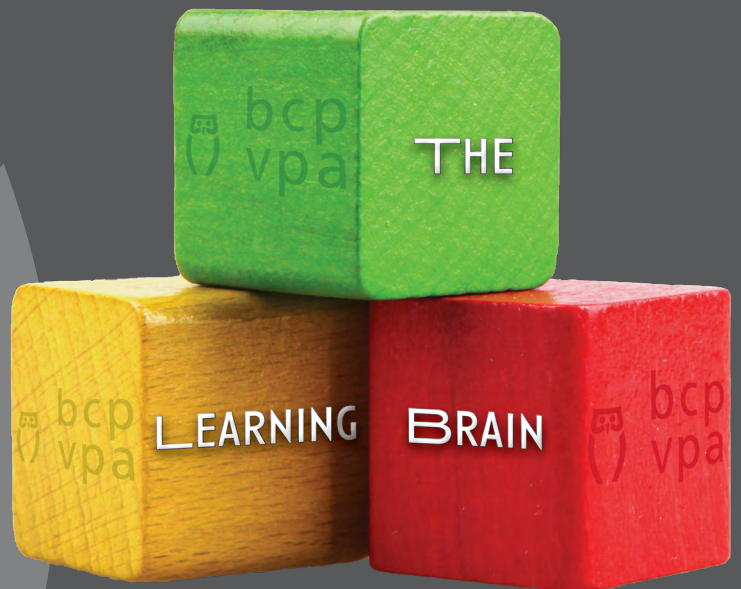


THE LEARNING BRAIN

Health Series

2019-2020



bcp  vpa

B.C. Principals' & Vice Principals' Association

Leaders in the education sector are under ever-increasing pressure and demands, not only in British Columbia but nationally and globally. Burnout is on the rise, and mental illness is plaguing our disability programs.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the B.C. Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA) launched ***The Learning Brain***, a weekly series of articles for our members and sector partners, designed to:

- Encourage safe discussion about mental health and illness and, in particular, reduce self-stigma;
- Share studies, insights and tips from a range of experts and organizations in order to expand our knowledge and understanding of this ever-growing field of health;
- Provide resources and tools for readers to self-assess and reflect, and to practice self-care including reaching out for help when needed; and,
- Invite member ideas and needs to shape the series.

The intent of this series was to start the dialogue, and to direct readers to resources available for help and support. We will continue the series in Fall 2020 with more tips and tactics for both promoting well-being, and developing the necessary skills for resilience, coping and promoting psychological safety in our work environments.

We have compiled seventeen articles into one reference book that we hope will be used as a valuable resource by our members and friends. We encourage you to send your feedback and ideas our way for next year's series!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rochelle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Rochelle Morandini
BCPVPA Member Health & Well-Being
rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Intro to Mental Health</u>	1
<u>Positive Psychology</u>	3
<u>The Building Blocks of Resilience</u>	6
<u>Self Care</u>	8
<u>Chilling Out</u>	12
<u>Calming a Reacting Mind</u>	17
<u>Coping with Anxiety</u>	20
<u>Early Warning Signs of Mental Health Injury</u>	23

27

Coping During a Pandemic

33

Rethinking Depression

38

Self-Soothing and Addiction

42

Play and Laughter

48

Investing in Relationships While
Social Distancing

57

Loving Someone with a Mental Illness

69

Glowing with Gratitude

75

Diversity & Inclusion: Mental Wellness
for the Whole Community

85

A Summer of Opportunity



bcpvpa

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 February 14, 2020
MENTAL HEALTH

**We go to the gym and eat well to look after our bodies,
 but what have you done lately to nourish and strengthen your brain?**

Over the next few months, we will share bite-size info-nuggets that promote psychological health, with the goal of helping you to enhance your professional and personal joy, and support your contribution at work, in the community and in your personal life.

These tips and tools run the gamut, from building resilience and maintaining good mental health across the continuum, to addressing mental strain, to accessing the right help to cope and/or recover when mental disorder hits.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

(CMHA: Canadian Mental Health Association)

The Mental Health Continuum

Healthy	Reacting	Injured	Ill
- Normal fluctuations in mood, calm, takes things in stride - Normal sleep patterns, few sleep difficulties - Physically well, good energy level - Consistent performance - Sense of humour, in control mentally - Physically active and socially active - Limited or no gambling/alcohol use	- Nervousness, irritability, impatience, sadness, feeling overwhelmed - Trouble sleeping, intrusive thoughts, nightmares - Tired/low energy, muscle tension, headaches - Procrastination - Displaced sarcasm, forgetfulness - Decreased physical and social activity - Regular but controlled gambling/alcohol use	- Anxiety, anger, pervasive sadness, hopelessness - Restless or disturbed sleep, recurring images or nightmares - Increased fatigue, aches and pains - Poor performance and concentration or workaholic, presenteeism - Negative attitude - Social avoidance or withdrawal - Increased gambling/alcohol use	- Excessive anxiety, easily angered, depressed mood, suicidal thoughts - Unable to fall or stay asleep, sleeping too much or too little - Exhaustion, physical illness - Unable to perform duties/control behavior/concentrate, overt subordination, absenteeism - Isolation, avoiding social events, not going out or answering the phone - Alcohol/gambling addition, other addictions
Actions to take at each phase of the continuum			
- Focus on task at hand - Break problems into manageable chunks - Identify and nurture support systems - Maintain healthy lifestyle	- Recognize limits - Identify and minimize stressors - Engage in healthy coping strategies - Get adequate food, rest, and exercise	- Identify and understand own signs of distress - Seek social support and talk with someone instead of withdrawing - Seek help	- Seek consultation as needed - Follow health care provider recommendations - Regain physical and mental health

bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com

The Learning Brain series visits each section of this continuum starting with **HEALTHY**, because as the saying goes,
“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”

**In any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians experiences
a mental illness or addiction problem**

**By the time Canadians reach 40 years of age,
1 in 2 have — or have had — a mental illness**

Smetanin et al. (2011). The life and economic impact of major mental illnesses in Canada: 2011-2041.
Prepared for the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Toronto: RiskAnalytica.

