

## **Psychological Adaptation after the Epidemic in China:**

### **Search for New Meaning and Purpose**

**Peizhong Li, Ph. D.**

**April 1, 2021**

On March 10<sup>th</sup> 2021, Employee Assistance and EAPA colleague Peizhong Li shared his insights during EAPA's Weekly Pandemic conversation on family, community, work, trust, Emotional First Support (EFS), rural ancestral home vs. urbanization/new home, support among strangers, and many challenging realities to COVID-19 acute and post-acute China. He emphasized that various communities need to create a refreshed sense of meaning and purpose for individuals. He believes that the workplaces can play a significant role in this aspect. The following is a summary of Peizhong's Pandemic Conversation presentation.

#### **Mental wellness in China in the aftermath of the pandemic**

In China, many people, including employees are starting to grapple with the aftermath of the pandemic and cope with its psychosocial impact. COVID-19 has changed the economy and people's work and life, creating a pervasive sense of threat. Families with and without cases of infection are both affected, at least by the constant media attention which triggers feelings of stress. The possibility of catching a fatal invisible disease is frightening. Employee Assistance hotlines have received increased numbers of complaints about symptoms of hypochondrias from employees and their families. Moreover, people are limited in their ability to support each other because meeting face-to-face could spread the virus. This situation prompts increased need for and use of professional services such as EA counseling for managing stress and interpersonal conflict.

Economic slowdown and travel restriction created more problems. Some people have suffered business failure, unemployment and disruption of family plans. During the epidemic, the livelihood migrant workers, small traders, workers in tourism, retail, catering and similar industries have become a national issue of concern. In the meantime, the mental health risks of those groups cannot be ignored. For those employees who are still working, adapting to the new working environments and conditions presents complex challenges.

Employees with school-aged children face special challenges. The children have had their studies interrupted, changed to online classes and lacked peer interaction for a long time. A series of suicides among middle school students after the lifting of lockdown and resumption of classes sounded an alarm.

Peizhong discussed some groups that might need special attention because they happen to be positioned at the fault lines of civilization. These groups include Chinese expatriate employees working overseas and international employees of multi-national companies working in China. Employers with employees across national borders would need to think deeply about global vs. country-specific health and wellness policies and providers. Another group that needs special attention includes children of employees who study overseas. Student Assistance Program embedded in EAP is an under-developed area with strong potential need. Many Chinese students have prepared for years in high school and middle school in order to study at colleges and universities abroad, but their plans are in suspense

because of the pandemic. Students who are already attending schools overseas are faced with multiple issues that might cause psychological pressure. International EAPs should reach out to these groups and offer them appropriate assistance.

### **Meaning and purpose and social support**

Looking ahead, as the epidemic approach an end, people are searching for a new orientation system and sense of direction for their work and life. One's extended family used to provide an important orientation system for individual. Having someone who will come to your assistance when you are in trouble is important for one's psychological well-being. Connections to one's home of birth and extended family provide a sense of protection and stability. The rituals of family reunion during Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, tomb-sweeping days and other occasions related to familial piety and ancestral affiliation serve such psychological functions. These traditional relations, customs and social support systems have been weakened by the epidemic; people are looking for replacements.

In February 2021, travel restrictions forced many employees to abandon their trip back to their ancestral home for the Chinese New Year. This development carried significant symbolic meanings, highlighting some of the changes many employees must make to their lives. These changes may include:

(1) One must make a home in the urbanities where one works and has a career, rather than looking to one's traditional hometown roots for a sense of security and protection. One needs to feel safe and welcome in an adopted home-based for self and family.

(2) One must learn to turn to people without genetic connections for help and support, including professional help, the healthcare system, work/business associates and community resources.

### **The important role of work organizations**

The identity of an individual is associated with one's career, profession or occupation. Work provides self-esteem, a sense of purpose, and social networks that frame daily life and form the core components of a personal navigation system. Work organizations that have a culture of high level trust can provide employees with a sense of rootedness and belonging. Employee loyalty benefits both workers and employers. This may in turn help employees feel at home in the urbanities where they live and work. Even before the pandemic, many Chinese employers face the challenge of striking a balance between increasing productivity and protecting employees' physical and mental health. As one manager states, "the workplaces does not have to be a jungle or battle ground but we do not want to make it a kindergarten either." Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) may provide tools for helping employees adapt to the high demand at work and achieve balance between work and life.

