

Easing the Ache of Infecting Someone with Covid

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Each of the 33 million Americans who have contracted Coronavirus received it from another person. Some transmitted the virus despite great efforts to distance and quarantine. Others transmitted it through behaving in ways that were naïve or negligent. Many will never know for sure if they infected someone. Those who know or suspect that they transmitted COVID may experience a wide range of thoughts and feelings that can interfere with their ability to love, work, and enjoy life.

Psychologists and neuroscientists have identified effective strategies that anyone can put into practice to ease their distress. Here are three tips drawn from researchⁱ on trauma, self-compassion, and mindfulness to assist those who transmitted COVID, or fear they did so, to find some ease within or around their experience.

Care for yourself as you would care for a friend.

Imagine that a dear friend, choking back tears, calls you. “You know how super careful I’ve been self-quarantining in the house after testing positive. Well, my father has been coughing all morning. I must have infected him. I’m heartsick.” You wait for a moment and say, “Of course he caught it. What kind of irresponsible daughter are you? You should have stayed in a hotel. Making your dad sick – you deserve to feel badly.”

Though we would never spew such toxins toward a friend, it is exactly such cruelty that we, at times, send our own way. To a friend or beloved, we might compassionately say, “I’m sorry you feel so sad. You are an amazing daughter and love your dad so much. I am glad you called me. What can I do to help?” Even if someone was negligent you might say, “Looking back, it’s

easy to conclude that you should have made different choices. You probably made the best decision you could at the time. That doesn't mean you would make the same choice again."

Tip: Try extending to yourself the spaciousness and kindness you would offer to a friend.

Notice what you are telling yourself.

Recognizing that you did infect or might have infected someone with COVID can be painful. But too often we take the facts of the situation and turn them against ourselves. For example, someone might say to themselves, "I infected them, so I'm an awful person." Making up a story about who you are based on what you did adds to sorrow and self-condemnation.

Thoughts and feelings about infecting someone will arise on their own and are beyond your ability to control. You can, however, learn to control how much and what kind of attention you give them and to control what actions you take in response to them. Research over the last 30 years has shown mindfulness practices to be effective in helping people focus attention on the present moment – and accept it without judgment. A simple practice that may help is to ask yourself if a recurring thought is helpful. If, for example, you notice yourself repeating, "I can't believe I gave my husband Covid," you might ask yourself whether and how continuing to recycle the thought is helpful. If each time you repeat it you feel better, you might choose to keep it going. Or, if it builds or adds to distress, you might lighten-up on it. You don't have to give these thoughts and feelings so much power.

Tip: Try to watch your self-messaging and consider dropping thoughts that fail the test of helpfulness.

Consider an apology if you think it might be useful to the person you infected.

"I'm sorry I infected you," is a simple form of apology that lets the infected person know about *your experience*. It is about *you* – *you* are sorry. It's a popular and easy way of

apologizing, but only gets the job half-done. The missing piece is your acknowledgment and caring about *their experience*, something the person you infected might welcome. Asking about someone's difficult experience when we believe it occurred by our hand can reinforce our own bad feelings. But it is often healing for them and for us. They get a chance to be heard about their experience and we become slightly liberated from our own distress by freeing them from being alone with theirs. Through the human connection made between us, we both gain.

A full apology that includes *them*, might sound something like, "I'm so sorry you got the virus and for all you endured since I transmitted it. I'm sure it's been difficult for you, and I'd welcome hearing about your experience."

Quaker writer Douglas Steere says: "To listen another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service one human being ever performs for another." By sharing with someone who listens with compassion, we can process our own feelings. As the one who transmitted the infection, you get to deliver that gift -- a "give back" of sorts or a form of making amends.

Tip: Open to hearing the infected person's experience even as it might be challenging. Those who have unintentionally passed COVID to others may experience a wide range of challenging thoughts and emotions. The tips presented above seek to maximize compassion for self and other – and call upon the best of our being human.

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