

Distance Learning in Times of Disaster



Without warning, children across the country have experienced a dramatic shift in how they participate in daily learning. In addition, children who relied on social service connections and food service programs provided at school were suddenly without these essential resources. Educators have put their heads together to experiment with practices that many have come to identify as distance learning, becoming pioneers in this unfamiliar way of teaching and learning. Montessori educators have had the added complexity of holding the method intact while also creating a program manageable for children and families.

This was the primary focus at the outset of school closures as Coronavirus swept the nation. Montessori educators and families made heroic efforts to create and institute a new way of being for children that would hold them in a routine. Administrators rallied, teachers spent countless hours preparing, families learned new technology skills and reorganized to accommodate what teachers were suggesting. It was a valiant team effort to lift something so unknown in such a short amount of time.

While we are all still adjusting to the new way of being, it's a good time to reflect on what has happened and anticipate together what we might feel and experience in the coming days and weeks.

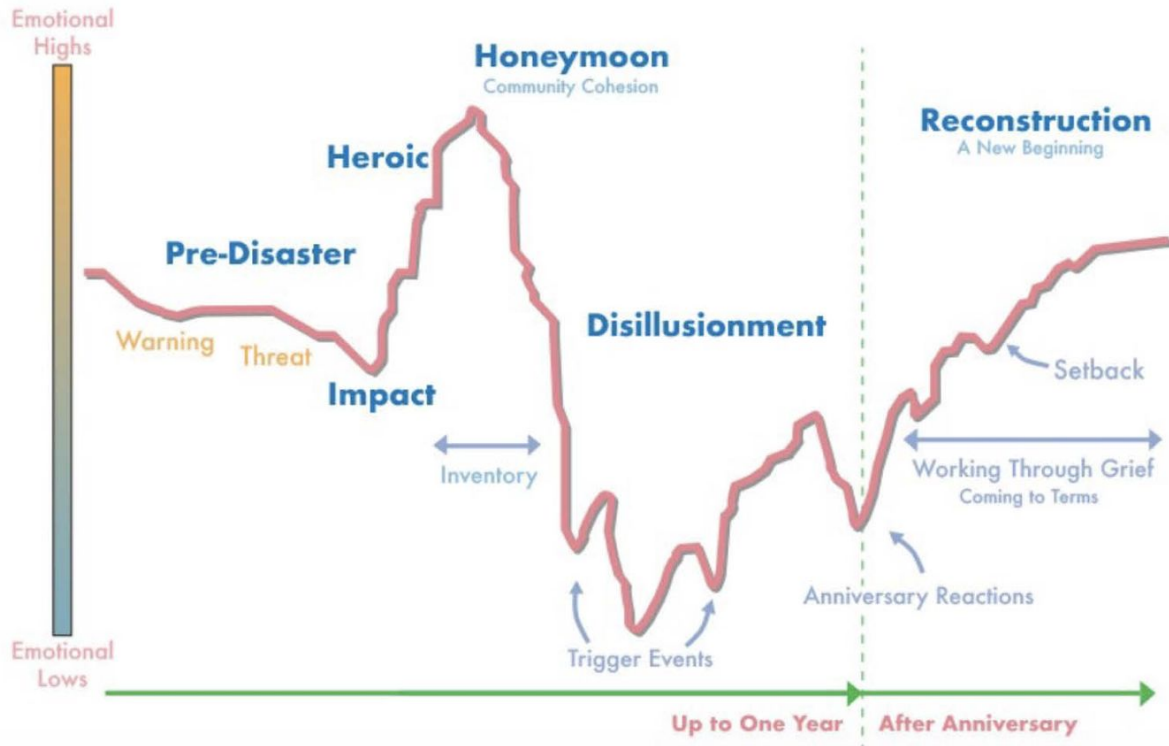


Image: samhsa.gov

The theoretical model entitled “Phases of Disaster Response,” which was developed by Zunin and Myers in California, outlines the various phases of a disaster in terms of individual and collective emotional response in the community. The phases are as follows: **pre-disaster phase, impact phase, heroic phase, the honeymoon phase, disillusionment, and reconstruction.** Our response to the disaster of this world pandemic was heroic and we are now in the honeymoon phase- largely relieved that we figured something out- anything at all- and that many are finding a new routine, which is comforting. However, if we aren't there already, all evidence points to the idea that we will soon enter into a collective stage of disillusionment.