On any given day we are all on a continuum of mental health depending on our exposure to risk and our protective factors of resiliency and support.

On the **“Healthy”** side of this continuum we successfully cope with the stresses (or stressors?) and challenges of every day life. We may find ourselves in the middle section of **“Reacting”** due to a temporary upset from a major stressor that may leave you feeling disrupted. Ideally, we are able to cope, we have support and return to **“Healthy”**. We may fluctuate back and forth between these two states often but may never experience a mental disorder as we are capable of “bouncing back” to the left of this continuum.

We may, unfortunately, experience a major stressor that we are unable to bounce back from, or may be exposed to repeated stress, and find we can no longer return to **“Healthy”**. We have exhausted our coping skills. This is when we are at the greatest risk of moving further right to **“Injured”**.

Nearly everyone will experience a mental health challenge to one degree or another in their lifetime. This might include periods of worry, grieving, trouble sleeping or eating, feeling fatigued, anxious, having difficulty concentrating and focusing on work-life responsibilities or being in a depressed mood.

Generally, we return to the left of the continuum when we draw on resources and personal coping strategies, such as taking some downtime to connect with close friends or family, getting a good night’s sleep, or speaking with a healthcare provider or psychological counsellor.

If we do not seek help or, even when required, treatment when **“Injured”** or are continuously exposed to significant stressors, this can lead to a more chronic mental health illness which affects your overall health, as well as cognitive and even physical functioning. At this stage, you have slipped to the right of the continuum to **“III”**.

Want to know how you are doing? Take this quick assessment:

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/screening/online/?screen=wellbeing#>

So, what do you do to promote your own mental health and stay to the left of the Continuum?



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

Next week

Positive Psychology – Can you change your perspective?

Get in touch! If you have any questions about The Learning Brain series, contact
Rochelle Morandini rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca 604-689-3399



bcp vpa

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 February 21, 2020

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

What is Positive Psychology?

The University of Pennsylvania – the alma mater of the “Godfather of Positive Psychology”, Martin Seligman – defines it as:

The scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive.

The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.

(Source: <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>)

Or, as my 12-year-old son Kalen would define it:

... the study of looking at the positive side of life instead of focussing on the bad stuff.

E.g. if you were in a hit-and-run and knocked into a ditch, you could think this was awful and you were cursed.

Or you can think about how grateful you are that you do not need to go to the hospital and that the tow truck arrived quickly to get you out!



Although I didn't know it at the time, I was first introduced to **Positive Psychology** in an executive coaching session nine years ago.

I had described an overwhelming feeling that I experienced when I arrived home the previous evening.

I had walked in the front door to find my still-unemployed then-husband baking cookies in the kitchen, and my seven-month-pregnant live-in nanny playing on the floor with my 3-year-old in front of the fireplace.

The weight of my own never-ending responsibilities lay heavy on my shoulders.

After describing this event to my coach, she wisely told me, “Rochelle, change the story. As you described the scene, I felt the warmth of family, calm and happiness in the moment, and how grateful you are that you have a career that enables you to provide these comforts.”

This advice changed my life!

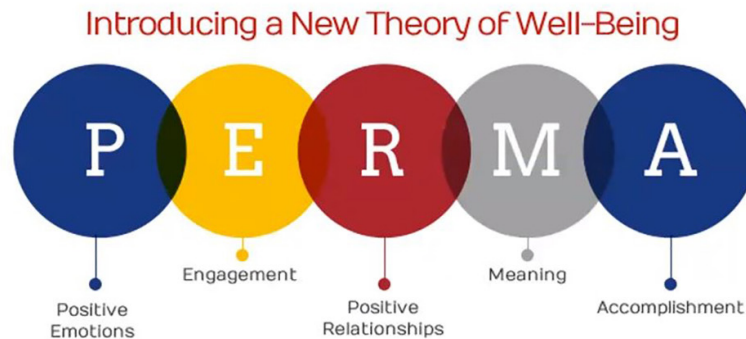
To get an even better understanding of the power and ripple effect of Positive Psychology,

I recommend this 10 minute TedTalk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4nbt6afV3o>

This website provides an informative foundation on the topic:
<https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-positive-psychology-definition/>

The website introduces the **PERMA** model which
“is a widely recognized and influential model in positive psychology”.



(Source: Martin Seligman, *Flourish*, 2011)

Seligman proposed this model to help explain and define well-being in greater depth.

If you are looking to enhance your own sense of authentic happiness and well-being, all you need to do is focus on:

- **Experiencing more positive emotions:**

do more of the things that make you happy, and bring enjoyment into your daily routine

- **Working on upping your engagement:**

pursue hobbies that interest you, develop your skills, and look for a job more suited to your passions, if necessary;

- **Improving the quality (and/or quantity) of your relationships with others:**

work on building more positive and supportive relationships with your friends, family, and significant other(s);

- **Seeking out meaning:**

if you don't find it through your work, look for it in volunteering opportunities, personal hobbies or leisure activities, or acting as a mentor for others;

- **Keeping your focus on achieving your goals — but not focusing too hard:**

“try to keep your ambition in balance with all of the other important things in life” (Seligman, 2011).

What has Positive Psychology taught me?

The key is that **how you think** has a tremendous impact on your emotions and even shapes the physiology of your brain!

