror to the fissures in society calls for empowering of individuals, families and communities to face adversity.

Though the pandemic has been severe in terms of degree and duration, India has more than 40 years of experience in implementing emotional health interventions during disasters such as the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Orissa cyclone, the Gujarat earthquake, and the 2004 tsunami. The lessons learnt are three: it is possible to share skills with the survivors to care for their emotional health; family life can be improved to make facing the pandemic a joint effort; and community support and cohesion can mitigate the negative effects.

## Personal level

During a disaster, there are two challenges, namely maintaining emotional health and addressing “distress”. Luckily, similar to physical hygiene (mask, washing hands, social distance), there are psychological measures that can strengthen the emotions and prevent a breakdown. Specifically, daily exercise of at least 30 minutes, eight hours of sleep, a daily diet rich in fruits and vegetables, and relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, listening to music, art, and spirituality to make sense of the changes can strengthen emotional health.

When there is “distress” causing a feeling of hopelessness, anger, uncertainty and fear of death, instead of using alcohol or unleashing anger at family members, seek help from friends and relatives, share feelings, write down daily thoughts (journalling), and make time daily for pleasurable activities and reading of books that help find a meaning to life.

## Family level

One of the common observations during the pandemic is that each person, even within the family, experiences the situation in his or her own way. Most often, there is no communication, and lines of authority are altered. The most important step is to create spaces to share feelings (what is upsetting the person?). Doing common activities (eating together, games, art work, gardening, going to a park or temple together, singing and so on) is helpful. The individual problems can become family issues to address and solve.

## Community level

Societies which have been cohesive and have within their structures opportunities to share and support come out winners in a pandemic. This type of support could be around a temple, church, mosque or professional groups or informal groups such as self-help groups. By sharing and caring, the weakness of some can be strengthened by the support of the other members.

I remember an incident following an earthquake in Uttarakhand where most of the homes were destroyed and the families dislocated. To my question to a group of survivors, what do they want most, they asked for a place of worship, to have a common place to meet each other and share problems.

One of the activities that has been strengthened during the pandemic is religious discourses in each community. I have noticed people participating in online discourses and finding emotional relief. What is achieved by these activities? Is it the “opium for the masses”? The pandemic has reminded people of their mortality and halted lives and plans. Finding meaning and purpose of life can only come from a larger understanding of the universe and connecting with the higher power.

To conclude, however challenging the current pandemic, similar to the medical vaccine and physical hygiene, it is possible to strengthen individuals, families and communities and utilise the rich spiritual resources of the country towards that end. This can convert people from victims to victors.

Three recent books give further information: *Keep Sharp* by Sanjay Gupta, *Together* by Vivek Murthy and *Wiser* by Dilip Jeste.

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