This next phase is where we realize: this is our new reality. It is sinking in that this is how life is going to look for the foreseeable future. And along with this new stage comes a time of grief. As we all find our footing after scrambling to figure out how to set up our children on video calls as a form of distance learning while trying to keep our toddlers occupied while also balancing working from home, most people are finally beginning to slow down, and what happens when people slow down is that they start feeling all of the uncomfortable feelings that were put aside during the initial scramble.

Below we will explore each of these phases, with some thought to how these phases might be felt from the adult perspective. Teachers and caregivers have both experienced a major upheaval as their roles in educating children has changed radically.

The Pre-Disaster Phase

There is some warning that a threat is imminent, and people are starting to feel uneasy as they see the signs of possible impending change.

During this time, the Coronavirus is making an appearance, schools are talking about closures but haven't come to decisions, some are thinking to close for a couple of weeks until the perceived threat has subsided.

The Impact Phase

This phase is usually the shortest of the phases and can be different depending on if the threat was rapid or slow. At first, people tend to feel feelings of confusion and denial, but then there is a quick shift over to self-preservation and protecting loved ones.

In our case, this threat was slow-building over several weeks and months, and then sudden when the moment finally came when schools were closed. People were learning that schools would be closed and that they would have to be working from home or possibly in danger of losing their job in the coming weeks. Educators scrambled to create an immediate plan to reach all learners while managing their own children and home situation. Some caregivers were in shock and the reality of being at home with their children every day hadn't quite settled in, and others were panicking as they worried about how to juggle all aspects of their lives. This was a time of stress and overwhelm as we were being asked to pivot in a new direction.

The Heroic Phase

This is the time when people are feeling an adrenaline rush in response to the impact of the change. Much like after a loved one has passed, they are focused on getting the business aspects taken care of. There is a lot of movement and activity, and people are reaching out to help wherever they can, and not all of the actions are productive or strategic. There is a lot of helping for the sake of helping, and often without a plan. There is a focus on making sure the people around us are getting our physical and psychological needs met.

This is the time when people were furiously downloading every resource they can find, and information was flying back and forth without an informed direction or practice. There was resource overload and it was hard to separate the useful from useless. Educational consultants were offering free support to help educators, many teachers were available around the clock to answer questions and concerns, and caregivers were trying to organize their lives at home to

support their children. Schools provided meals to children in the community, educators were figuring out more equitable ways to offer better distance learning opportunities for their students, and caregivers were joining online support groups while doing the triple duty of parenting, teaching, and working. People may have felt purposeful during this time, as there is a lot of energy to be productive.

Honeymoon Phase

There is a lot of optimism and community bonding, as people connect with one another. Private and government assistance is available, and many are optimistic that this is a short-lived experience and that things will soon return to normal.

This is the stage when people believe that this would only last a couple of weeks, and they with a few days under their belt feel like they will be able to make it through, and even might be enjoying the experience and feel a sense of relief to be having a break from their regular life and routine. It may have even felt like a bit of vacation for some, as everything felt exciting and new. The educators found a way to connect and to start something that felt meaningful and the children were generally being cooperative as they embarked on this novel experience. Caregivers at home may have been a bit frazzled but they felt there was light at the end of the tunnel. Families and teachers were generally appreciating one another and all that was accomplished during the heroic phase. It was a time of community cohesion- we needed each other, we worked together and we are doing it.

The Disillusionment Phase

This phase can also be considered “the crash.” This is where the exhaustion that has been relegated to the sidelines is no longer able to be ignored. People may feel an excessive amount of fatigue, and overwhelm. Some people may succumb to situational depression. There is a realization that there is no going back to how things used to be, and also a feeling of hopelessness...nothing we can do can change what has happened. There is also a huge gap between what people need during this time, and what assistance is available, as physical resources are scarce and emotional resources are overtaxed. It's a time of feeling all the emotions, such as sadness, anger, sorrow, guilt, loneliness, gratitude, inner peace. Towards the end of this phase, knowing that we cannot return to life exactly as it was can be found a certain sense of acceptance.