And we can control how we think. I am working on “unlearning” my regular thinking loops that were picked up in a household with an anxious, pessimistic father. Believe me, it takes practice, but I can assure you it gets easier and more habitual over time. Positive thinking offers compounding returns, so the more often you practice it, the greater benefits you'll realize.



Here is a great 4 minute video describing learned optimism – based on the work of Martin Seligman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hHNq45rEnU>

Finally, here are 7 practical tips to achieve a positive mindset: *commit to trying a couple today!*

1. Start the Day with Positive Affirmation

How you start the morning sets the tone for the rest of the day. Have you ever woken up late, panicked, and then felt like nothing good happened the rest of the day? This is likely because you started out the day with a negative emotion and a pessimistic view that carried into every other event you experienced. Instead of letting this dominate, start your day with positive affirmations.

Talk to yourself in the mirror – even if you feel silly – with statements like, “*Today will be a good day*” or “*I’m going to be awesome today.*” You’ll be amazed by how much your day improves.

2. Focus on the Good Things, However Small

Almost invariably, you’re going to encounter obstacles throughout the day—there’s no such thing as a perfect day. When you encounter such a challenge, focus on the benefits, no matter how slight or unimportant they seem. For example, if you get stuck in traffic, think about how you now have time to listen to the rest of your favorite podcast.

3. Find Humour in Bad Situations

Allow yourself to experience humor in even the darkest or most trying situations.

Remind yourself that this situation will probably make for a good story later, and try to crack a joke about it.

[Personally, I think my sense of humour has been my most valuable gift in helping keep me positive!]

4. Turn Failures into Lessons

You aren’t perfect. You’re going to make mistakes and experience failure in multiple contexts, at multiple jobs and with multiple people. Instead of focusing on how you failed, think about what you’re going to do next time — turn your failure into a lesson. Conceptualize this in concrete rules. For example, you could come up with three new rules for managing projects as a result.

5. Transform Negative self-talk into Positive self-talk

Negative self-talk can creep up easily and is often hard to notice. You might think “*I’m so bad at this*” or “*I shouldn’t have tried that*”.

But these thoughts turn into internalized feelings and might cement your conceptions of yourself.

When you catch yourself doing this, stop and replace those negative messages with positive ones.

For example, “*I shouldn’t have tried*” becomes “*That didn’t work out as planned—maybe next time.*”

6. Focus on the Present

I’m talking about the present — not today, not this hour, only this exact moment. You may have missed your bus, but what in this exact moment is happening that’s so bad? Forget what cost you five extra minutes this morning.

Forget what will happen when you arrive 20 minutes late. Focus on this one individual moment.

In most situations, you’ll find it’s not as bad as you imagine it to be. Most sources of negativity stem from a memory of a recent event or the exaggerated imagination of a potential future event. Stay in the present moment.

7. Find Positive Friends, Mentors and Co-Workers

When you surround yourself with positive people, you’ll hear positive outlooks, positive stories and positive affirmations. Their positive words will sink in and affect your own line of thinking, which then affects your words and similarly contributes to the group.

Finding positive people to fill up your life can be difficult, but you need to eliminate the negativity in your life before it consumes you. Do what you can to improve the positivity of others, and let their positivity affect you the same way.

<https://www.success.com/7-practical-tips-to-achieve-a-positive-mindset/>

So, what practical tips do *YOU* use to achieve a positive mindset?



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

Next week

The Building Blocks of Resilience

bcp vpa

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 February 28, 2020

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF RESILIENCE



Benefits of Resilience



What are the benefits of **resilience**? Well, resilient people:

- Adapt better in the face of life challenges
- Have healthier, positive relationships
- Are more efficient and happier at work
- Experience more positive emotions
- Have a reduced risk of sliding to the injured/ill side of the mental health continuum
- Are likely to have a healthier immune system
- Tend to report more satisfaction with life

Being resilient doesn't mean that a person won't experience difficulty or distress. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

While certain factors might make some individuals more resilient than others, resilience isn't necessarily a personality trait that only some people possess. On the contrary, resilience involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that anyone can learn and develop.

Like building a muscle, increasing your resilience takes time and intentionality.

Source: <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>

Did you take the quiz? How resilient are you?

<https://www.theresilientmind.life/test/resiliency-quiz/>

Be sure to watch and share this four-minute video that does a great job of summarizing resilience:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLAdRgft7pU>

Tips to Improve Your Resilience

If you'd like to become more resilient, consider these tips:

- **Get connected**

Building strong, positive relationships with loved ones and friends can provide you with needed support and acceptance in both good times and bad.
Establish other important connections by volunteering or joining a faith or spiritual community.

- **Make every day meaningful**

Do something that gives you a sense of accomplishment and purpose every day.
Set goals to help you look toward the future with meaning.

- **Learn from experience**

Think of how you've coped with hardships in the past. Consider the skills and strategies that helped you through rough times. You might even write about past experiences in a journal to help you identify positive and negative behavior patterns, and guide your future behavior.

- **Remain hopeful**

You can't change the past, but you can always look toward the future. Accepting and even anticipating change makes it easier to adapt and view new challenges with less anxiety.

- **Take care of yourself**

Tend to your own needs and feelings. Participate in activities and hobbies you enjoy.
Include physical activity in your daily routine. Get plenty of sleep. Eat a healthy diet. Practice stress management and relaxation techniques, such as yoga, meditation, guided imagery, deep breathing or prayer.

- **Be proactive**

Don't ignore your problems. Instead, figure out what needs to be done, make a plan, and take action.
Although it can take time to recover from a major setback, traumatic event or loss, know that your situation can improve if you work at it.

Source: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>

For more context check out:

<https://www.stressresilientmind.co.uk/articles/five-key-stress-resilience-skills>

As well, remember our tips last week on **Positive Psychology**: that's another way to power up your resilience.

