



Weekly Tips + Links for Your Health

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THE LEARNING BRAIN

Each week in BCPVPA eNews, we share tips, links and self-assessment tools that will help our members to better understand the mental health continuum, and to use the resources that are available.

bcpvpa.bc.ca/thelearningbrain

Friday April 24th, 2020

COPING DURING A PANDEMIC

How are you?

COVID-19 has changed our lives in a flash. Here in Canada, we have not dealt with this type and level of emergency in our generation and it is uncharted territory.

Most of us are under a stay-at home directive and are feeling the challenges and cabin fever of sustained isolation. I don't know about you, but anytime I go into a grocery store (or pet store – the animals need to eat too!), I feel like I am putting my life at risk. Which, in my situation, with no underlying health conditions, is simply inflated anxiety!

Many people are out of work and struggling with limited financial resources. Some have contracted the virus already or may know someone who has. Even if your situation is relatively okay, there is probably a vein of anxiety running through your life that was not there a short time ago.



I felt this phenomenon. My son and I were riding our bikes on a warm beautiful evening last week and were looking at the flowers blooming. I was really enjoying this time with my son and was so grateful for the amazing weather but could not shake this underlying feeling that all was not quite normal. Just a little nagging angst that seems to be with me now— 24/7.

Our subconscious knows that there is a threat. We want to “fight or flight” but are being told to stay still, not move and this causes conflict in our physiology. No wonder we are restless!

Everyone copes differently.

Many people are using their time to catch up on projects, spring cleaning etc. Some are using their time at home to develop new skills: cooking up a storm, at-home exercise routines, new languages, or musical instruments.

On the other hand, a lot of people are not energized to do new things during this coronavirus pandemic, especially with the social isolation that comes with it. For some people, just getting through the day in sweatpants, with dirty hair and lapsed responsibilities, is enough to deal with. For some people, not having a total breakdown is a big accomplishment. Particularly, those who may have been struggling pre-pandemic.

In fact, we know that being isolated from others and not having support and connection can worsen depression. That is why it is so important to remember we are all—and I mean the “global we”—are going through this uncertain time together.

IT IS OK TO NOT BE OK.

You may have heard this line recently. Just like many of us who have struggled with mental health issues in the past, you may have heard or read on social media “think positively”, “you will be ok soon” or “chin up, keep going”.

Certainly, there is power in positive thinking and perspective. And it is good to keep in mind that we will return to better days. However, that being said, it is OK in this unsettling time to admit you are not at your best. It's probably more common than not that you are struggling, like most of us, to cope during this time.

