

## A DEEPER LOOK AT WHY OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE PANDEMIC IS SO HARD FOR US & WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT FOR OURSELVES AND OUR CHILDREN

According to some psychologists who work with adults and children and try to understand their attachment to others, we have four basic needs that we are each seeking to meet every day<sup>1</sup>. These are:

- A. The need to feel safe
- B. The need for comfort (social, emotional and physical)
- C. The need to be close to others
- D. The need for things to make sense, be predictable and be familiar

In these difficult times, **all** of these needs have been threatened. It's important for us to have a better understanding of the effects of the pandemic on these basic needs. This will allow us to make sense of what we are already doing. It will help us to do more of the things that meet these basic needs, especially for our children, and it will help us to manage in the best way we can throughout these trying times.

So, let's look at them one at a time to begin with, just to think about what the effects have already been on us:

*A. The need to feel safe.* We don't feel safe - we and our loved ones could become ill or die. We could also lose some of the other good things that we have in our lives, such as our jobs, our savings or our homes. Even things like having enough food to eat have been threatened and going outside where there are other people is now dangerous to us.

*B. The need for comfort.* We feel distress, worry and fear and it is difficult to find comfort for these feelings. Our living environment may not be as comfortable as we are used to. Our routines that give us comfort and security have been disrupted and the consoling thoughts that 'everything will turn OK', which we normally rely on to help us through difficulties, are challenged.

*C. The need to be close to others.* We are social beings and we need to feel connected to each other. Self-isolation can lead to feelings of isolation from loved ones and other humans in general. This current crisis has made us feel the considerable loss of simply being in the presence of others on a regular and general basis.

*D. The need for things to make sense, be predictable and be familiar.* Nothing is predictable now. Things are changing on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis. Many aspects of our familiar lives have been taken away. We don't understand a lot of what is going on and the information we are getting can be contradictory and confusing.

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<sup>1</sup> See Crittenden (2008)

Now, let's look at what we are already doing to meet these needs:

*A. The need to feel safe.* We've been staying in our homes and doing social distancing to reduce the threat of getting the virus and this makes us feel a bit safer. We've been reaching out to our loved ones to reassure ourselves that they are still well and safe. We've been keeping up with the news to reassure ourselves that the world isn't falling apart and it's not as bad as we think.

*B. The need for comfort.* We've been getting social and emotional comfort from keeping in touch with each other in whatever way we can and, as well as talking about the difficult things, we have been reassuring each other about some of the good things that are coming out of this experience. We have been singing on our balconies, clapping the NHS workers and forming neighbourhood groups. There has been emotional comfort in sending each other wishes and presents through social media or deliveries. We look for stories that show us that people are looking after each other and that makes us feel that, if we need it, people will look after us. We are giving ourselves physical comfort in the new routines we are building. We are looking after ourselves with exercise and enriching or fun activities. We are organising our homes to be as comfortable as possible.

*C. The need to be close to others.* We are using all the technology resources available to us to meet the need of being close to others. Video conferencing, social media, messaging, texting and sharing content are being used like never before. The singing together and playing music together, all clapping for our NHS heroes, also help us with this need. Even watching TV programmes about other human beings doing things are fulfilling this need of being connected to others. In many households, the members who are living together are reaching out to each other for human contact, possibly more than they previously did.

*D. The need for things to make sense, be predictable and be familiar.* Some people are meeting the need for predictability by thinking a lot about possible plans and solutions, even if they are soon replaced by new ones. Others are meeting the need by avoiding thinking about the future until it all feels more known and settled. We are avidly watching, listening to and reading the news to help us understand what is going on. We are sharing information with one another and talking about what it means. A lot of people are spending a lot of time trying to predict what current events will mean for the future. Many of us are trying to create routines at home to help us feel more in control and to begin a new lifestyle that is familiar and predictable.

We're doing a lot without even realising it! But, when we understand these four basic needs, we can do more of the things that help us with them. We can also think creatively about how to do more for our children and those who depend on us.

Here are just a few ideas of more we can do to address these needs with our children:

*A. The need to feel safe.* We can reassure them that this will pass, we'll get through it, we're all working together. We can show them examples of this on social media to reassure them. We can show them a confident approach in our behaviour in how we are dealing with current events, which will reassure them that they are safe in our hands. We can take care about what we are saying about our own worries to others in their hearing, so as not to raise their anxieties.

*B. The need for comfort.* We can give them lots of cuddles, close contact and rough and tumble play. Also, we can regularly engage in fun activities with them (e.g. doing physical exercise like dancing). These will release good chemicals in their brains, which will soothe their anxieties. Our children are likely to be needing us more than normal, so we can try to make the time to give them our attention when they are asking for it. We can make the house comfortable for them as well as the adults.

*C. The need to be close to others.* We can help them to stay connected with their loved ones through social media and let them have time on devices connecting with their friends. We can get them to watch movies or programmes about people in families or relationships and join them, if possible. We can get them involved in crafts that focus on making items to be sent to relatives or friends. We can play games with them or do other activities together.

*D. The need for things to make sense, be predictable and be familiar.* We can create a predictable and appropriate routine. This should, ideally, be a combination of preserving their familiar routines, where that is possible, and creating new routines that fit the current situation. We can try to involve them in having choices, for example about activities or food, each day to give them a level of control over their experiences. We can try to give them some simple, age appropriate, explanations of what is happening. Children have very active imaginations and, if we don't tell them anything, they can imagine terrible things that are actually worse than the reality.

Understanding these four basic needs gives us a picture that can help us to make sense of why this experience is so hard for us all and to recognise the things we've been doing to try to cope with it. We should be really proud of what we have already been doing and reassured by what we can still do in the coming weeks and months to look after ourselves, our children and each other.

*Susannah Cowland and Dr Ava Horowitz (March 2020)*