For me, when I am feeling down and need to energize my resilience, I dance! (In my living room, where only my cats can see me!). Just like this character in one of my favourite Pixar's short film, who shows what "bouncing back" is all about: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WYR4AqRweY>

So: what do YOU do to energize your own resilience?



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

Next week
Self Care

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 March 6, 2020

Self care



Self Care Tips

I challenge you to try one or all three of the next three **Self Care** tips over the next week and share with us the difference you noticed!



Exercise Daily

From easing symptoms of depression and anxiety to keeping your memory sharp, there's no shortage of mental benefits to exercise.

Exercise can take many forms, such as taking the stairs whenever possible, walking up escalators, and running or biking rather than driving.

1. Help for depression and anxiety

Exercise is a scientifically proven mood booster, decreasing symptoms of both depression and anxiety. Physical activity increases endorphin levels, the body's famous "feel good" chemical produced by the brain and spinal cord that produces feelings of happiness and euphoria. Even just moderate exercise throughout the week can improve depression and anxiety, so much so that some doctors recommend trying out an exercise regimen for these conditions before turning to medication.

2. Decreased stress

Another mental benefit of exercise is reduced stress levels—something that can make us all happier. Increasing your heart rate can actually reverse stress-induced brain damage by stimulating the production of neurohormones like norepinephrine, which not only improve cognition and mood but improve thinking clouded by stressful events. Exercise also forces the body's central and sympathetic nervous systems to communicate with one another, improving the body's overall ability to respond to stress.

3. Increased self-esteem and self-confidence

From improving endurance to losing weight and increasing muscle tone, there's no shortage of physical achievements that come from regular exercise. All those achievements can add up to a whopping boost of self-esteem — and the confidence that comes with it. You may not set out for better-fitting clothes, a slimmer physique, and the ability to climb a hill without getting winded. Oftentimes it happens before you even realize it. It's just one of the many benefits of physical activity that boost your body, mind, and spirit.

4. Better sleep

If you have trouble getting a good night's sleep, exercise can help with that, too. Physical activity increases body temperature, which can have calming effects on the mind, leading to less sheep-counting and more shut-eye. Exercise also helps to regulate your circadian rhythm, our bodies' built-in alarm clock that controls when we feel tired and when we feel alert. *(Although improved sleep is a psychological benefit of exercise, sleep experts recommend not exercising close to bedtime.)*

5. Brain boost

From building intelligence to strengthening memory, exercise boosts brainpower in a number of ways. Studies on mice and humans indicate that cardiovascular exercise creates new brain cells — a process called neurogenesis — and improves overall brain performance. It also prevents cognitive decline and memory loss by strengthening the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory and learning. Studies also prove that physical activity boosts creativity and mental energy. So, if you're in need of inspiration, your big idea could be just a walk or jog away.

SOURCE:

<https://www.waldenu.edu/online-bachelors-programs/bs-in-psychology/resource/five-mental-benefits-of-exercise>

Here is a 3 minute video to motivate you to get moving!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG7n2QiaMB8&list=RDCMUCL-IWPkXQn3JYYYsPnpGllg&index=9

Practice Relaxation

at least 2 - 3 times daily

Deep breathing, mindfulness and progressive muscle relaxation are easy, quick ways to reduce stress.

When conflicts come up between you, a family member or even a colleague, these tools can help you feel less controlled by turbulent feelings and give you the space you need to think clearly about what to do next. Practice yoga, get a massage, take a bath or walk in the woods.

Studies into our biological state of being show that we have a
physical response when we experience stress.

Muscles constrict, cortisol rises, and we become flooded by sensory input.

Did you know that there is an immediate way to stop this from getting out of control?

Breathing

Benefits of breathing:



Lowered blood pressure and heart rate



Reduced levels of stress hormones in the blood



Reduced lactic acid build-up in muscle tissue



Balanced levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood



Improved immune system



Increased physical energy



Increased feelings of calm and wellbeing



You can do calming breathing anytime with this
breathing bubble:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaQed_Xdyvw

Another breathing technique is called the

4-7-8 technique,

introduced by Dr. Andrew Weill
who believes it can help with:

- reducing anxiety
- helping a person get to sleep
- controlling or reducing anger responses

Adopt a comfortable sitting position and place the tip of the
tongue on the tissue right behind the top front teeth:

- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a 'whoosh' sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a 'whoosh' sound to a count of eight. This is one breath.
- Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

To learn more and watch a video on this technique click here:

www.drweil.com/videos-features/videos/breathing-exercises-4-7-8-breath/

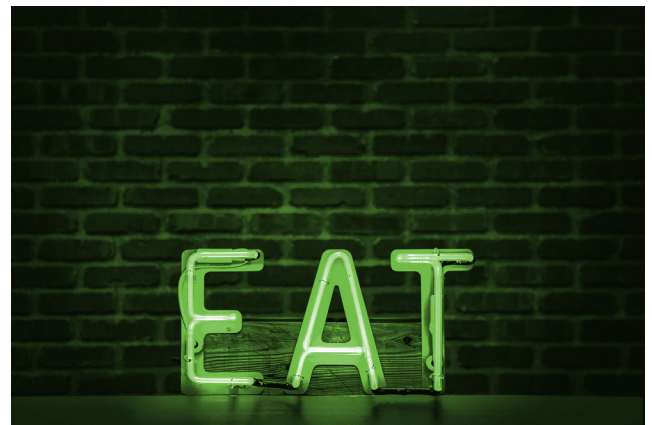
Eat Well

www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/foods-linked-to-better-brainpower

Follow a healthy dietary pattern that includes a lot of fruits,
vegetables, legumes, and whole grains.

Try to get protein from plant sources and fish and choose
healthy fats, such as olive oil or canola, rather than
saturated fats. *And do you know what is great?*

The best brain foods are the same ones that
protect your heart and blood vessels!



