

Discovery COVID-19 Podcast Series  
 Transcript: Zamo Mbele – PTSD and COVID-19  
 May 2020

	Speaker	Dialogue	
00:00	Zamo Mbele	My name is Zamo Mbele and I am a clinical psychologist in Johannesburg, South Africa as well as a board member of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group – SADAG. I wanted to speak briefly around post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, and COVID-19, the pandemic that has the globe at its grips at this point. I think that the 2 words, trauma and stress have become quite synonymous with what it is that we are experiencing during this terrible and terrifying crisis so it's quite important to put some things into context, perhaps know a little bit more around PTSD, know a lot more around how it might relate to COVID-19, think a little bit around particular vulnerable populations and then lastly, to know what it is that you can do now to prevent a post-traumatic response during this difficult time.	00:57
00:57		Now we absolutely know that post traumatic stress disorder is a serious mental condition, it's a psychiatric condition that follows after very traumatic events. These traumatic events can include terrorist attacks, physical assaults and attacks, serious incidents, and accidents. Though we absolutely know that the COVID-19 pandemic can have very similar effects on a person's psychology to those traumatic events that I was speaking about. The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to increase the stress and anxiety both because of the fear of infection and because of the uncertainty of how the outbreak will affect people socially and economically. This stress and anxiety can be incredibly traumatic and if not dealt with and attended to now and/or later can absolutely lead to a PTSD. IT's quite important to say at this point, that not everyone that is experiencing this period as stressful with develop PTSD, though, for those who might, it's also incredibly important to listen out to what might happen or what might be happening that might lead or encourage the development of a PTSD	02:15
02:16		Everybody at this point, as I said, is going through extreme stress, anxiety and is terrified. Things are incredibly overwhelming. It's quite important to attend to yourself right now, in a bid to reduce the amount of stress and anxiety or to attend to the stress, anxiety and uncertainty that you're feeling. The importance of this is that, if not attended to, it can really increase the likelihood of ossifying this	03:00

		<p>period as an absolute traumatic period and as a result, the development of a traumatic response later on in your life, a few weeks down the line or a few months down the line</p>	
03:05		<p>I particularly want to think of those people who will unfortunately lose loved ones and I think that there are several reasons why this will be a particularly traumatic grief or bereavement period. One of them is how you will lose loved ones and the second one is the inability to have very normal rituals and customs, such as funerals or wakes. This can be incredibly traumatic, and you might need to prepare yourself or attend to the fact that this is not normal, and this might result, in fact, in a trauma later on. Trying to find ways to grieve somebody that you've lost might be incredibly helpful not just to attend to the grief and the loss of that person and that, that you are feeling, though it might also reduce the trauma of the loss at this particular time</p>	03:58
03:59		<p>We also know that people who might have positive tests for COVID-19 or the coronavirus might also experience this as traumatic. The entire process is traumatic, all the way from the actual procedure of the testing to waiting for results. All of that for everybody can be experienced as very, very traumatic. Knowing that it's difficult and it's incredibly frightening and speaking and negating that we know will in fact decrease the extent of this becoming a trauma. However, for those that do have a positive test, we also know that this can absolutely be a trauma. And there are several reasons for this. Firstly, is not only the isolation that you'll have to experience, it's also the perception, the real perception of the danger of what it is you've tested positive for. The uncertainty, the physical discomfort that you might go through if your symptoms worsen, the side effects of the medication as well as the fear of transmitting this virus on to other people.</p>	05:10
05:11		<p>You can already get some support and help to the extent that you have a positive test, you do not have to wait until afterwards. There are telephonic counselling options and opportunities as well as virtual counselling platforms that you can attend in order to attend to yourself. The other thing that we are seeing, which is really unfortunate, is to the extent that somebody test positive and then they quarantine and/or get treated and they recover, they eventually test negative, one of the real problems that can develop is the stigma that people might have to that person and the social hostility that that person might experience. There are 2 things here that are important to say. The first one is that as a society it's quite important to know</p>	07:00