This is the stage where many people in the US find themselves right now. They had been doing distance learning for a week or two, and then there was notice from the government that schools would be closed for an additional month, and some announced through the end of the year. Families who were either enjoying what felt like a short reprieve from regular life or who have been holding on by a thread now come to the realization that their children will be learning at home for much longer than originally anticipated. Many families are experiencing the impact

of increased economic hardships, and social isolation may be having an adverse effect on children and families. Children and families become increasingly worried as they hear about people they know becoming sick with the Coronavirus. What felt like a vacation for many children now feels like a prison sentence as their worlds become increasingly smaller, first not being able to play with friends, and then many not being able to freely venture outside. Elementary children thrive on time with their peers and love having the freedom of going out of the home, so this new way of being can feel especially restrictive. There is also the grim reality that many people will become very sick with the Coronavirus, and a percentage of those who fall ill will die.

Caregivers are feeling the weight of the pressure for their children to make academic growth and feel stressed and resentful about being a teacher (especially when they never signed up for the profession). Montessori families may, in particular, feel an extra burden that their children don't have packets of prescribed items like children in traditional settings, and may find the freedom and independence of the Montessori approach to be chaotic, loud and messy. In addition, our most vulnerable families are left without the consistent support structure and resources that many public schools provide, such as food, shelter, community, and medical care. And then there are Montessori teachers, who never signed up for a philosophy that involved instructing their students through a computer screen, who are grieving the fact that they won't be able to present lessons in-person to their children, and that they won't see them finish the school year.

Everyone is grieving the end of the year that won't happen as expected. All of the routines (going outs, project culminations...) as well as the special occasions (publishing parties, end of year celebrations, graduations...) have been cancelled. All of the routines of the school year (class placement and visits) will need to be reimaged. And mostly all of the time we thought we would have together inside the school building is gone. It is no one's fault yet in this time of disillusionment the feelings may lurch out as blame. That anger, that fury may be fueled by this shared grief. Knowing this may help us all to navigate this phase with grace and compassion. This is not the way anyone wants it to be; how can we stay in it together?

The Reconstruction Phase

This is the phase when people start the process of rebuilding and reconstruction. People begin to rebuild their lives with the resources they have available to them. They are mostly adjusted to the new circumstances and see new opportunities on the horizon. This phase comes when it is acknowledged that the change is here to stay, at least for a while. This time offers the realization that we have been profoundly affected by the Coronavirus, and that we are not immune to the misfortunes we've heard of or seen on the news. It is a period of recovery, and also what comes from it is greater wisdom as a result of the experience from the trauma.

In our schools, this is the time when distance learning is in full swing, and teachers are partnering with families to offer children a learning experience that works for their communities based upon initial trial and error. Now the new systems, procedures, and routines begin to solidify. Although there are still moments of grief and frustration, the mood becomes more optimistic as the routine begins to feel normal, and there are no new big surprises.

Navigating the Next Phase

We are on the steep cliff somewhere between the Honeymoon Phase and the Disillusionment Phase and knowing this gives us the power of understanding and allows for the opportunity for shared language. If we can name what is happening and talk about it with each other it is less likely to own us. It is still happening yet we are not entirely powerless in the face of it. We have the power of language, shared experience and community. We also have the opportunity to acknowledge and feel all the parts of this complicated reality stemming from an unexpected world pandemic. We are thinking/feeling beings - it is what separates us from other species.

Some people will want to skip over the feelings in the Disillusionment Phase because sitting with uncomfortable feelings is not what many people like to do, but it is a necessary step to sit with grief, to acknowledge it, recognize it, and honor it, so that it will pass through. What isn't expressed can become repressed and when we repress our emotions they have a way of finding other ways to be indirectly expressed.

In the stillness that is beginning while we are held in our homes for an extended time be prepared for the feelings you put on hold during the crisis to emerge. Those feelings we are holding are best felt as they arise, rather than coming out towards another person or much further down the road as a delayed response.

