

Summary of Teleconference for Holocaust Survivors During COVID-19

Held on May 21, 2020 | 1:00pm – 2:00pm

Topics discussed:

- ❖ How COVID-19 has affected us physically and mentally
- ❖ How pandemics in general affect people with trauma
- ❖ Mental and physical symptoms of anxiety and grief
- ❖ Coping mechanisms to use during a pandemic
- ❖ Ways to improve well-being and state-of-mind
- ❖ The importance of healthy routines



Eva Fogelman, PhD is a renowned psychologist based in New York City and has worked with many Holocaust survivors and their trauma. She has received multiple nominations and awards for her work on the Holocaust, including her documentary, *Breaking the Silence: The Generation After the Holocaust*.



Annette Insdorf, PhD is an internationally renowned educator, and author of *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*. Born to Polish Holocaust survivors, she received her PhD from Yale University, is a Professor at Columbia's School of the Arts, and Moderator of 92Y's *Reel Pieces*.

Holocaust Survivors Coping with Covid-19

Eva Fogelman, PhD

Holocaust survivors are particularly sensitive to knowing that one's life can change from minute to minute. You all faced death at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, one too many times.

Worry and Anxiety

Let's begin with worrying. After liberation, it took a lot of courage to get married and bring children into the world. A few did not have the opportunity to re-create families and may be all alone facing this pandemic. And so, worry can become more extreme.

When worry becomes anxiety or panic it is very challenging to cope with in daily life and it also affects sleep. Anxiety manifests itself both physically and psychologically:

I am speaking about symptoms such as: Pounding heart, Sweating, Headaches, stomach upset, Dizziness, Frequent urination or diarrhea, Shortness of breath, Muscle tension or twitches.

Natural Remedies for Anxiety

1. Sharing your feelings with people who understand you and don't criticize your reactions is a start.
2. Believe it or not, diet can have an influence. If you eat lots of processed meat, fried food, refined cereals, candy, pastries, and high-fat dairy products, you're more likely to be anxious and depressed. A diet full of whole fiber-rich grains, fruits, vegetables, and fish can help keep you on a more even keel.
3. And as for exercise, psychologists say it may improve mental health by helping the brain cope better with stress.
4. Other people get relief from stress by diverting their attention from their thoughts by keeping busy with cleaning. This compulsive activity shifts the energy from thinking into action. Other activities can be more creative such as cooking, writing, painting, playing an instrument, sewing, knitting, gardening.
5. Practice mindful meditation. The goal of mindful meditation is to focus your attention on things that are happening right now in the present moment. Oprah and Deepak Chopra have guided meditation that you can follow on YouTube.

Worry and Anxiety

When all else fails I recommend that you contact your general doctor or a psychiatrist to recommend some anti-anxiety medication. The most prominent of anti-anxiety drugs for the purpose of immediate relief are those known as benzodiazepines; some are addictive such as Xanax, Librium, Valium so I don't recommend them. Klonopin, and Ativan or the generic Lorazepam might provide some relief. Doctors today have telehealth appointments. Have your drug store telephone number handy to give to the doctor, and the medication will be delivered.

Depression

In a time where our patience and our compassion are tested daily, we must not forget the memories that this sudden change in circumstances has stirred in some of the Holocaust survivors, and they need special care to be understood. For this dwindling minority of survivors there's even more to the darkness of these days than meets our eye.

Depressive Symptoms

- Diminished interest or loss of pleasure in almost all activities (anhedonia)
- Significant weight change or appetite disturbance by either overeating or loss of appetite
- Sleep disturbance, either insomnia or sleeping too much
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate
- indecisiveness
- feelings of sadness, helplessness, worthlessness, or emptiness
- restlessness
- irritability
- recurrent thoughts of death

Natural Remedies for Depression

1. Setting a gentle daily schedule can help you get back on track.
2. Set small goals. When you're depressed, you may feel like you can't accomplish anything. That makes you feel worse about yourself. "Make your goal something that you can succeed at, like doing the dishes every other day."
3. Regular exercise such as walking a few times a week seems to encourage the brain to rewire itself in positive ways.
4. Eat healthy. There is no magic diet that fixes depression. It's a good idea to watch what you eat, though. If depression tends to make you overeat, getting in control of your eating will help you feel better.
5. Get enough sleep. Depression can make it hard to get enough shut-eye, and too little sleep can make depression worse.