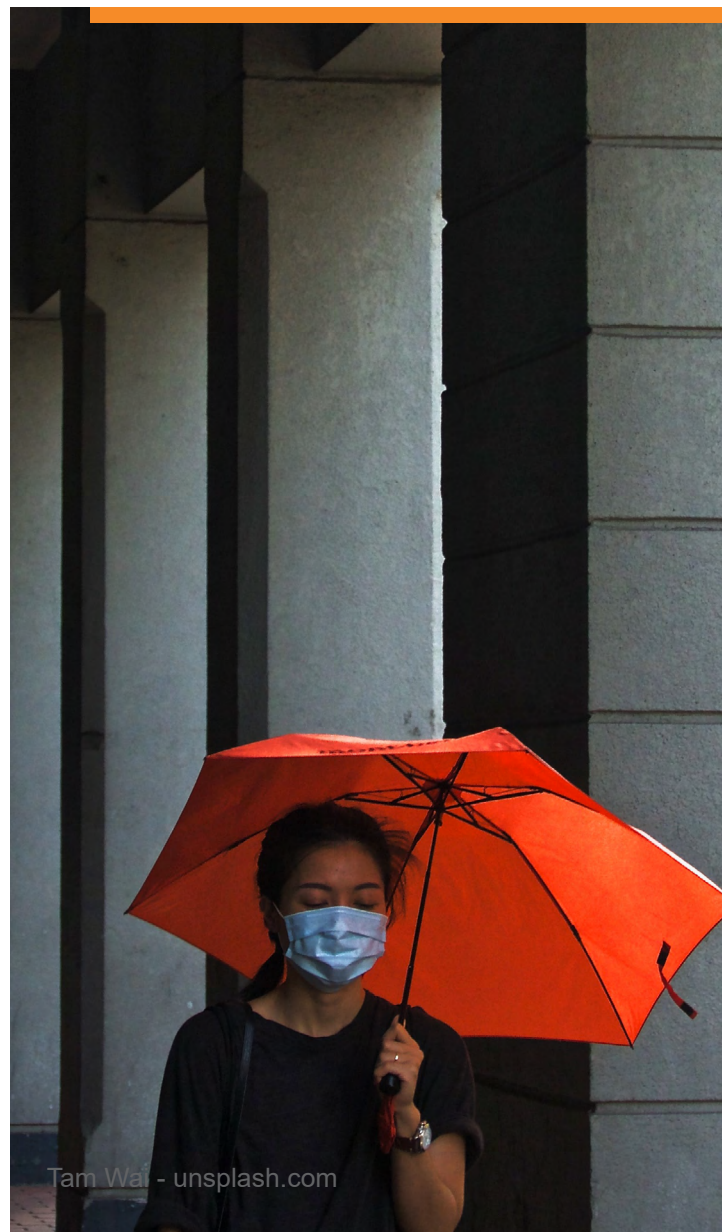
Grief

We are all grieving to some degree. A lot of people are experiencing a loss of control and connection, caused by the pandemic, in the form of grief. Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by the end or change in a familiar pattern of behaviour — and that's something we're all experiencing right now.

“Think of all of the familiarity that has changed for millions of people,” said Andrea Sadler, an occupational therapist and psychotherapist working in Toronto, “for our families, for our communities, for our businesses, for us, in a matter of days.”

“If the horrors and uncertainties in the world are overwhelming, causing you anxiety, causing you to lose sleep, you could consider giving yourself permission to turn it off. You do not need to read all the stories and updates and charts and graphs. You can journal, garden, bake, pray, meditate, nourish your body and soul, and disconnect.”

(Source: Rochelle's friend Tracy on Facebook)



Looking at what we're going through as grief might make it easier for us to be patient with ourselves. "We cannot minimize the mass of emotion that so many of us are feeling," she said.¹

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/coronavirus-productivity-mental-health_ca_5e80e5c7c5b6cb9dc1a22d88

Here is a [two minute CNN video clip](#) on grief from the pandemic. I realize it comes from the U.S., but it still contains an important message for us.

Productivity

For us Type A's, this "downtime" is really dragging down our productivity. Personally, I am trying to work each day and homeschool two boys. I'm trying to remember what time the virtual piano and online voice lessons take place as I can never remember what day it is. The house is constantly in disarray because everyone is home. I'm trying to ensure we all get at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day—more for the dog. I seem to spend the rest of the time policing electronics! How about you?

There is no way I could possibly be as productive as usual. This reality does not seem to stop me from trying, and frankly, is a sure way to crash! We're conditioned to believe that being as productive as possible and structuring our days in this very externally validating way, is what's right," said Andrea Sadler.

"There's an interesting judgment that the more productive people are doing it right, and the less productive people are doing it wrong," Sadler told HuffPost Canada. "But there are no rules around that. It's all just about getting through."¹

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/coronavirus-productivity-mental-health_ca_5e80e5c7c5b6cb9dc1a22d88



TIP: Redefine what productivity means for you and your family right now.

It may simply mean getting up, making your bed as the first task in the morning, and putting together a simple 2–3 task check list for the day of quick, easy accomplishments. It is healthy to feel like you have accomplished something each day. However, you need to be kind and compassionate with each other. Be cognisant of what productivity is expected and what is possible, while giving them space to just breathe and cope.