### **Promising EA services in the Chinese context**

Dr. Li Discussed the types of mental health assistance most needed in the Chinese workplace. These services are mostly non-clinical in nature so that they cover a large swath of the working population. A non-clinical orientation help make the services accessible, timely and culturally relevant. When you think in a clinical mind-set, you bring up concerns over liability issues, thus limiting the way you can reach out to people who are in need.

A non-clinical approach tends to be more inclusive. Individuals are in different situations in a pandemic, and each individual's response is distinctly unique, leading people to behave differently and have

different needs for resources during and after an epidemic. Some people do not need assistance from others, and have even begun to actively work in the community to help others, while others only need a little outside assistance to recover their functions, Some people need immediate and strong professional assistance, some people calmly deal with the incident when it first happened but after the incident has passed there will be a psychological delay reaction, even need long-term psychological treatment.

The Shengxin International EAP Institute and Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) have jointly developed an Emotional First Support Program to help individuals and groups affected by unexpected incidents find their resources and strengths to cope with the situation and improve resilience. Emotional First Support approach has a Five-Step structure, consisting of understanding, evaluating, learning, connecting and support. It follows a client-centered approach, recognizes and respects individuals' natural ability to recover, and provides personalized and targeted assistance.

### **Biographical Information of Peizhong Li**

After receiving his Ph. D. in psychology in 2004, Peizhong had seven years of university teaching and research experiences in the United States and China. He has worked in the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) area since 2012 at Shengxin International EAP Institute and Chestnut Global Partners, China. He currently resides in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

## **EAPA Wednesday Conversations**

**March 2021**

### **Notes from Dr. Liu's Presentation –**

Goal to jump start discussion about international EAP clients

### **Topics of discussion**

- What's going on with Chinese Employees in particular and population in general?
- Are there business and professional opportunities for international EAPs?

### **Current Landscape of Mental Wellness in China**

- The Pandemic is winding down but people feel somewhat stuck, many things are in suspense
- The symbolic significance of the Chinese New Year travel restriction

### **Some losses are illusory: the traditional social support network**

- Having someone who will come to your assistance when you are in trouble

- Connections to their **home** of birth and extended family for a sense of protection and stability
- You must make a home locally, i.e., **where you work and have a career**
- Turn to people without genetic connections with you for help and support, including **professional help**

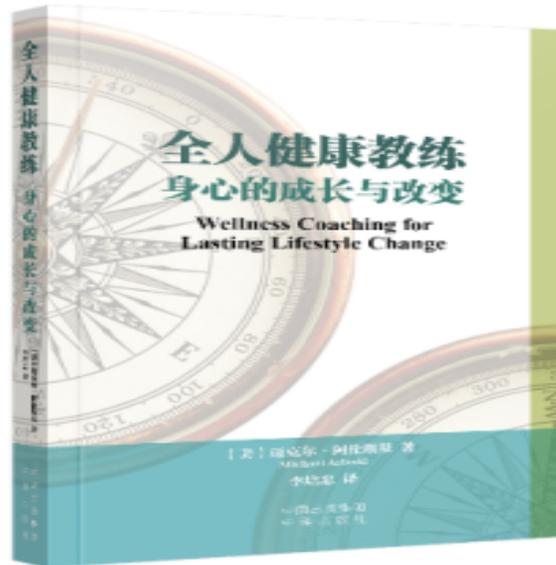
**Some Loses are real: opportunities and excitement in faraway places**

- International leisure/shopping travel
- International education
- Overseas work opportunities

**What types of mental health assistance are needed?**

- Mostly **not clinical**
- Accessible, timely, culturally relevant





**Are there opportunities for international EA and mental health professionals?**

**Pay attention to the fault lines of civilization**

- Expatriates: Chinese employees overseas, international employees in China
- Multi-national companies, global vs. country specific health & wellness policies
- Chinese students overseas, Student Assistance Program embedded in EAP
- Stay engaged!