

Published May 27th, 2020

Some emotional side effects from sheltering in place

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a local marriage and family therapist. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is currently working remotely on Zoom, Facetime and by phone.

One way to combat this is to be highly aware of our underlying feelings, especially frustration, worry and anger, and deal with them in more constructive ways than lashing out at others.

By the time you read this, we all will have spent over two months sheltering in place, experiencing many real and potential consequences from this pandemic. It is a time of great worry and upheaval for just about everyone.

As a therapist (using remote methods of communication now), I've been aware of certain emotional responses to our current need to isolate and the toll it takes personally and on our relationships. In addition, financial hardship and uncertainty for many, school closings, childcare worries, and the threat of exposure to COVID-19 all make for a difficult mix of emotions.

Some side effects of our recent frustrations, worries and fears may include:

1) Having less patience and tolerance with other people. When we feel stressed, we can easily discharge our stress onto others if we're not careful. The psychological term is displacement, and its function is to release our negative feelings in order to avoid having them swirl within. People rarely do this consciously, but it is a common means of finding some relief, an unhealthy coping mechanism that comes at the expense of others.

2) Having less patience and tolerance for frustration. When our world has suddenly shrunk, little things that wouldn't bother us as much in the past are more magnified. We all have heard about some people's reactions when stores have run out of certain supplies. Sometimes the problem is with a computer or a washing machine or food deliveries. Certainly, people demonstrating with guns to push for earlier reopening of society fall into this category. Many feel less control in their lives, and distress that life has become more difficult and unpredictable. When we're already saturated with frustration, fear or worry, it can be hard to accommodate one more thing.

3) Not taking good care of ourselves, physically and emotionally. During this difficult time, we need to have patience with ourselves. We have many more challenges now and it isn't easy to always do our best. This is a time to relax some of our standards for ourselves, whether it's getting things done, having a clean house, eating only healthy food, or being the best partner, parent or adult child. In other words, when there are already so many external pressures, it helps to relax our internal ones. When we feel positive about ourselves, we can plan and execute more effectively and make good choices.

One client, whom I'll call "Denise," is a single mother who has been sheltering in place with her two children under the age of 9. Her ex-husband lives three hours away and has a young child with his new wife. Denise works part-time, from home now, and has had to add in the role of caretaker and teacher to her children who would usually be in school while she worked. Denise suffers from long-term depression and anxiety, and the current situation has heightened her feelings of worry and despair. At the same time, she tries to constantly present a good face to her children to help them feel safe and secure.

Denise has added to her current burden by continually questioning her ability to be a good mom and an adequate teacher for her kids. She says she has a feeling that others are doing a much better job than she is. With no available childcare relief right now, she also feels isolated, out of shape physically, and out of sync with the world. Unfortunately, her current coping mechanisms have involved excess food and alcohol.

There isn't much that Denise can do about the hardships she's facing due to the pandemic, but she does have the ability to revise her image of herself. This is the time when we need to focus on our strengths and not on our weaknesses. Denise needs to be proud of all she's done to help her children through this exceptional time. She has managed to keep up with her work as well. She assists two of her elderly neighbors by ordering food for them along with her food orders. Denise needs to realize that everyone is struggling in one way or another, and to stop comparing herself to an imaginary ideal.

In addition, Denise is putting unneeded pressure on herself to present a positive image to her children at all times. Children are capable of witnessing their parents' sadness and frustration as long as they feel secure. Allowing our children to have a small window into our reality, while being careful to shield them from too

much of our distress, gives them more understanding of life's challenges. If they see us facing problems and trying to deal with them effectively, they will be better equipped when it's time to manage their own problems.

This is also a time where we need to allow ourselves to lean on others emotionally. Sharing our sadness about what we miss in life and our worries and frustrations helps us unburden ourselves. Having enough support through this time of potential emotional depletion will help fill us up. Denise was stuffing down her feelings with food and alcohol and becoming more depressed in the process. We need to find ways to help release our anxieties. Talking, exercising, meditating, doing yoga, playing music, cooking, playing games, and doing crafts are just some of the many options we can turn to.

Some people had significant struggles getting along with partners, children, and others before sheltering in place, and now the situation has become exacerbated. It is very important for those who are in difficult relationships right now to reach out to professionals for help. And, of course, if there is abuse present it is essential to get help. The 24-hour Contra Costa Crisis Hotline phone number is: 1-800-833-2900.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA