



Groups@work:  
Connection • Education • Leadership

March 18, 2020

Writing this message on St. Patrick's Day, it is striking to see what is unfolding around us as states of emergency are declared at all levels and by all jurisdictions.

First and foremost, we wish everyone well and recognize the enormous strain people are feeling: for some, it is the physical effects of the virus, the inability to access testing to confirm or disconfirm COVID19 status; the impact of self-isolation; the strains of not working in our traditional formats; and learning new technological platforms to deliver care to our clients.

In the spirit of informing our members and providing support in the best way that we can, we want to let you know that we have 22 confirmed positive COVID19 tests. Judging from the emails on the listservs there are others who may be positive but have not been able to be tested yet.

There are others, reporting that they have tested negative, which is of course most welcome news. Please keep us all updated and informed about your status and your well-being.

We have had requests for names of our attendees who have tested positive. We are very grateful for the courage and transparency of our members who have self-declared their status, but we are not comfortable as an organization posting peoples' names directly. What we have put together is a Google document listing all AGPA Connect Sessions and indicating those attended by registrants who have tested positive

(<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1sJmUhhmLyFpUidxOG9LFkZ35RzDh5MlxzFBFin3vNjM/edit?usp=sharing>). Please note as well that this is a conservative estimate of potential exposure as the virus is no doubt within our communities at large, and all of us, with regret, should consider ourselves as having been exposed.

We have been in communication with all of the individuals who have been involved with our conference including exhibitors and non-registrants, and those who received awards at the Mitchell Hochberg plenary. And we have of course been in contact with the hotel and NY State Public Health.

The New York Times and the Washington Post have contacted us and there are stories about AGPA Connect 2020 in the press.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-shelter-in-place.html> and [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-coronavirus-victim-alison-mcgrath-howard/2020/03/17/693f4d58-67a9-11ea-abef-020fo86a3fab\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-coronavirus-victim-alison-mcgrath-howard/2020/03/17/693f4d58-67a9-11ea-abef-020fo86a3fab_story.html)). The reporters focused on COVID19 transmission and its impact. What we also hoped would stand out is the remarkable support and sense of community that is evident on our listservs as well as our members' professionalism and concern for their clients and communities. We

hope that will yet emerge and we are working to do so.

As group therapists, no one knows better than us the importance of social integration and social connection: physical distance need not mean social isolation. These are also fraught times with anxiety about what is happening in society at large, with massive shut downs, the frustration about accessing reliable and consistent health care, and economic pressures. We are embedded in our larger social contexts.

Our members' communications appear to be supporting peoples' capacities for reflection and finding a midway between minimization and intense anxiety which could lead to understating risk or greater distress. These are familiar polarities in responding to acute stress.

It is also evident that we recognize that we are all interconnected. Our commitment to social distancing and self-isolation is a manifestation of that joint responsibility and the outpouring of concern and support on our listservs is another. Many people have posted information regarding coping with anxiety; communication with children about COVID19; managing children who are not in school; and of course, the abundant support for people engaging in technological platforms to access care for their clients. There will be a special issue of *Group Connections* that will highlight all of these resources and web links. We are also aware that there will be a lessening of HIPPA restrictions to facilitate access to care. Look for this special issue for more information. We are also developing special training sessions on using online platforms; first up is Haim Weinberg this Sunday, March 22, 8:00 – 9:30 PM EST with *The Theory and Practice of Online Group Psychotherapy*. Register at <https://member.agpa.org/itemdetail?iprodcode=AUWEINBERGNC>

I (Molyn) am also reminded of the learnings that emerged in dealing with SARS, 17 years ago. There are both traumatic echoes of that time and also a reminder of the importance of maintaining reflective space so that one can access coping strategies and make explicit what is normally implicit. It can be helpful to keep in mind the three prongs of effective coping: emotion-based coping; problem-based coping; and meaning-based coping. We are providing a link to an article on evidence-based approaches to coping with pandemic stress in healthcare workers.

(<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF03403782.pdf>) A copy of a PPT lecture I (Molyn) have given on supporting our colleagues and health care providers during pandemic stress will also be accessible through *Group Connections*.

We recognize that prior to the determination that self-isolation was required, some members had returned to their clinical practice. The public health information about transmission of the illness prior to the emergence of symptoms, is inconsistent. The risk of transmission is much greater once people become symptomatic because the illness is transmitted through droplets and in the absence of symptoms, droplets are less likely to be produced. We all recognize the feelings of responsibility and concern that we may have unwittingly transmitted this illness to our clients. We don't believe we could have known at that time what we know now. Had that been the case we would have acted differently.

Social distancing and the emergency state in which we are now living deprives

us of simple pleasures like a visit with one's children or grandchildren, a meal with friends, and even the rhythmic distraction of watching a sporting event.

That makes the profound expressions of our members' compassion and support all the more heartening and of immense value. The resilience and ingenuity of our members is also remarkable as is evident in a ZOOM dance and the spontaneous online support groups for members. This is what good and strong communities do.

We think we should also see the opportunity of studying and learning from our experience as a way to synthesize learning to maximize our coping and responsiveness in the face of unprecedented stressors such as this pandemic.

We know about the importance of belonging, affiliation and the value and power of the group. What this also underscores for us is that no one can be healthier than the health of their groups, both small and large.

Wishing us all strength, courage and compassion, and most importantly wellness.

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