

A Perspective on Mature Gratitude as a Way of Coping with COVID-19

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, we all must adjust to a world that was already been scourged by conflict, natural disasters due to climate change, and other serious adversities. The SARS-CoV-2 virus forces us to physically distance us from others and abstain from important social behavior. We all experienced lockdowns and are still strongly advised to refrain from larger gatherings and unnecessary traveling. Many people have lost their jobs because of the economic decline and face poverty. Above all, there is an existential fear that lingers in our daily life now COVID-19 is threatening the lives of the vulnerable and old. The main question for this perspective is if mature gratitude can be a way to cope with the threats and new boundaries because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mature gratitude

Mature gratitude consists of an attitude of gratitude in two dimensions: a horizontal and a vertical dimension. The horizontal immanent dimension includes gratitude for prosperity and adversity that is conceived consciously and within earthly borders. The horizontal gratitude is directed at materialistic and naturalistic objects, expected and unexpected events, and the people with whom we interact. Being grateful for the good things in life is the easier part. Being grateful for broken objects, disheartening events, and people that are annoying or hurtful, is a more difficult part of gratitude. For this it is necessary to accept and transform frustration, powerlessness, and hurt that one experiences.

The vertical transcendental dimension of gratitude can assist in experiencing the horizontal gratitude. This transcendental dimension is the experience of gratitude for phenomena that cannot be precisely and mentally located in space and time. Illustrations of this vertical gratitude are cosmic gratitude (Roberts, 2014), Gratitude to God, or spiritual gratitude that can be elicited by, for example, gratitude for ancestors or spirits, but also cultural expressions such as music or art, or an awareness of being part of something big. Mature gratitude might play a vital role in preventing people from depression, anger, and anxiety because of suffering, by teaching people a better and adaptive way to

embrace their hardship (Jans-Beken & Wong, 2019). Suffering makes a better human being because of increased capacity for compassion and other spiritual virtues (Wong, 2019).

Threats

In 2020, every country on the earth faces various threats from the SARS-CoV-2 virus. First, there is the physical threat from the virus. Although everyone can get infected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, especially vulnerable and older people seem to be susceptible to become life threatening ill due to COVID-19. Some of the patients end up on the intensive care and when they survive, residual complaints invalidate the survivors for a long time and perhaps even for life (Vaate et al., 2020). The case fatality rate in September 2020 is 3.3%, but this is only the rate of fatalities from individuals who were tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The exact number of fatalities caused by complications due to COVID-19 is and will be unknown (Our World in Data, 2020).

Second, there is an economic threat. For almost all countries in the world, the unemployment rate has risen dramatically (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2020; Eurostat, 2020; Statista, 2020). For most of the people who were able to hold their job or business, income and revenue respectively dropped. Many governments provided social safety nets for entrepreneurs and companies to prevent them from going bankrupt, but although this can prevent some of going out of business, there still will be companies that cease to exist after 2020. Many people have lost the possibility to provide for themselves and their family, increasing poverty around the globe (Sumner et al., 2020). Both the physical and economical threat can cause the experience of existential fear; people have to cope with the terror of losing a safe home, not being able to eat or care for their children, and there is a realistic possibility of becoming ill or even die. This existential threat is new for many of us and it may lead to severe psychological difficulties (Blustein & Guarino, 2020).

Boundaries

The first measure against the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that was issued by many governments was the lockdown. The strictness of this lockdown varied from a strong advice to stay home and work remotely if possible, to being prohibited to leave home including a ban on buying tobacco and alcohol (Moynihan, 2020). As the virus spreads by droplets and aerosols that cross a certain distance while talking / laughing / singing, the experts advised to keep a physical distance from

other people. However, this physical distance of at least one meter, prohibits people to engage in important social touching behaviors such as shaking hands for trust and comforting others by hugging (Dolcos et al., 2012; Forsell & Åström, 2012). This lack of closeness and affection can also lead to psychological distress in healthy people and can deteriorate the mental health of people already suffering from psychological illness (Venkatesh & Edirappuli, 2020).

Aim

The aim of the perspective is to search the recent literature for evidence of coping with COVID-19 with characteristics of mature gratitude, for instance dispositional gratitude, existential gratitude, appreciation, spirituality, and religion. For those characteristics not studied during the COVID-19 period, the perspective will draw from literature regarding other life-threatening illnesses. Knowledge about these associations can help psychologists, counselors, and coaches to support people who experience psychological issues due to the current pandemic.

Literature

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