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Home > Health and Medicine > Coronavirus > Haifa U Psychologist Warns of the Perils of Self-Isolation

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Haifa U Psychologist Warns of the Perils of Self-Isolation

By **David Israel** · 4 Nissan 5780 – March 29, 2020

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Dr. Eli Somer

With 13 Israelis already dead and more than 3,800 infected with COVID-19, the nation is fixated on the physical and economic ramifications of this devastating virus. However, Dr. Eli Somer, a clinical psychologist and Professor Emeritus of Psychology at University of Haifa's School of Social Work, warned that many will be psychologically impacted as well.

Somer, who served as a mental health officer in the IDF and later as a civilian clinician for survivors of terrorism and childhood trauma, warned that the “accumulative stress” of self-isolation can take a toll on many vulnerable people. Specifically, the elderly, migrants, unemployed, victims of domestic violence and, individuals with previous diagnoses of anxiety and depression are most likely to develop significant emotional distress from coronavirus self-quarantining.

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“I think that people can endure only so much stress,” Dr. Somer said during an online briefing hosted by the American Society of the University of Haifa on Thursday night. “If you look at a volume of groups such as immigrants or migrant workers, for example, these are individuals who’ve seen a lot of change in their lives. They are an example of an obvious risk group. Also, people with deficient social support, people who are socially shy and anxious [are at risk]. The unemployed and those suffering from pre-existing mental disorders like anxiety, depression, and PTSD are also at risk.”

As for the elderly, who are already physically targeted by the virus, adjusting to the new regulations has left them feeling helpless. As such, Dr. Somer commended an initiative spearheaded by University of Haifa and NGOs Matav and Shila to recruit volunteers to chauffeur caregivers to the homes of the elderly during this trying time. In Israel alone, there are 220,000 senior citizens and many of them must function without their caregivers because of the near shutdown of public transportation.

Dr. Somer also offered tips on how to handle our newfound confinement. First, he suggested that people follow a limited, but trustworthy stream of news to keep one both informed and at ease. He also advocated for strengthening support systems and relying on family, when possible, since families with a solid and healthy foundation are likely to cope better to this new reality than ones that have a toxic dynamic or disconnection between family members.

Since it's natural to want to problem-solve in times of crisis, Dr. Somer called on authorities to give citizens more agency in managing their situation and enable them to get involved so they can feel proactive in a state of affairs that (until now) feels beyond their control. “When civilians are asked to do nothing, that worries me,” he said. “So we need to find ways to get citizens to be more proactive both at home and online.”

For families with children, he stressed the importance of maintaining calm within a household. “Children are vulnerable because they don't understand the situation. They take cues from their parents. So, I would advise parents that their kids react to what they say and how they say it. Parents should make themselves available to listen and answer any questions their children may have,” adding that parents should also limit how much news a child overhears regarding the pandemic.

Finally, he suggested that people develop a daily routine to abide by. “When everything changes, we want to keep some things constant, especially when we don't have control over the situation.”

Despite the need to monitor one's mental health during this trying time, Somer said reassuringly that most people will not develop long-term psychological effects from self-isolation. In fact, many may even come out of this pandemic with a deeper appreciation for life, he predicted.

“During this challenging time, people can realize their own capacities – their ability to withstand and prevail. The pandemic gives us an opportunity to reassess what's important to us and appreciate the smaller things in life. Some of us may discover spirituality, the value of family, intimacy with their partner and the value of pausing to reflect. Eventually, this pandemic will subside and authorities will encourage people to return to daily life. People will savor what they initially took for granted.”