Green, leafy vegetables.

Leafy greens such as kale, spinach, collards, and broccoli are rich in brain-healthy
nutrients like vitamin K, lutein, folate, and beta carotene. Research suggests these
plant-based foods may help slow cognitive decline.

Fatty fish.

Fatty fish are abundant sources of omega-3 fatty acids, healthy unsaturated fats that have been linked to
lower blood levels of beta-amyloid, the protein that forms damaging clumps in the brains of people with
Alzheimer's disease. Try to eat fish at least twice a week, but choose varieties that are low in mercury, such
as salmon, cod, canned light tuna, and pollack. If you're not a fan of fish, ask your doctor about taking an
omega-3 supplement, or choose terrestrial omega-3 sources such as flaxseeds, avocados, and walnuts.

Berries.

Research shows that flavonoids, the natural plant pigments that give berries their brilliant hues, also help to improve memory. In a 2012 study published in *Annals of Neurology*, researchers at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital found that women who consumed two or more servings of strawberries and blueberries each week delayed memory decline by up to two-and-a-half years.

Tea and coffee.

The caffeine in your morning cup of coffee or tea might offer more than just a short-term concentration boost. In a 2014 study published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, participants with higher caffeine consumption scored better on tests of mental function. Caffeine might also help solidify new memories, according to other research. Investigators at Johns Hopkins University asked participants to study a series of images and then take either a placebo or a 200-milligram caffeine tablet. More members of the caffeine group were able to correctly identify the images on the following day.

Walnuts.

Nuts are excellent sources of protein and healthy fats, and one type of nut in particular might also improve memory. A 2015 study from UCLA linked higher walnut consumption to improved cognitive test scores. Walnuts are high in a type of omega-3 fatty acid called alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which helps lower blood pressure and protects arteries. That's good for both the heart and brain.



Other Self Care Tips

Get enough sleep

Adults generally need between seven and nine hours of sleep. A brief nap — up to 30 minutes — can help you feel alert again during the day. Even 15 minutes of daytime sleep is helpful. To make your nighttime sleep count more, practice good 'sleep hygiene', like avoiding using computers, TV and smartphones before bed.

Avoid alcohol and drugs

They do not actually reduce stress, and often worsen it.

Connect socially

See friends to build your sense of belonging. Consider joining a support group to make new friends.

Encourage daily joy

Try to do something you enjoy every day. That might mean dancing, watching a favorite TV show, working in the garden, painting or reading.

Check out this longer list of self care ideas and find something that you can commit to trying!

www.youthab.ca/articles/30-ways-to-practice-self-care-take-care-of-yourself

So: what's your tried-and-true self care regime?



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

Next week

Chilling Out!



bcp vpa

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 March 13, 2020

CHILLING OUT



Learning to relax, calming your thoughts and sleeping well are not only important techniques for preventative health, but are powerful tools when you feel you are slipping to the **'Reacting'** quadrant of the Mental Health Continuum.

No excuses. Finding time to relax is not selfish, it is not 'lazy' and it is not unproductive.

That is just the 'little voice' in your head that you or someone in your past — like a parent — have trained you to think.

In fact, it can be the opposite. It is self care, for you and for those in your care, and it gives your mind and body that much needed space to repair, refresh and reenergize.

As Spring Break is upon us, now is the time to give back to your mind and body and fuel up your energy banks through rest and quality sleep.

Be proactive in getting rest! How? Check out this 8 minute video by Alex Pang:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QGef0CCTy8>

The Importance of Sleep

Why do we need to sleep? According to

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/sleep-deprivation-and-deficiency>

... sleep plays a vital role in good health and well-being throughout your life. Getting enough quality sleep at the right times can help protect your mental health, physical health, quality of life, and safety.

During sleep, your body is working to support healthy brain function and maintain your physical health.

In children and teens, sleep also helps support growth and development.

Sleep helps your brain work properly. While you're sleeping, your brain is preparing for the next day. It's forming new pathways to help you learn and remember information. Studies show that a good night's sleep improves learning. Sleep also helps you pay attention, make decisions, and be creative.

The damage from sleep deficiency can occur in an instant (such as a car crash), or it can harm you over time. For example, ongoing sleep deficiency can raise your risk for some chronic health problems. It also can affect how well you think, react, work, learn, and get along with others. Studies also show that sleep deficiency alters activity in some parts of the brain. If you're sleep deficient, you may have trouble making decisions, solving problems, controlling your emotions and behavior, and coping with change. Sleep deficiency also has been linked to depression, suicide, and risk-taking behavior.

Safety becomes a significant issue when you are sleep deprived due to an increased risk of accidents as the body attempts to balance the need for sleep. Without adequate sleep, the brain will seek out rest through short sleep attacks called microsleeps. These microsleeps render you unable to process environmental stimulation and sensory information for a brief amount of time. Your eyes may remain open during these episodes, but you have essentially “zoned out.” These can be quite sudden, thereby the consequences of a sleep-deprived individual operating heavy machinery or driving can be catastrophic to you as well as others.

Source: <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/consequences/sleep-and-disease-risk>

CALL OUT:

Did you know that driving on 5 or less hours of sleep is like driving drunk?
You are 1.9 times as likely to get in a car accident.

What kinds of sleep problems can you have?

- Trouble falling asleep: lying in bed for more than 30 minutes without being able to fall asleep
- Trouble staying asleep: waking up frequently during the night
- Early morning waking: waking in the early hours of the morning before you need to get up but not being able to fall back asleep
- Behaviours that interfere with sleep: such as snoring, grinding your teeth, restless legs, sleep walking and breathing problems
- Sleeping too much or for too long
- Excessive sleepiness or urge to nap during the day
- Excessive fatigue or lack of energy

How much sleep do I really need?

The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends the following sleep times:

- Toddlers: 11-14 hours a night
- Preschoolers: 10-13 hours a night
- School-aged children: 9-11 hours a night
- Teens: 8-10 hours a night
- Adults: 7-9 hours a night
- Older adults: 7-8 hours a night

Source: <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

The main symptom of ongoing sleep loss is excessive daytime sleepiness, but other symptoms include:

• yawning • moodiness • fatigue • irritability • depressed mood • difficulty learning new concepts • forgetfulness • inability to concentrate or a “fuzzy” head • lack of motivation	• clumsiness • increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings • reduced sex drive • reduced tendency to think positively • a decreased willingness to solve problems • a greater tendency towards superstitious and magical thinking • intolerance and less empathy toward others • poor impulse control • inability to delay gratification
--	---

Source: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/307334#effects>

Sleep Apnea

Sleep Apnea is a sleep disorder that slows or stops breathing for 10 seconds or more at a time. Signs of sleep apnea include not feeling rested after a night's sleep, feeling sleepy during the day, waking up with a headache and loud snoring. It can lead to serious health issues, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, depression and diabetes.

Read more about sleep apnea here:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/chronic-diseases/sleep-apnea.html>

Be wary though! There are lots of “clinics” advertising free sleep apnea testing who are retailers selling the CPAP machine for sleep apnea. If you think you might be suffering from sleep apnea, contact your physician. If you go for testing, make sure your physician reviews the results and confirms your condition *BEFORE* you spend your money!

Improving Your Sleep

You can improve the quality and amount of your sleep.

Use a Sleep Diary

Finding the right solution often includes gathering some ‘data’ to target your sleep challenge. You may wish to track your behaviours and sleep quality to see if there are any patterns to when you sleep well vs. when you sleep poorly and what environmental or behavioural factors may have contributed to your quality of sleep.

When I did an online search, I found several examples of sleep diaries, and I have included a few links below. You may prefer one to another, or may search to find a diary style that works for you. Using a sleep diary for a week may help reveal what may be impacting your sleep!

Examples of Sleep Diaries

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/SleepDiary.pdf>

(Personally, I like this one. Simple and easy to use!)

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/SleepDiaryv6.pdf>

TIPS to Improve Sleep

My personal strategies include:

A warm bath or shower 45 minutes before bed. As your body cools, this prepares you for sleep.

Stretching before bed helps me relax faster. We hold so much tension in our muscles, we need to allow it to release.

Taking a Magnesium supplement before bed. Speak to your physician or naturopath to see if this is something that would help you as well.

If it has been a particularly stressful day or am feeling anxious, I do belly breathing (See video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRSbxS-uG9A>)

If you have young children – they can do this as well: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mZbzDOpyIA

I listen to sleep music or sleep frequencies. There are so many of these online, find one that works for you.

Here is an example to get you started: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgc0HiFNCoI>

For those who like videos – here are some sleep tips: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSJa4vxelXY>

There is also further information from the *heretohelp* website.

Click on this link for more detail per Tip noted below.

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

Tip #1

Avoid caffeine close to bedtime

Some people have problems sleeping when they have consumed too much caffeine.

This is especially true as you get older.

Tip #2

Avoid alcohol close to bedtime

It might feel like drinking alcohol helps you fall asleep faster, but alcohol can disrupt your sleep.

Tip #3

Unwind

Stress has a big impact on sleep, so it's important to take time to relax before bed.

Click here for some relaxation techniques:

<https://www.concordia.ca/students/health/topics/stress-management/strategies-that-address-the-symptoms-of-stress-relaxation-strategies.html>

Screen time is stimulating and the blue light emitted by devices can affect sleep, so it's best to avoid watching TV, going online or using other electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bed.

Tip #4

Exercise a few hours before bedtime

Research shows that people who exercise regularly (30 to 60 minutes, three times a week) have deeper sleep. Exercising gives you a boost of energy, so it's best to exercise four to eight hours before bedtime. It is not wise, however, to exercise within 2 hours of going to bed as this may make it hard to fall asleep.

Tip #5

Follow the same routine

Try to keep the same sleep and wake schedule every day—including weekends.

Keeping a consistent schedule helps your body get into a routine.

Tip #6

Avoid naps if you experience sleep problems

Naps aren't necessarily a problem, but for some, naps may interfere with sleep at night.

If you experience problems with sleep, consider cutting out naps to see if your sleep improves. In all cases, it's best to keep naps short, around 30 minutes at most, to minimize disruptions to your normal sleep patterns.

Tip #7

Avoid going to bed too hungry or too full

Eating balanced, healthy meals and snacks at regular times throughout the day will help with a good night's sleep. Try to avoid eating a large meal in the two hours before bedtime. Consider a light, healthy snack if you're still hungry just before going to bed.

Tip #8

Get up if you do not fall asleep within half an hour

Get up if you don't fall asleep within 30 minutes. Leave your bedroom and do something relaxing like listening to soft music, taking a bath, drinking a warm caffeine-free beverage or meditating. Avoid watching TV or going on a screen during this time. Go back to bed once you feel very drowsy. At first, this strategy might feel like it's making things worse because you may have a few sleepless nights. However, after several nights, it will become easier to fall asleep and stay asleep. Be consistent in your use of this strategy. Studies show it is very effective in reversing sleep problems.

Tip #9

Make your bedroom comfortable and only use it for sleeping

A mattress with good support and comfortable bedding (invest in a good pillow!) are helpful. Make sure your room is not too hot or too cold—slightly cool is best (18 degrees C). Don't use your bed for watching TV, working, studying or any other mentally stimulating activities, especially if you are already experiencing sleep problems.³

Tip #10

Challenge the belief you can't function without a perfect night's sleep

When you can't sleep, you might check the clock and worry about getting through the upcoming day. This increases anxiety and makes it even harder to fall back asleep. Turn the clock away from your view. Remind yourself that you can likely do your daily activities even when you feel tired (unless this would pose a danger to yourself or others).