Depression

When all else fails a psychotropic medication may be necessary to alleviate some of the symptoms. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) is now the most common class used for depression. Examples include citalopram (Celexa), escitalopram (Lexapro), paroxetine (Paxil, Pexeva), fluoxetine (Prozac, Sarafem), and sertraline (Zoloft).

The 3 C's

Whether a Holocaust survivor is experiencing anxiety, panic, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or resilience in the face of the life-threatening coronavirus-19, I would like to recommend that each person needs what I call the 3 C's.

1. Connection

2. Continuity

**3. Caring -self care and caring
by others**

Connection

The first necessary component to adapting to this health crisis is to be **connected** to other people, not to feel alone, during these stressful, uncertain times. The imposed isolation can be alleviated when a person feels a connection with other people, from family members to total strangers.

Continuity

The second element is to experience a sense of **continuity** despite the disruption in the normal routine of ones' life. If you cannot go to the café Europa luncheons, call someone from the group and talk while having lunch in your separate homes on face time or zoom or just on the phone. If you attend classes in your local synagogue or JCC contact the place and ask what classes are being offered on line or just by calling a telephone number and listening to a lecture. Each person needs to think creatively to develop a semblance of **continuity**. Obviously, some activities have to be modified.

Caring

The third component, **caring**, has two aspects to it – self-care and care by others. Caring by others is an added dimension to **connection**.

Connection to other people or communities makes one feel he or she is not alone. Feeling you are cared for by others happens when you have people you can rely on to bring you chicken soup, a doctor that will listen to your ailments, someone who will have the patience to tell you how to use zoom a dozen times or how to use your remote control for your television.

Daily Routines

There are helpful preventative measures that one can engage in order to improve ones' well-being and state of mind. It begins with having a daily routine. That means getting up at an early normal time. If one is depressed it often manifests itself most severely in the morning. If you are suffering from depressive symptoms get someone to wake you up daily and talk to you until you have gotten out of bed. It is a challenge to accomplish when you are depressed, but you will feel better once you begin a semblance of a normal day. Put on clothes and make-up as if you are going out.

Daily Routines

For the rest of the day, everyone's routines are different. I would like to illustrate a few examples. If you have young grandchildren or great grandchildren think about books you can read to them over facetime, or with older grandchildren try to read a book or watch a television series they are watching so you can discuss it with them. This alone can keep you very busy during the day preparing for an evening discussion with them. This will give you not only a feeling of connectedness but also a feeling that you are doing something for someone else.

In Summary

In summary, people are better equipped to cope with adversity when they reframe events through a hopeful lens, feel a sense of connectedness, and mark the passing of time with rituals and rites of passage like birthdays, day of liberation, day of arrival in the United States.

One activity that is detrimental to ones' mental-health is being glued to the television and watching one talk show after another about the health crisis due to the epidemic monopolizing the media. I am not suggesting that you not be informed about the current pandemic. Of course, keep abreast of the situation, but not too often. Use your television mainly for entertainment.

Many organizations are focusing their attention on Holocaust survivors today in local communities. They make sure survivors have enough food and other necessities. Volunteers are reaching out to contact Holocaust survivors who are alone. While this attention is comforting, to know that someone cares and one is not alone, it is also a double edge sword.

I want to end by saying that during this pandemic Holocaust survivors' resilience is exemplary despite the trauma, all the losses and suffering during and after the liberation is ever present. Despite it all, you the survivors created families, communities, institutions, schools, businesses, and most importantly the State of Israel.

Q&A

Dr. Annette Insdorf asks Dr. Eva Fogelman:

Why Holocaust survivors are less likely to seek care for medical problems at this time? Or less likely to get tested or treated for Covid-19?

During the Holocaust illness was equated with death. Jews in ghettos saw their sick people dying because there was no medical care to be had. In the concentration camps, sick people were killed because they weren't fit for work. Being tested for Covid-19 is like a death sentence. On the other hand, some survivors are very frustrated that they cannot reach their doctor for other ailments, their phone calls are not being returned and it is associated with not having any access to medical care during the Holocaust.

It seems to me people are mourning the loss of freedom, the loss of control, loss of friends, relatives, what are the stages that people go through in mourning these losses at this time?

