

9/11 research reveals effective strategies to cope with COVID-19 stress

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Research into mass trauma events, like the 9/11 terror attacks, suggests effective ways to cope during the current COVID-19 crisis, according to research led by faculty at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

Binghamton University Distinguished Professor of Psychology Steven Jay Lynn, doctoral student Craig Polizzi and Andrew Perry explored these techniques in "Stress and Coping in the time of COVID-19: Pathways to Resilience and Recovery," an article published in a special issue of the academic journal *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*. Lynn is the director of the Laboratory of Consciousness, Cognition and Psychopathology at Binghamton University.

The lab has studied coping techniques that can potentially promote resilience to and recovery from stress, including acceptance-based coping, mindfulness and lovingkindness meditation, Polizzi explained. "We also drew inspiration from our previous work with clients who have experienced traumas and how they have coped with traumatic events," he said.

In the article, the authors draw on studies of the New York metropolitan area following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, another incident of mass [trauma](#) marked by intense fear with the potential to produce psychological problems such as posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression. Additionally, 9/11 has been heavily studied in terms of coping, resilience and trauma, providing a strong scientific foundation

for evaluating the efficacy of coping strategies, Polizzi said.

Of course, there are significant differences. While [natural disasters](#) and terror events can bring people together in response or recovery, the pandemic requires a level of social isolation not seen since the 1918 Spanish flu. People also respond to trauma differently, which led the authors to suggest a variety of coping techniques.

"People are unique and the way they cope should be consistent with their needs and values," Polizzi said.

Coping activities—also called behavioral activation—can increase the ability to bounce back from negative events, and free up mental resources to deal with ongoing stressors and changing situations. At the heart of these coping activities are the three Cs of control, coherence and connectedness.

You can get a sense of control by planning your daily activities, checking in on friends and loved ones, adjusting your news intake, keeping a journal or preparing for your post-pandemic future. Connection, which fulfills the need for human contact and support, can be achieved even in times of social distancing through telephone calls, videoconferencing and [social media](#), or even the purely internal practice of lovingkindness meditation, which directs [positive emotions](#) toward the self, loved ones, all humans and eventually all sentient beings.

Coherence "is founded in the deeply human desire to make sense and meaning of the world," according to the article. One starting point is "acceptance-based coping," observing our fears, anxieties and emotional responses without judgment—a practice commonly known as mindfulness. You can practice mindfulness not only through meditation and focusing on the breath, but by giving an activity—such as eating or walking—your full and unhurried attention.

Looking ahead, the pandemic will give rise to additional research. Lynn's laboratory is planning to evaluate how mindfulness and emotion regulation promote resilience during the pandemic by defending against post-traumatic stress and dissociation.

"It is also important to test the coping strategies we proposed in our article to see if people did use them to reduce distress during the pandemic, as well identify additional techniques individuals used to cope with stress to enhance recommendations for coping during future mass traumas," Polizzi said.

More information: Craig Polizzi et al. Stress And Coping In The Time Of COVID-19: Pathways To Resilience And Recovery. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.36131/CN20200204](https://doi.org/10.36131/CN20200204)

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