Technology to help sleep

Technology can also help us get better sleep. Online, there are many videos and apps from sleep music and frequencies, to guided body scans to relaxation techniques. Many of the mindfulness apps have a sleep component (we will look more at mindfulness in the next issue). For example, many of you may already be familiar with Calm.com app that includes sleep meditation, sleep music and sleep stories – for both you and your children. Finally, if you are still struggling getting quality sleep, there is also online help, customized for you. Check out organizations like <https://www.haleo.ca/en> with an evidence-based approach using tools and sleep therapists to help coach you towards a better sleep experience!

So: do you have a sleep tip that's worked wonders for you?



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

Next week

Calming a Reacting Mind



Weekly Tips + Links for Your Health

bcp vpa

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 3rd, 2020

CALMING A REACTING MIND

JUST BREATHE, JUST BE

How? By focussing on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts and body sensations through a compassionate and non-judging lens.

What is mindfulness?

According to the Mayo Clinic:

Mindfulness is a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other practices to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress.

Why practice mindfulness?

Many of us are weary from information/media overload, overly busy schedules and endless demands which is why it is so important to make space to think, pause and refresh. Practicing mindfulness is a proven way to create measurable changes in the brain regions associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress.

The Mayo Clinic further comments: *Spending too much time planning, problem-solving, daydreaming, or thinking negative or random thoughts can be draining. It can also make you more likely to experience stress, anxiety and symptoms of depression. Practicing mindfulness exercises can help you direct your attention away from this kind of thinking and engage with the world around you.*

Xevi Casalona - unsplash.com

For those of you who love science:
[Check out this video](#) on the brain and mindfulness.

Benefits of mindfulness:

- Promotes a calm mind
- Reduce stress
- Improve memory and concentration
- Enhance creativity
- Lessen your emotional reactivity
- Increase empathy
- Improve your mood and resilience

bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com



The Basics

Anytime you practice mindfulness, you are focussing on the present moment – most often, concentrating on your breathing. It will be natural for your thoughts to wander. That is ok! This is not about ‘not thinking’.

Mindfulness is about acknowledging thoughts and feelings, without judgement.

Looking at your thoughts from the ‘outside’ looking in and watching them go by as you refocus on your breath. If your mind wanders – no problem. Just notice and bring your attention back to your breath.

[Watch this three minute video](#) to get an overview.
For a deeper understanding, [here is a good read](#).

Guided Meditation

It is very helpful, particularly when you are starting out, to use guided meditation. There are many YouTube guided sessions to try. And there are great apps available, many of which will let you have a free trial. Here are some to check out!

- **Calm** – Many of you have heard of Calm as it used to be available for free for teachers. This is the app that I use, and the ‘lessons’ in the sessions have been life-changing for me, never mind the actual mindfulness practice! There are mindfulness sessions and sleep stories for children as well. Another valuable tool in my household.
- **Headspace** – Another good app that is more “mainstream”
- **Buddhify** – Rates highly amongst users.

[Here is a list](#) of more mindfulness apps
– find one that is right for you.

Get Started!

To get started on your own, here are some great ways to practice mindfulness:

1 Learning to Stay in the Present

A less formal approach to mindfulness can also help you to stay in the present and to fully participate in your life. You can choose any task or moment to practice informal mindfulness, whether you are eating, showering, walking, touching a partner, or playing with a child or grandchild.

Attending to these points will help:

- Start by bringing your attention to the sensations in your body
- Breathe in through your nose, allowing the air downward into your lower belly. Let your abdomen expand fully.
- Now breathe out through your mouth
- Notice the sensations of each inhalation and exhalation
- Proceed with the task at hand slowly and with full deliberation
- Engage your senses fully. Notice each sight, touch, and sound so that you savor every sensation.
- When you notice that your mind has wandered from the task at hand, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of the moment.

Source: <https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm>



Nathan Dumlao, Daniel Gaffey - unsplash.com

Next week:
Coping with Anxiety

2 Do a Body Scan

Sit or lie somewhere quiet. Take a few deep breaths. Then slowly focus on different parts of your body simply to experience what you are feeling. No judging or trying to change, just accepting. Relax each body part as you go from head to toe.

I challenge you to find 3 minutes to [try the Body Scan here](#).

3 Take a Mindful Walk

Leave your phone on silent. Focus on each step and how your body feels. Look up and pay attention to your surroundings. Appreciate nature. What do you see? What are the sounds and the scents? A mindful walk can be a solo or group activity.

4 Incorporating mindfulness into your daily routine.

We have lots of opportunities to practice mindfulness as we go about our daily routine, from washing dishes, to exercise, to preparing for bed. Even a couple of minutes here and there are beneficial, and contribute to training your brain to stay in the present. You will also get better and better the more you practice.

[Click here](#) for some wonderful tips on incorporating mindfulness into your daily life.



DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE MEDITATION TECHNIQUE?



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



Weekly Tips + Links for Your Health

bcpvpa

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 10th, 2020

COPING WITH ANXIETY

We are in an interesting time, full of unknowns and bombarded with anxious messages from media about the global pandemic. There is no doubt that some of this information is important for us to know so that we can protect our health during this turbulent time. However, this continuous and often exaggerated information can take a toll on our mental health.

*You may not be able to control what is happening around you,
but you can control your thoughts and response.*

What does anxiety look like?

Anxiety is different for everyone – from symptoms to severity, there is no one-size-fits-all definition. For some people, who have lived with anxiety for most of their lives, they may have forgotten what it means to not be anxious. I was one of those people, but learned that I can ease what I believed was ‘normal’ with regards to my suffering from anxiety.

