

RESTING IN UNCERTAINTY

We have all experienced crisis at some point in our lives. With the Covid-19 pandemic, we are facing crisis as a humanity. As our world is turned upside down, we are caught in the grips of collective fear, anxiety, panic and sadness. One way of making sense of these feelings is to see them as reactions to grief and trauma. Trauma is an event that happens to us. It takes away our sense of control and leaves us feeling paralysed and helpless. It also invokes a sense of loss as we are forced to grieve lives, livelihoods and our connections with others. Both grief and trauma involves a loss of meaning as we lose our bearings and our sense of safety in the world: 'Where am I?', 'Where do I go from here?'. Both grief and trauma are rooted in fear. Fear of the unknown seems to characterise our Covid-19 situation. There is no certainty to its end or resolve and we are thrown into a state of 'not knowing'.

Finding your own space away from the collective fear

To fear something means that we know what we fear: a person, place, object or thing. We may have in place symptom checklists, statistics tracking, research findings, etc. that helps us name this fear as a virus. But what we may be experiencing is perhaps more than fear. Dread is a profoundly agitating feeling state to 'some thing' that feels threatening but yet cannot fully be named, understood or be known. It is diffuse and haunting – we cannot locate it exactly but it is 'out there'. We may understand this dread as an anticipatory anxiety. We feel a storm coming, but not sure when it's going to hit.

*Find your own inner calm midst of the storm so
you are not caught into grips of collective fear*

These are difficult feelings. They expose our vulnerabilities and leave us in a state of 'not knowing' what to do. We want to avoid them, run away from, eat them away or numb them through self-destructive behaviours. This place of uncertainty – not knowing – does not need to be disempowering. It does not need to fill you with all-consuming anxiety and paralyzing dread. The challenge and the wisdom is to give yourself the permission to experience the fear, panic, anger, sadness, grief and even dread. As you learn to hold your own emotions, sensitively and compassionately, you can learn to re-orientate yourself again and allow yourself to enter the place of survival. The process of survival will help us move from the question, 'Where am I?' (feeling lost) to 'Who am I (now)?', a rebuilding of yourself again and the possibility to thrive.

Knowing that your emotional states are heightened

Grief and trauma responses such as fear, anxiety, sadness and even numbness are part of a normal response to stress and trauma. These can't be willed away but are very much part of the healing process. Rather than dismiss your fear ('I should not be feeling this way!'), learn to connect with it. Write it down, paint it, talk about it. Once you have done this, then let it rest. Allow yourself to feel these emotions but also allow yourself to detach from them as they do not define you.

Knowing that your thinking has kicked into 'survival mode'

In times of trauma, we may revert to polarised or 'black-and-white' thinking. This is a way that our minds try to process events that are confusing. This can show up as seeing the world or others as either 'all good' or 'all bad' or 'us' versus 'them'. We may feel inclined to blame, punish and stigmatise others. It is easy to get swept away with the news and media that often amplifies our fears and reinforces our lack of safety in the world.

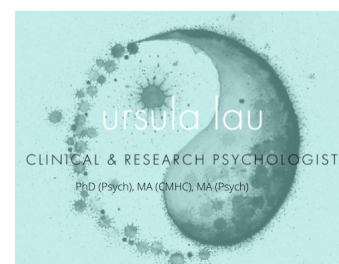
The crisis has put us in high alert and at times this has resulted in public shaming of others, for example, when we see others as disobeying lockdown rules. The crisis has led us to becoming easily triggered and less tolerant of others than before. You too might find yourself or others responding to you in ways that are harsher than usual. Recognising that these patterns of thinking are ways of coping allows us to be more compassionate with ourselves and others. At the same time, it is also important to find a space of 'heart and wisdom' between these extremes in thinking. Black-and-white thinking tends to keep us close off from others. You can find balance in your thoughts by reaching out to others with concern and compassion. As we learn to find balance in our thoughts, we begin to see the full spectrum of colours, the complexity and nuance to every situation. This will allow you to respond with wisdom, kindness and level-headedness.



Knowing when to seek help

Apart from feelings of fear and anxiety, your body and mind might also be responding to grief and trauma in other ways. You might find that your sleep and eating patterns are disrupted and that you have lost interest in activities and are withdrawing from people. You might find yourself engaging in risky behaviours such as drinking excessively. Pay attention to your responses. If they are overwhelming and intrusive, exceed your ability to cope with day-to-day functioning, you might want to seek help through counselling or therapy. If you are experiencing suicidal impulses, seek professional help immediately.

*"Fear is a
 natural reaction to moving
 closer to the truth"*
 — Pema Chodron



About the author

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This article is written for general audience and is not intended as a replacement for individual therapy. You might feel you are ready to take on the emotional work that comes with entering a therapy process and may want to explore all your options for entering this space of healing.

If you are in immediate crisis and at risk of self-harm, please contact SADAG (0800 21 22 23, 0800 70 80 90 or 0800 456 789 or the Suicide Helpline 0800 567 567) or Life Line (0861 322 322 or 0800-150-150) who provide you with immediate support.