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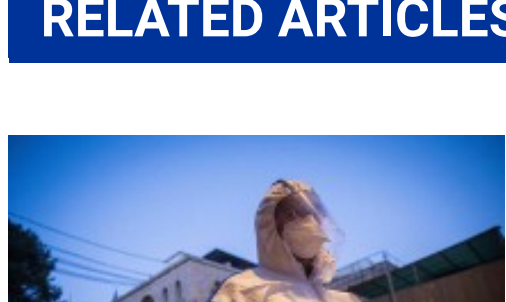
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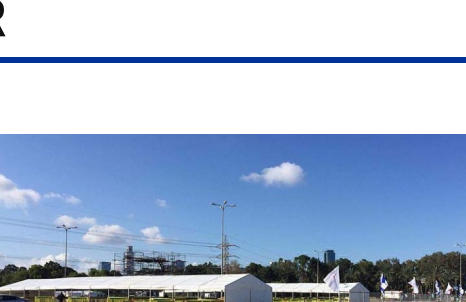
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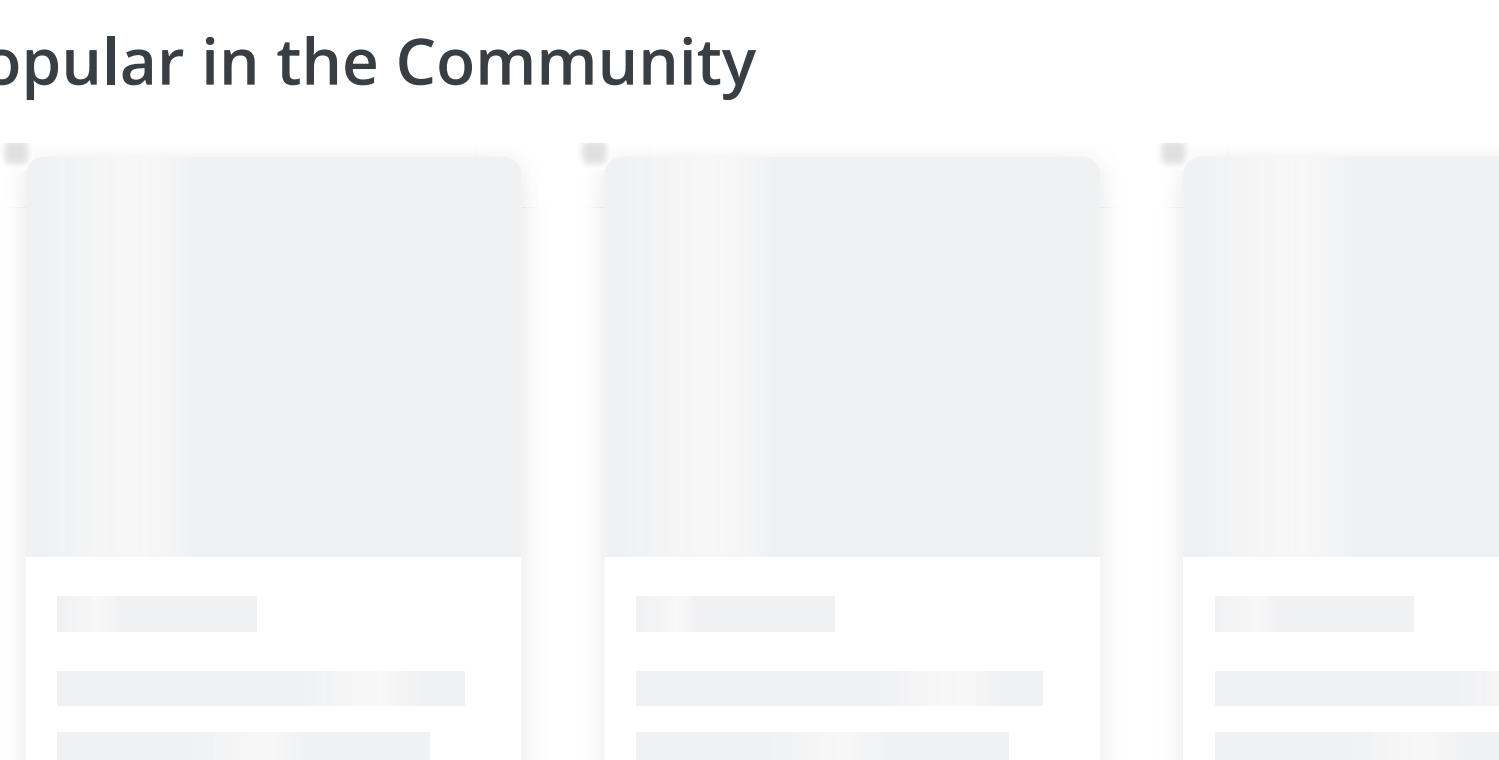
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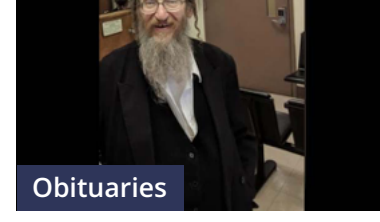
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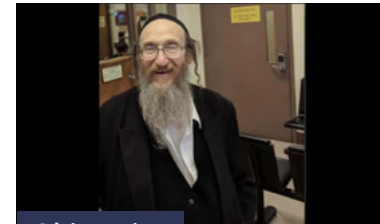
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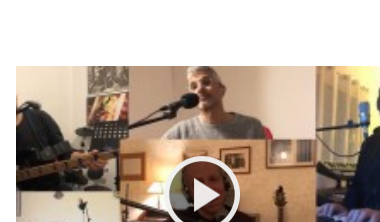
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