

Not Just on Our Shoulders

Systemic Stressors and Mental Health

Ebony Vandross

BEFORE YOU READ: Discuss the term “systemic stressors.” Look at the subheadings. What are some of the systemic stressors the author will likely talk about in her article?

So Much Stacked Against Us

Many people struggle with mental health. While there is a lot we can do to manage and repair our mental health, most of these strategies rest on the shoulders of the individual: seek therapy, take medication, practice self-care. However, we are all deeply affected by things that feel outside of our control. I have been a long-time advocate for people acknowledging their mental health problems and seeking treatment, but for the past year, I have struggled to maintain this resolve while living in a world with systems seemingly stacked against those simply trying to survive.

Covid Was Bad Enough, The National Response Was Worse

When the dangers of Covid became clear, many employers told their employees to work from home. States and towns ordered different levels of stay-at-home orders. At first, I saw this as good fortune. (At least I hadn't lost my job.) But then I thought, “If this disease is bad enough that people can no longer be in the same building safely, why didn't our federal government have a coherent message and coordinated national response?”

As a person with generalized anxiety disorder, I felt panic take hold. But I tried to convince



myself that I was getting worked up over nothing. Surely our national leadership would take action seeing that no one was exempt from the effects of this deadly virus. Instead, our country had one of the least coordinated national responses in the world! It turns out, my panic wasn't rooted in my disorder as much as it was a rational response to a system not supporting citizens.

Adjusting to working from home wasn't easy, but I eventually found a routine that worked for me. However, as I learned more about the alarming rates of Covid infections and deaths, I wondered if my co-workers were feeling as anxious as I was. From what I could tell, aside from feeling cooped up at home, it was business as usual.

As the death toll continued to rise, I noticed the administration seemed more concerned with convincing citizens that things weren't that bad, noting that illness and death mainly affected the elderly and the immune-compromised.¹ Like others, I thought, “Are the deaths of these populations acceptable?”² Knowing that racially marginalized groups were among those most affected only increased my concern. This disregard for human life added to

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>

2. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/5/28/21259238/coronavirus-elderly-immunocompromised-stay-at-home>

my anxiety, especially after realizing that some of my own family members with chronic illnesses were not able to travel for necessary health care. Our healthcare system was failing millions of people, including my own family.

Racism Was Always Bad, Now It's Worse

All the while, systemic racism and the deaths of brown and black bodies didn't miss a beat.³ High profile cases such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd continued to weigh on my spirit, and while some of these incidents mobilized people to defend Black lives, much of the response and promise for diversity and inclusion initiatives rang hollow.⁴ I found that my own desire to participate and support change was hampered by my fear of contracting Covid, and I began to feel the strain of isolation and hopelessness. At some point, I realized that I wouldn't be able to visit with my family for the holidays. My isolation grew.

Election Uncertainty Adds to Stress

The impending elections added yet another layer of stress. Some state and national leaders seemed more concerned with suppressing votes (and even discounting the election results!) than addressing the constantly increasing death count.⁵ Thanks to the work of activists and the politicians dedicated to ensuring a fair and accessible election, many people were able to vote safely.⁶

Still, waiting for the results while clocking normal work hours and seeing no solution to the pandemic set off my anxiety like never before, and I experienced my first panic attack. After that, I felt like I could barely keep up. Sometimes, it took



Sista Afya is an organization in Chicago that helps black women sustain mental wellness by offering education, resources, and support. Find out more here: <https://www.sista-afya.com/post/mental-wellness-an-approach-to-liberation>

me three times longer than usual to complete basic tasks, and at the end of the day I had no interest in or capacity for activities I used to enjoy.

I had a supportive therapist, but navigating the remainder of 2020 was difficult as the standing administration refused to concede. The impending holidays and the prospect of time off from work didn't provide any relief because it wasn't safe to visit with my family who live mostly out of state. Nor could I see my friends due to social distancing. As an introvert, I value my time alone, but this was too much!

The incoming administration and their promises of Covid relief eased my anxiety in the new year, but then on January 6th I watched a mob break into the nation's Capitol building and terrorize members of congress. I knew there would be a difference in the treatment of these rioters compared to those supporting racial justice⁷ and

3. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/865261916/a-decade-of-watching-black-people-die>

4. <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/blackface-episodes-pulled-30-rock-golden-girls-community-1234694796/>

5. <https://time.com/5817380/voter-suppression-coronavirus/>

6. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/13/georgia-election-high-black-voter-turnout-activist-efforts-stacey-abrams>

7. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2021/01/07/fact-check-photos-compare-handling-of-blm-protest-capitol-riot/6578562002/>

indigenous sovereignty⁸, for example. Seeing white supremacy on display and then hearing people claim that it was not representative of the nation,⁹ was frustrating. It made me believe that I was living in some kind of nightmare fantasy of my own creation and the people in charge were somewhere else. Hearing what the marginalized members of Congress went through leading up to and on this day¹⁰ only confirmed my belief that some people are out to hurt those who look like me if they are given the opportunity.

Our Healing Journey Is Not Ours Alone

When talking about mental health, my hope is always to support and inspire people to take that first step toward their healing journeys. But my experience over the past year has made me realize that I must also advocate for structural changes that alleviate issues brought on by systems like racism and white supremacy.

I'm in the middle of my journey. I am getting help for my mental health, and I see a lot of people in the world working to improve the health of our communities. That gives me hope.

What Can You Do?

- Reach out to your doctor if you need help. Learn about mental health terminology so that you're able to communicate with them from an informed perspective.
- Look up support groups that you can attend in person or online.
- To contradict the feeling of powerlessness, get involved in something in your community — e.g., food distribution, advocating for legislation you believe is important.

8. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/police-deploy-water-hoses-tear-gas-against-standing-rock-protesters>

9. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/01/06/transcript-joe-biden-capitol-chaos>

10. <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2021/01/13/aoc-capitol-hill-riots-tp-lon-orig.cnn/video/playlists/this-week-in-politics/>

- Connect with your neighborhood mutual aid group. It's a great way to connect with your neighbors and support each other during the most difficult times.

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We Are in the Midst of a Mental Health Crisis

- 891% more calls were received by the U.S. suicide hotline in March 2020 than the previous March.
- 40% of Americans have reported a pandemic-related mental health condition
- 49% of people aged 18 – 24 reported anxiety symptoms and 26% had seriously considered suicide
- 22% of people who are essential workers had considered suicide, compared with 7.8% of nonessential workers
- 41% of Black Americans were experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression one week after the murder of George Floyd, up from 36% prior to his murder, according to the Census Bureau
- 0.01% of the federal money approved for Covid-19 emergency relief was designated to address mental health concerns

Excerpted from In These Times (December 21, 2020) by Hannah Faris. Reprinted with permission.