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NASW-NYS Newsletter

Put a new tilt on Covid-19 guilt

Susan Radcliffe & Daniel Pollack

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Covid-19 seems to have made us experience many emotions that normally we are simply not so used to feeling. One of them is guilt. Ask any mental health professional and they'll tell you that guilt can only be managed if its cause is first identified and acknowledged.

Guilt is a powerful emotion that often keeps us from harming others. Without it, we can engage in unconscionable acts. Most of us try to avoid feeling it because it involves a behavior resulting in regret. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines guilt as “a feeling of deserving blame.”

Amy Morin, LCSW, **writes**: “During the pandemic, some people feel guilty because they’re doing well. Others feel guilty because they aren’t doing as well as they think they should be. Some people feel guilty about almost everything.” When ethical, front-line social workers are confronted by a global pandemic, the likelihood for the virus spreading is ever present. So is the possibility of feeling guilty that inadvertently or negligently those same social workers may be responsible for someone else contracting the disease. We over think what we could have done differently. We get angry at ourselves and others who may not have followed all of the guidelines. Tracing back our steps, we ask: “Was I six feet away from that person for less than 15 minutes?” There is just no way to make sense of something we don't fully understand, to control a situation over which we do not have full control. These feelings can lead to blaming.

Cesar Cavallera notes in his article, “COVID-19 Psychological Implications: The Role of Shame and Guilt”: “Guilt can become maladaptive for mental health when individuals develop an exaggerated sense of responsibility for events that occur out of their control...”

Not getting the virus but having clients, co-workers and family members contract COVID-19 can lead to feelings similar to survivors’ guilt. This is compounded by the effect on employment and housing. For those of us who still have jobs and are not a casualty of being unemployed or underemployed, it is difficult to see others losing their homes and being food insecure.

One of the difficult things for social workers is that information about the virus has changed dramatically since its onset. During the first few weeks of the

pandemic the public was told that masks do not make a difference in the spread of the virus. That changed quickly. Social workers have had to follow the changing **CDC guidelines** and continue to serve their clients. It has not been easy to keep up with all the changes. It's been even harder to disseminate timely, accurate information to the communities we serve.

Lives and routines have adjusted to the pandemic. The **World Health Organization** notes that it is a challenge to adapt to the new lifestyle changes and also manage our worries and fears of contracting the virus. With the anxiety of trying to remember the new norms, we are bound to forget. When we do forget, innocent people can get sick -- and then the self-blame and guilt begin.

Here are some steps to address those guilty feelings:

- How can you be responsible for spreading the virus when the best scientists in the world have yet to develop a plan and figure it out? You can't. You are doing the best that you can. That is all you can ask of yourself.
- You would not intentionally do anything to harm your clients or your family. Period. We look at blame in terms of intentionality. Your intentions are always for what is best for you, your family and your clients. There is no need to second-guess yourself.
- You are going to make mistakes. You may forget to wipe the car door. You may accidentally touch your mask and then rub your eyes.
- It is okay not to be okay. We are not going to be absolutely rational all the time.
- The pandemic and the socio-economic consequences are not your fault.

Here is what we do know. **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC) states: “COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly through close contact from person to person, including between people who are physically near each other. People who are infected but do not show symptoms can also spread the virus to others. How easily a virus spreads from person to person can vary.” We have all heard of how an entire family, residing together contracts the virus except one individual. It sometimes just doesn’t make sense.

Here are a few things that can make you feel more in control. They can also help slow the spread of this virus, according to the **CDC**:

- Try to stay at least 6 feet away from each other.
- Wear a mask that covers your nose, mouth and chin.
- Wash your hands with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer with 60% alcohol.
- Limit your time in crowds in indoor spaces.
- Stay home when sick. As social workers, it's likely you have gone to work when sick to help a person or a family. Not this time. Take care of yourself to take care of others.
- Clean and disinfect “high touch” surfaces often.
- Maintain your social contacts. Socialization helps with your mental health. Meet outside or online.

If you are feeling a bit guilty, you are having a normal reaction to a very abnormal situation. If you need to place blame, put it on the COVID-19, not yourself. These four simple rules are easy-to-remember takeaways:

- Be honest about what you can and can't do.
- Forgive yourself for not being able to be everything to everyone at all times.
- Keep a healthy, realistic perspective. Don't exaggerate small mishaps.
- Respect and appreciate yourself.

Susan Radcliffe, LCSW-C, is a mental health therapist with the Dorchester County Health Department in Cambridge, Maryland.

Contact: sue.radcliffe@maryland.gov.

Daniel Pollack, MSSA (MSW), JD, is an attorney and professor at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work in New York.

Contact: dpollack@yu.edu; 646-592-6836.