What is my life? Where is my life going?

During a session with a patient this week, I heard the above question in a lost, frustrated, sad and fearful tone. My patient has a traumatic history. The current COVID19 pandemic not only arose deep fears that had been previously addressed, but it also added a sense of impotence, of being locked up or stuck in a world that is unpredictable and potentially harmful. My patient is not alone in having childhood trauma resurfacing with the impact of this virus. Other patients with early childhood trauma also feel stuck, lost and frozen in planning next steps. Some also feel angry at authority figures. When our sense of safety and the predictability of our routines are shattered, we all tend to regress emotionally.

Sometimes changes can be pleasurable, but changes that result in interpersonal losses can be devastating. COVID19 brought unpredictable changes to our lives. Although we vary in how we cope with stress and stressful events, all of us have an innate tendency to habituate to routines and to long for permanence. When our routine changes, either because of a natural disaster, terroristic attack, relocation, underemployment or unemployment, abuse, violence, death, illness and/ or COVID, the stress can become overwhelming... so can our sense of loneliness, fear and frustration.

COVID19 has unearthed our most primitive fears. Fearing of and possibly losing our parents, children, grandchildren, loved ones, and friends during this pandemic threatens not only our relationships with important people in our lives, but our hope for life’s continuity in a manner we can bear. Some of our love rituals no longer are. Our loved ones are sick and unaccompanied at hospitals. Funerals and death services are not being attended in person. Being sick, possibly dying without loved ones around, or not being present at someone’s funeral services are deeply threatening to all of us, but we endure and become creative in managing significant events. Shivas are conducted virtually. Birthdays are celebrated through a honking driving cars parade. Psychotherapy and medical appointments get done online. Non-profit organizations organize food deliveries to the needy and health care workers work non-stop in triple shifts, selflessly caring for the ill. We hold the hope that this will be temporary, that things will resume to normal. We comply with the lockdown.

Many of us focus on the individual impact of traumatic experiences, but traumatic experiences can also be triggered by macro-systemic legislative, political, and cultural changes. All leaders become particularly challenged during a crisis. Just like parental figures during a child’s illness, leaders have the responsibility to care and protect people who depend on them while they themselves, may also feel vulnerable without knowing what to do. Many leaders experience profound loneliness, sadness and unbearable responsibility.

Leaders can however, combat stereotypes, shame, and model help seeking behaviors, but they can also be selfish, self-centered, reactive and defensive. For some of my patients, being at the receiving end of a leader who cannot be accountable for his/ her possible wrongdoing, can be
deeply shaming. Conversely, during distress and desperation being exposed to a leader’s ability to be humble, take responsibility induces safety, understanding and containment. It can be transformative. We heal in love and safety.

During times of turmoil and emotional distress, seeking a professional psychologist to talk to can be extremely helpful. However, finding the right fit is not always easy. The right fit results from speaking with someone that makes one feels understood and cared for. One negative experience with a professional, does not mean the positive one is not just around the corner. When it works, psychotherapy is transformative, but most importantly as another one of my patients said: “It feels like I am still dealing with my problems myself, but I am not alone. I know you are there and you are a participant and a witness to my suffering.”

It is my believe that more than ever during this crisis, having our safe space, experiencing compassion for ourselves and for others, being able to be comforted by someone who loves us and who we love, brings hope and healing. Hope brings strength. Strength makes us tolerate not knowing where life goes, but no matter where it goes, we are not alone.

Lucy Sant'Anna Takagi, Psy.D.