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Editor-in-Chief

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The anguish of our patients' illnesses is exacerbated by the fear, anger, sadness, and uncertainty about the current multifaceted societal turmoil

Enduring the ordeal of a quadruple threat is especially arduous for psychiatric patients

These are unusually stressful days for everyone, especially our patients. We are all experiencing a turbulent mix of emotions as we try to cope with a confluence of threats to both our lives and to life as we know it. Peace of mind has become so elusive due to the relentless overlapping waves of fear, sadness, anger, and uncertainty. We are all grieving in a different way, but our psychiatric patients are suffering the most.

Fear. It only takes 1 traumatic event to trigger posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yet over the past few months, we have been afflicted by 4 jarring traumatic events, individually and as a society. Just a few months ago, it would have been impossible to imagine the conflux of 4 concurrent seismic threats to our well-being. A toxic political zeitgeist was the backdrop, which we bemoaned and tried to compartmentalize, despite the corrosive political environment shrouding the country. Then the deadly coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic suddenly arrived, imposing draconian health-preserving measures that impacted

every individual's daily life in countless detrimental ways. Fear prevailed as we all sheltered at home, stopped commuting to work, canceled all trips, distanced ourselves from our friends and relatives, and watched depressing and anxiety-provoking television and read online news throughout our waking hours. Hoarding food and household supplies became endemic due to fear about survival.

Sadness. The agonizing prospect of a national financial necrosis followed the threat of serious illness or death. The economy came to a screeching halt, hemorrhaging millions of jobs. Unemployed parents stayed home with their morose children whose schools were shuttered, leaving them deprived of socializing with their friends. The government hurried with financial chemotherapy, printing trillions of dollars to prevent economic collapse, to avert potential poverty and hunger for many. The fear of the pandemic became coupled with sadness over the loss of livelihoods and grief for the loss of liberty and the ability to pursue happiness, or even small pleasures.

Anger. Then a tsunami of anger was generated by the brutal and sadistic

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death of a black man in police custody. This was a spark that ignited a massive amount of previously dormant racial tension dating back to the dark days of slavery. Peaceful protests were marred by destructive riots. The explosive fury was perhaps intensified by the protestors having been being locked up for weeks and having to wear masks, both of which were symbolic of being held down and “unable to breathe,” like the murdered Mr. George Floyd.

An epidemic of destroying statues followed. Heavy statues that appeared invincible for decades were dismantled from their plinth in a matter of minutes, signifying extreme frustration with the social injustice that remains despite the transformational laws of the Civil Rights Acts of 1960 and 1964. Suddenly—like falling dominoes—statues, flags, names of military bases, and previously venerated monuments were removed, changed, vandalized, or threatened with destruction. The founders of the republic were also maligned because they were slave owners 2 centuries ago. The paradigm shift spawned by the rage over racial inequality was disconcerting and dramatic. The anger and rampage spawned a sense that a tipping point in our society has been reached.

Uncertainty. The confluence of political instability, a deadly pandemic, economic collapse, and racial tensions were like the 4 horsemen of mass PTSD. The result was an agonizing uncertainty about the impact of these changes, and whether a sense of normalcy will ever return. It became apparent to all of us that our social structure has changed forever across multiple fundamental domains: public health, social, political, and financial. The wait for a vaccine for COVID-19 seems interminable, and racial healing

and harmony seems elusive. Economic recovery may be possible, but political detoxification appears unlikely. The fate of police departments, condemned because of the deplorable and illegal acts of a few, and the safety of citizens, usually guaranteed by law and order, seem uncertain. Like COVID-19, angst has rapidly spread across the population.

The price our patients pay

The ingredients of a large-scale societal PTSD, similar to what probably happens during a world war, are now in place. Even resilient individuals may buckle during quadruple ordeals such as this one. So imagine what is happening to our patients, rendered fragile and vulnerable to threats by their pre-existing psychiatric illness. They all pay a heavy price. Patients with anxiety disorders will decompensate, with more panic attacks. Patients burdened by depression will worsen, with more hopelessness, despair, and suicidal ideation due to anxiety and loneliness. Patients with bipolar disorder will become more labile and irritable, and their comorbid anxiety will intensify. Patients with schizophrenia will become more paranoid, depressed, and anxious. Patients with autism will become more agitated and aggressive because their cherished daily routines are disrupted. Patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder will react to their germophobia by washing their hands and cleaning everything around them even more frequently, and they (along with everyone else) will become hoarders.

Hope and healing

As psychiatrists, we are determined to transcend our own stress, rise above it all, and attend to the pervasive sadness, grief, anger, and uncertainty all

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around us, but especially among our patients, for whom the anguish of a psychiatric disorder is further compounded by 4 additional ordeals. This is our moment of truth as healers of our patients' souls, because they look to us to provide them with hope to help navigate these trying times into full health.

And we psychiatrists, along with fellow mental health professionals, are up to this unprecedented challenge.



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