		<p>that we're worsening the experience of the person who has maybe and often times already had a tough time with a positive test. Potentially with symptoms and has been fortunate enough to recover. We are worsening that experience by stigmatising them and being hostile. The other thing to remember is that actually, often times stigma is a result often times of not knowing, of ignorance. And sometimes the ignorance is nobody's fault. So it's important to arm ourselves with as much information as possible, to really research what we need to know and to engage with that information so we can know the truth about a person who tests negative that to the best of our knowledge at this point, they are a person who cannot transfer, transmit or infect anybody else.</p>	
07:00		<p>It's also quite important to have open and honest conversations around fears and fantasies. That everybody is allowed to say "I'm actually quite worried to be next to you, because of this" Actually often times, if we speak these fears and fantasies out, we know that we dispel them. We dispel them like myths. It's okay to be frightened and rather, let's speak about what it is that frightens you, so we can know how it is that in fact it is no longer frightening.</p>	07:30
07:30		<p>We also think a lot about our frontline healthcare workers. We know that they are, in fact at the highest risk of developing PTSD later. One of the reasons for this is that while they are working tirelessly at this moment and being incredibly courageous, something we should absolutely thank them for, there can be something of an ignoring of their current situation and symptoms, their current psychological states and emotional experiences which is something that is of adrenaline. However, something that can exacerbate the trauma of the situation. Now, we need our frontline healthcare workers after this crisis, so we need them to attend to themselves now. We need all our frontline healthcare workers to be kind to themselves, to know that to take breaks, to look after themselves will not actually only make them better people, better nurses, better doctors, in this moment make better decisions in this moment, though in fact later on, when this is all over it will make them better off. So, attend to yourselves. We also feel for our frontline healthcare workers for the moral injuries and crises that they will face. Not only will they be seeing incredibly difficult things, they will also have to make difficult decisions. Let's speak about that. There are professionals out there to help engage with these crises that you are going through now and will be going through soon enough.</p>	09:03

09:04		<p>I thought it's also important to bear in mind young people. All the way from infants, toddlers, and adolescents, this is also an incredibly difficult time. Not only do we know that even young infants can pick up on their parents' anxiety and distress. Though toddlers and adolescents might find this time excruciatingly painful, they might find it unfair and not understand why it is that they cannot return to their routine which they love and had gotten really used to. It's quite important to speak to young people in this regard, to be as open and honest as possible, to engage with them as much as you can. It's also quite important to appreciate that sometimes for a young person, things like time, place and space are very difficult to understand, so it's important to, for example, where is necessary, keep them informed that "Well, this is where we are, and this cannot last for forever" In a way, it should not last for forever. Young people might be frightened that this will go on until they, themselves are adults, for example. So, it's quite important to engage those things in a real, concrete way as well. We absolutely know that to rebuild the trust and safety in a young person's mind is essential at this point, so it does not become a trauma that they live with for forever. And that safety and trust is not just in the sense that the world is not in and of itself a dangerous place, that yes, some really difficult and dangerous things can happen, though if we're cautious and if we are attentive, actually, we will be fine. The media exposure that a lot of young people have, is often times overlooked, so often times as parents or adults, we are busy consuming and arming ourselves with as much information. They may not be able to make sense of it. It's quite important to help them make sense of it and also to limit the amount or minimise the amount of media exposure that they have to this particular crisis. The films or the visuals that young people see during the day are often times, playing in their minds at night and it can absolutely be damaging and leave them incredibly restless. Lastly on this point, is we know that parents or adults who look after themselves, look after their children best so it's quite important for you to attend to your own anxieties stress and distress in a bid to better attend to those of young people.</p>	11:41
11:42		<p>Lastly, I wanted to highlight some of the things that you can do. I've already spoken about the importance of self-awareness. We know that one of the big factors in a trauma is that it is unexpected. Now, we are in an opportunity to expect that things will be tough. They may be tough for a couple of weeks because of restrictions and they may be tough for a couple of months because of what the country, society, and us a population will face. Knowing this and not denying</p>	13:22

		<p>it, not kind of minimising it and also not making it bigger than it is, is incredibly important as not to have that surprise moment or that shock moment which is a huge ingredient in a trauma. Secondly, as I've been saying, is to increase self-awareness. Be aware of many things. So, be aware, in the form of the amount of information is out there, be aware of the levels of danger, be aware of what's going on in a way that is safe and is sanitised. So, do not become too aware, do not overexpose yourself to something but have enough awareness so you can keep yourself safe. But also, absolutely be aware of yourself. Be aware of your thoughts, your emotions, and your behaviour and what it is that they are telling you. Are they telling you that you need to rest, that you need to recreate, or are they telling you in fact that you need to get up, that you need to be active and do what you can with what you have? Be aware of your thoughts, emotions, and behaviour and how it is that they themselves link to each other.</p>	
13:23		<p>I've spoken a little bit around the importance of sanitary news consumption. Sanitary news consumption includes looking at information that is credible and avoiding information that is fake or that is distorted or inaccurate. Though also consuming it at levels that are also helpful. Too much of it can be incredibly detrimental and of course sticking your head in the sand and too little of it, can also put you in harm's way. Lastly, the 3 C's. Care, connect and communicate. Take care of yourself and others. To look after yourself as I've been saying is incredibly important, however, the act of looking after others can be so masterful for one's self and soul. Connect with people as much as possible. This particular crisis has asked us to isolate and social isolation and self-isolation is incredibly important; however, sole isolation can be very detrimental so with what you have and how you can, connect with friends and family. And the last one is communicate. Make certain that the channels of communication are always open in social ways, though also communicate what your needs are and communicate if you're struggling</p>	