GETTING THROUGH

1 Be compassionate to yourself

In the midst of this crisis, it is important that we pause to get in touch with the emotional distress we are experiencing so that we can give ourselves the care we need. Just like in the Disney Movie *“Inside Out”*, we need to allow in the sadness to allow for connection, support and healing.

[See this clip](#) where the character “Joy”, who is always trying to keep people happy, realises the power of sadness.

This one is easier said than done. According to Andrea Sadler, it’s important to be patient and kind to yourself as you adapt to a new and very difficult reality. You’re figuring out how to cope under circumstances you didn’t expect and haven’t experienced before. It’s normal for that to be difficult. There’s no value in adding “a dirty layer of anxiety and judgment and frustration” to an already very difficult situation, she said.

The best way to start the difficult process of self-compassion is to notice your self-judgement when it starts to set in. “By noticing that, there’s this sense of self-compassion, this idea that this is a really difficult time,” she said. Taking note of your tendency to judge your behaviour as “weak” or “not enough” can be the first step to stopping that sort of negative self-talk and becoming kinder to yourself.

2 The power of perspective

The coronavirus is a crisis and an opportunity.

[This short video](#) provides a great perspective.

Without taking away from the intense suffering, death, and hardship this pandemic announces, there is also a profound collective opportunity. We cannot do business as usual and everyone is off their game. In all of this uncertainty, there is great deal of vulnerability and it can be an opportunity to do something like call and check-in on someone that remained unfinished business. Or to pause and think about what can you do to make those around you feel a little better.



Focus on the here and now

As we know from previous articles in The Learning Brain series, being mindful in the moment is important for calming our thoughts. Although focusing on the here and now is challenging, try your best to not think too far ahead. *When will this end? Will I be able to travel to see my family this summer? What will happen to my investments?* No one has the answers and you'll just drive yourself crazy trying to figure it out.

I am not suggesting that these questions are not important to you. They are great questions, but as Sandler says, "they're not helpful in this given time, because we can't answer them, and that makes us stressed."

"Take it day by day, week by week, moment by moment," Sadler suggested. For instance: Right here, right now, I still have a job. Right here, right now, I don't have COVID-19. Right here, right now, I can apply for employment insurance. Right here, right now, I got COVID-19 but I recovered."

"There are no rules," Sadler said. "The rules are all out, for this. It's really about: How do we get through."



Finally...

The tips we have provided previously to support resilience and your mental health apply during this time, and may even be more critical as we stay "sedentary":

- **Exercise regularly.** Release that stress and strain. Give your physiology the feeling of "fighting or flighting" by keeping moving.
- **Stay connected.** Reach out to people and family by phone or Zoom - how about those you have lost touch with and can use this as an excuse to connect, apologize, rekindle friendships etc. Although I am not one to usually plug into social media, it can be very helpful now when we can not physically connect.
- **Practice mindfulness**
- **Get into nature** when you can (Safely! 6 feet apart!)
- Try to get a good night's **sleep**
- **Eat well**
- **Minimize self-soothing activities** (Carbs, alcohol, screen time etc.). I appreciate we need some soothing at this time, but this can be more damaging than good in the long term!

For more tips: [Check out this great 5 min video](#) by Babylon (and not just because there is a cat cameo!)



If you feel you need to speak to someone about how you are feeling or access more information to help you through this challenging time, here are some resources:

- COVID-19 and mental health advice from the [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#)
- Pandemic-related advice from the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
- COVID-19 mental health advice from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Online AA meetings](#)

Are you in a crisis?

If you need help, contact Crisis Services Canada at their [website](#) or by calling 1-833-456-4566. If you know someone who may be having thoughts of suicide, visit [CAMH's resource](#) to learn how to talk about suicide with the person you're worried about.



**WHAT IS ONE WORD (OR TWO)
THAT DESCRIBES HOW YOU
ARE FEELING RIGHT NOW?**



We'll be posting this question on Twitter and Instagram this week! Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!

Next week

Rethinking Depression



Get in touch! If you have any questions about The Learning Brain series, contact
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