

Ten Public Health Tips to Heal From COVID-19 Losses



Over the past 20 months, we have all been bombarded with information about COVID-19. From professional journals to Facebook, it has been nearly impossible to stay away from data for more than a few minutes. Every conversation with family and friends, every news report, every work-related policy, every travel plan, and every wedding invitation and dinner plan have had at least a few minutes of discussion about COVID-19. Truth and lies have come mingled in ways that I had not seen before in my life. Nor had I ever thought carefully about politics as another determinant of health.

But, as president of the American Public Health Association (APHA), I've had the opportunity over the past year to hear from people around the country about their stories and about how they are coping with this pandemic. I have heard from colleagues who remained determined to do the right thing for the health of their communities, even when their employment was in jeopardy and they and their families received threats. I have heard from some friends and relatives who think that this is all a big hoax and that I should really read this or that thing their friend posted on Twitter. I have been moved to tears by the dedication of so many, and I have been—and remain—incensed at the intentional disinformation campaigns.

I've read about the impact on the economy, on the health sector, on educational achievement, and on the food chain, to name a few. But the report that struck me the most was one that stated that, on average, every person who dies from COVID-19 leaves behind nine mourners. This means there are almost 42 million people in the world mourning the loss of a loved one, 6 million of those in the United States.

I try to grasp the impact of this pandemic on the emotional well-being of the world I live in. Besides everything else, how do we come back from this pain? How do we heal from these

losses and attempt to return to some semblance of normalcy in our everyday lives? How do we heal the social wounds that have been inflicted on this nation by a false narrative that has only fostered a longer agony? I am no thanatologist but can offer some thoughts about what I'm doing in this regard.

First, I acknowledge the losses and build healing spaces for individuals and communities to mourn in their own ways.

Second, I redouble my efforts to remove the structural inequities that foster the uneven distribution of the burden of disease.

Third, I recommit to redressing the pervasive racist practices that continue to keep historically marginalized communities out of the rooms where decisions are made.

Fourth, I look back and examine how we have managed the situation, what we did right, and what we did wrong.

Fifth, I continue to advocate adequate funding for the public health infrastructure and emergency preparedness systems.

Sixth, I amplify my work in the realm of civic engagement and voter registration to ensure that every voice is heard.

Seventh, I work to strengthen our ability to respond quickly and assertively to disinformation campaigns.

Eighth, I seek to partner with key players outside our field to better understand the issues and to help us extend our reach.

Ninth, I renew my efforts to develop a health workforce that mirrors the population it serves.

Tenth, I don't forget to allow myself to laugh, to weep, and to take a break.

It's been an honor to be the "virtual president" of the APHA. **AJPH**

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12 Years Ago

Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities in Residential Proximity to Polluting Industrial Facilities

Lower-income people were found to be significantly more likely than were higher-income people to live near a polluting industrial facility. Similarly, those without high school diplomas were significantly more likely to live near such a facility than were those with higher levels of education. Although we did not find significant gender differences in regard to proximity to a facility, our results suggest that marital status is correlated with the presence of nearby polluting industrial facilities. Participants who were divorced or separated or had never been married were more likely than were participants who were married or widowed to live near such a facility, but at levels not quite reaching statistical significance. . . . Racial disparities were also much more pronounced in certain areas of the country than in others.

From AJPH, Supplement 3, 2009, p. S654

17 Years Ago

Cumulative Environmental Risks Among Low- and Middle-Income Children

Environmental risks are not randomly distributed in the population; instead, they are inversely correlated to income. Economically disadvantaged children live in noisier and more crowded homes and are exposed to more environmental toxins than their middle-income counterparts. Housing quality is also inversely related to income. Ethnic minorities also suffer disproportionate environmental risk. . . . Although poor children are substantially more likely to confront singular environmental risks in their immediate environments, exposure to cumulative environmental risks may be a particularly important and unstudied aspect of environmental justice and health. If the ecology of childhood poverty is characterized by the confluence of environmental risks, examination of the health consequences of singular risks may underestimate the true environmental risk profile of low-income children.

From AJPH, November 2004, p. 1942