

PHI: *Even though my wife is eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, she has yet to do so. I've shown her the information on PHI's website that encourages polio survivors to get the vaccine, but she still has some trepidation. It is still so new, she says. What if there is some long-term side effect we don't know about? I feel like the very real risks from contracting COVID-19 far outweigh any theoretical (or irrational) concerns about the new vaccines. How can I put her mind at ease and convince her to get vaccinated?*

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

People have different levels of risk tolerance. I am assuming your wife's is quite low for the unknown (like long-term vaccine side effects) while her tolerance of known risks (like that of contracting COVID-19) is higher. Research has shown that the ability to estimate risk is poor at best. Most of us overestimate the likelihood of low-probability, high-risk events while underestimating the risk posed by higher-probability, high-risk events. This is why few people hesitate to drive a car (higher probability of experiencing a serious accident) while many fear flying (lower probability). Low probability doesn't mean no probability (which is why lottery tickets sell so well). Having already experienced one low-probability event (paralytic polio only occurred in 1-5% of cases), your wife may be more fearful that she could experience another.

At this time, no one knows whether there will be any long-term vaccine side effects, let alone how high the probability of experiencing them might be. However, there is information available that might help reassure your wife. One clear but thorough explanation of the vaccines including how they work and why the risk of long-term side effects from them may well be quite low can be found at: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines/mRNA.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fvaccines%2Fcovid-19%2Fhcp%2Fmrna-vaccine-basics.html. If she hasn't, encourage her to speak with

her healthcare providers about the risks and benefits of getting the vaccine as opposed to contracting COVID-19.

I am assuming you and other family members have been or are scheduled to be vaccinated. Talk about how you made your decision, what getting the vaccine was like, and how you felt afterwards, including any side effects you might have experienced. Family members and close friends may also need to let her know whether they will be willing to take the risk of socializing with her (and you) if she remains unvaccinated. And you may need to let her know how her decision will affect you and your marriage.

She may still argue that it is her choice. But it's a choice with consequences for anyone with whom she comes in contact. If she remains unvaccinated, no matter how careful she is she could contract COVID-19 and spread it to you or others she loves. And if enough people make the same choice, there is a high probability that infection rates will remain high, more dangerous variants will emerge and lives will remain restricted.

Which brings me to my final thought: Is your wife's vaccine hesitancy in part due to a wish not to go back to the way things were before? Maybe the slower pace of pandemic life has improved your wife's PPS symptoms. Or maybe she has experienced more symptoms over the past year and doesn't want others to see how reliant she has become on assistive devices. If so, it might help to reassure her that once she's fully vaccinated no one will pressure her to become more active than she wants to be.



Dr. Stephanie T. Machell is a psychologist in independent practice in the Greater Boston (MA) area. She specializes in working with those affected by polio and other physical disabilities. Her father was a polio survivor.

PHI: *I have used a wheelchair since I was in my twenties and in recent years have developed significant neurological pain in my shoulder. I have tried a number of treatment options with varying degrees of success. One thing I have noticed is that stress tends to exacerbate the pain. This past year, because of the pandemic, has been particularly stressful for me. What are some things I can do to deal with this stress?*

Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:

You are quite right that stress increases pain, in two ways: it increases inflammation which causes pain, and it decreases tolerance thus increasing our perception of the pain. This is a vicious cycle, since the pain becomes a stressor in itself. The past year (and more) of the pandemic has been stressful in so many ways, including economics, health, social isolation, contagion and illness fears, relationships. And that's true even if you never watch the news!

I wish I had a magic pill for stress. Learning to manage one's level of stress is an important life skill, and like all skills, it takes learning, practice and repetition to get better. I'm going to suggest a few ideas, all of which will not seem like they are helping one little bit until you have incorporated them more fully into your daily routine and your mindset. Remember to breathe deeply (four counts inhale through the nose, hold for four counts, let it out through your mouth for four counts).

First, accept that you are stressed. If one track in your mind is saying "I'm so stressed!" and the other track is saying "You need to stop being so stressed!" then you are compounding your stress. Second, at the end of each day, write down three things that went well that day. These can be really small things, like "I liked that new toast I tried" or "there was no line at the grocery store" or "I got a load of laundry done today" or "I worked on that project for fifteen minutes." If you

really and truly cannot find three things, it might be that you are trained to look for the negative (through upbringing or disposition or depression) and have to reprogram your perceptions. Or it might be that you really don't have three good things and your life really is out of balance, and some changes need to be made.

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Third, do nice things for yourself. Light a candle at the dinner table, hire someone to clean the house, have a donut, drink tea in the middle of the day, get your car detailed, buy a houseplant. Fourth, socialize, whether by Zoom or phone or Facetime or however. Do this even when it might feel like you don't want to. It can be for just ten minutes a day.

Fifth, do something for someone else. Whether it's part of a nonprofit organization (hey, I just happen to know one related to polio!) or a friend, neighbor or family member, doing for others has been reliably shown to improve moods. And lastly, smile and laugh. I don't mean this ironically. Smiling makes even depressed people feel better and laughing releases endorphins. So, look for the funny wherever you are.

And thank you for writing – you are not alone in feeling stressed and your question is timely. ■

Dr. Rhoda Olkin is a Distinguished Professor of Clinical Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Francisco, as well as the Executive Director of the Institute on Disability and Health Psychology. She is a polio survivor and single mother of two grown children.