- Shock
- Denial
- Confrontation
- Emotions
- Search for meaning

Is there evidence that people who experienced a traumatic experience such as the Holocaust have a higher risk to develop problems over time because of the coronavirus-19?

People who have experienced a trauma also develop a certain amount of resilience that helps them overcome future traumas. The survivors are not more vulnerable to develop problems overtime.

Places are beginning to open up, how do we get rid of our fears of how we can be safe going out again?

Everyone has their own comfort level.

Take the necessary precautions as you venture slowly into the outside world from which you have been isolated for two months. Take small steps and that will alleviate some of the fears. Leave a mask and glasses on when going outside or any indoor public space.

Don't be concerned what others around are saying.

Gage your own feelings so you won't get anxious if you exposed yourself too much.

I started coughing and I am not sure if I have the coronavirus-19 or not, what should I do?

We are in the season of allergies. Allergies are more common in older people. So, coughing can be an allergic reaction rather than something more serious. Take your temperature; if it is more than 99 degrees call your doctor.

I am very anxious, I cannot concentrate, I am shaking, I am forgetful, will this ever go away. Will I ever be my old self again?

I would like to invoke what Pope Francis said this past Easter. “The strength of faith frees us from fear and gives us hope.

And I would like to add, as you know, you have survived the worst trauma a person can experience. Believe it or not there will be an end to this pandemic, and you will be back to yourself. Having gratitude for all that you the survivors have accomplished will bring you a renewed peace and happiness.

Q&A

Dr. Annette Insdorf asks Masha Pearl,
Executive Director of The Blue Card

How can we get services from The Blue Card?

The Blue Card works by referral with local Jewish Family Service Agencies. Survivors are encouraged to connect with their social workers to aid them through the application process. This also allows survivors to establish a relationship with the local community and to benefit from services provided by their local agency.

If you do not have a Social Worker or any Jewish Family Services agency in your area, please call us and we can connect you with a Social Worker. The Blue Card number is (212) 239 – 2251 or email us at Info@BlueCardFund.org

What are the most reported needs for Holocaust survivors during this time as seen by The Blue Card?

In addition to the countless requests we have been receiving for food, meals and deliveries for personal care items. We have been inundated with requests for the Telephone Emergency Response System (TERS) unit. These are buttons which are worn either around the neck or wrist and are activated in times of emergency. These are special Phone or WiFi adaptable GPS units which can be equipped with fall detectors. As survivors are now home alone, should they feel shortness of breath or begin feeling symptoms, help is available and an ambulance is dispatched at the press of a button.

What services are you offering additionally that I may benefit from at this time?

The programs we have that survivors can most benefit from during this time are:

- More emphasis on TERS
- Assistance with money for groceries, supplies, medication, and delivery expenses;
- We are sending essential supplies like paper towels, hand sanitizer, and masks to those who cannot leave their homes and have no volunteer or acquaintance that can shop and deliver for them;
- To make things easier for survivors and to further encourage social distancing, we are providing cash assistance via bank wire transfer. This is especially crucial now as survivors are unable to leave their homes to go to the bank and the significant delays with the mail.

What is available for Holocaust survivors with emotional support?

- Earlier this year, we have launched our Companion pets program to bring comfort and happiness to the older population with interactive, cats and dogs that replicate the look, sounds and feel of real pets. Many studies have found that these pets have the ability to enhance one's well-being and quality of life through companionship.
- Mood Restore Light Box - Intelligent Light Therapy - A special, compact and portable, UV free unit provides much needed light therapy to Holocaust survivors. In addition to effectively treating Season Affective Disorders (SAD), the Mood Restore Light Box, improves visual clarity and color rendering, as well as offset season weather and climate changes, and helps support the circadian rhythm regulation. This light box works wonders for thousands of our lonely survivors especially those who are shut-ins and are home-bound during these challenging times.

- Other ways we provide emotional support is setting survivors up with weekly calls with a volunteer, just to talk and say hello;
- We are beta testing our Virtual Volunteer program where people all over send in videos and clips to help brighten your day, and we send those videos out to survivors to watch and hopefully help them feel less lonely.
- And lastly, we are trying out having these teleconferences as a way to connect with everyone. Hopefully we get good results and we can do these conferences more than once.
- To sign up please for any of these programs, please contact your social worker or call or email The Blue Card.