What do the next steps look like for my elementary-aged child?

Whereas the first part of Distance Learning was about occupying their time to keep them busy as everyone was orienting themselves, this next phase is about creating a predictable schedule based upon current limitations and possibilities. While the first phase was about experimenting with varying rhythm and routines, the second phase can be a celebratory time as you and your child together figure out what works. This adds to a sense of stability and predictability that children will find valuable with so much uncertainty in our world right now.

What will you want to watch out for?

There is a lot of conversation lately about caregivers feeling frustrated with child behavior, and looking at the big picture, these children have been experiencing the same kind of collective trauma that the adults are experiencing. However, they don't always have the tools,

experience, or self-awareness to express what they are truly feeling inside, and these uncomfortable feelings can manifest as negative or undesirable behaviors.

Here are some common behaviors that might be heightened right now due to the huge transition many children have recently experienced:

- **Withdrawal:** Your elementary child might easily retreat into books or electronics to pull away from the challenges of the outside world. While we all have our idealized practices, during a time of survival is not a time to enter into power struggles or force them to talk. Keep the communication lines open on your end, reach out and make a bid for connection, talk about how you are feeling, tell a story about your day. Elementary children love stories and this can be an opening for them to share how they're feeling.
- **Fatigue:** Children might be much more tired than usual. Between being at home all day, learning how to do school from a distance, and learning new life routines, that is a lot for children to process. Make sure children are getting enough rest. While it's important to keep the same schedule for consistency, older elementary children may want to sleep in late. Again, we are not living in the same world we were living in even a month ago. Children are taking a lot in, and they may need the extra rest right now.
- **Anger:** It's natural that your child might get overly upset about small things. A lot of time the anger is misplaced onto something trivial or something/someone that feels safer to be angry with. And with such an abstract enemy such as an invisible virus, it's hard to know where to channel the anger from the disruption. As the days and weeks, march on and children are not able to see their friends, this anger is bound to build. Offering empathy and compassion while setting limits is key right now, as well keeping it in perspective. The circumstances we are now living in are not ideal for anyone.
- **Anxiety:** Even children who don't typically display anxious behavior will be prone to it right now. We have just turned the corner into April, and with that, there are bills to pay and rent is due, and elementary children are very much attuned to the hardships and struggles that their parents face. Minimizing a child's anxious feelings in an attempt to make them feel better often has the opposite effect. Instead, you will want to acknowledge and affirm their feelings, even their feelings that might activate your discomfort.
- **Resistance:** Children who are normally cooperative can become resistant during this time. Even the most innocuous suggestion from you can result in a wall of resistance from your child. Rather than getting into a mental game of tug-o-war, drop the rope. Say something like "I see that you don't want to attend to the work that we agreed upon. Let's talk about that." Another important point to note about resistance is that sometimes children resist because they want you to respond in a way that will activate their pent up feelings. Behind resistance is usually deeper-rooted feelings, and often these feelings have nothing to do with whatever is being resisted. Helping children develop a language of feelings, as well as supporting them in feeling angry or crying when necessary, will allow children to identify the source of their pain and talk about it.

If some of these feelings or scenarios resonate it may be because on some level we are all feeling withdrawn, tired, angry, anxious and resistant. We are all cycling through a natural response to something dramatic that has happened to us collectively. We are all holding loved ones near and far who are also cycling through these feelings. The difficult part is finding the reserves to offer love in response. Yet the amazing part is to be so connected as we go through this crisis together.

Through it all we are now holding the shared task of educating our children. We have found a way to continue in the face of disaster. This might be a time for us to ask ourselves the following questions: What will we want to remember about this time? How can we find purpose and meaning in these changes? May we remember to lean in, to share what is true and to continue knowing that this time is shaping our children and that our children are the future.

“Our task as educators is to ensure that an intense consciousness of universal solidarity will flourish in our children... This is the great task of education: to make the child conscious of the reality and depth of human unity”

Montessori, Maria. “Human Solidarity in Time and Space” *The San Remo Lectures, 1949.*
Amsterdam: AMI, 2003/2004

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Elizabeth Slade



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