Symptoms of anxiety can include:

- Being tense and shaky
- Having ruminating and/or racing thoughts
- Experiencing chest pain or pressure
- Being easily irritated
- Excessive need to be in control
- Dreading upcoming events
- Feelings of panic
- Overreacting to insignificant challenges
- Avoiding objects, people or situations

A great resource where you can learn more about anxiety is [Anxiety Canada](https://www.anxietycanada.com/).



Are you suffering from anxiety?

If you think you may be suffering from anxiety, [take this quiz](#). A well-known and validated tool for assessing anxiety is the **Beck Index**. [Here is an example](#) I found online that you could use and bring to your physician. Your physician may have their own tools as well.

Chronic anxiety can lead to serious mental and physical health complications. The best way to cope with anxiety is to address it early before it becomes something so large that it seems impossible to manage, such as **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) or Panic Attacks**. You or someone you know may have Panic Attacks – an over reaction to an assumed threat. It can often become a never-ending cycle of being worried about being worried!

Watch this excellent [5 min video](#) on Generalized Anxiety Disorders and Panic Attacks.

*If you feel you are suffering,
take action right away!*

When to see your physician?

There are no hard and fast rules as to when you should see your physician about your anxiety. Next week, we will review early warning signs for when to seek help. Meanwhile, when it comes to anxiety, if you feel you need to see someone, it is probably time.

If you complete the Beck quiz noted above, and it looks like you have medium to high levels of anxiety based on your score, you should consider seeing your physician.

Healthlinkbc also has some [information on anxiety and a quick quiz](#) that may guide you to whether you should see a physician.



In BC, we are also very fortunate to have access to **Babylon** – an app you can download on your phone or tablet. **Babylon provides virtual health (powered by TELUS)** where you can access a physician quickly from your own home and it is covered by our medical services plan (MSP in BC).

Babylon is very handy right now as people are staying home and not venturing out – and may be feeling very anxious! [Check it out!](#)

What can I do when I am feeling anxious?

[Here is a 12 minute video](#) on how to use Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to ease anxiety. Yes, it is a little dry, I will admit, but after reviewing many videos online, I really like the learning in this one.

Other ways to ease anxiety...

1 Try a Visualization Exercise

Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a safe, peaceful and stress-free environment. Concentrate on the details of this place – the sights, sounds and smells! Stay focused on your breathing while concentrating on your safe place for 5 minutes.

Try one of the guided visualization exercises [listed here](#) from the Anxiety Canada website.

2 Talk to Someone

Talking to a trusted friend or family member may be the last thing you feel like doing, but it can make a big difference. Start the conversation with, “I’ve been feeling very anxious lately. This is really challenging for me to talk about, but I trust that you will listen without judgement.”

You can always speak to a professional through your District’s EFAP or the EIP.

3 Exercise

Exercise is proven to release endorphins that improve your mood. Whatever form of exercise you choose – walk, run, lift weights, swim, dance, bike etc. – focus on it wholeheartedly while you are doing it. The more you focus on what you’re doing, the more beneficial it will be. Not sure where to start?

There are many great yoga for anxiety videos online depending on your level of fitness you can do in your living room



BCPVPA's Early Intervention Program (EIP) offers an excellent opportunity to be proactive in managing your health and well-being.

If you are feeling anxious, you can always reach out to the Early Intervention Program provided by humanworks. This is free to members. The goal of the **humanworks Early Intervention Program (EIP)** is to help members to remain healthy and well at work. The objective of the EIP is to support BCPVPA LTD Benefits Plan members experiencing personal and/or professional disruption as a result of illness, injury, or disability.

By participating in this program, the Plan members will be connected with an EIP Consultant who will equip them with the tools and resources they need to address their health-related challenges so that they can stay at work or resume their work roles in a safe and durable manner.

604-734-4130
jack@humanworks.ca | kreimer@bcvpva.bc.ca



WHAT METHODS DO YOU USE TO COPE WITH ANXIETY?



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

Next week:

**Early Warning Signs
of an Injured Brain**

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

Rochelle Morandini

rochelle@bcvpva.bc.ca

604-689-3399



bcp vpa

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 17th, 2020

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF MENTAL HEALTH INJURY

It's not just all in your head!

It seems an obvious statement to say that your brain and body are connected. But it is worth bringing this concept to the forefront for our discussion, because your thoughts, which drive your emotions, often have a physiological impact at a cellular level in your body. So often, early warnings signs of mental illness first show up **physically**. Then often, our ability to emotionally regulate is challenged. We may notice **emotional** signs as well.

We may also experience challenges in our **personal well-being** and then in our **intellectual abilities**.

When our executive functioning is strained, we find ourselves concerned, even scared, as we feel angst about our inability to think straight, our increased frequency of losing our keys, or forgetting appointments. We wonder if we will ever return to the level of concentration, clarity and memory we had only months before. This increased angst feeds an anxious cycle of worrying and concern, which then exacerbates our symptoms.

PHYSICAL

- Muscular tension/headaches
- Upset stomach
- Grinding/clenching teeth
- Difficulty sleeping/fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Cold hands and feet
- Trembling/shakiness
- Frequent colds, flu, infections
- Rapid loss or gain in weight

EMOTIONAL

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Irritability
- Depression
- Hopeless/trapped feeling
- Feeling out of control
- Guilt/self-conscious
- Apathy
- Feeling of incompetence

PERSONAL WELL-BEING

- Questioning our own values
- Loss of purpose and meaning in what we do
- Isolating yourself from friends, family, and your community
- Loneliness (which leads to other physical health issues!)
- Excessive busyness
- Low motivation, low energy
- Poor eating habits
- Self-soothing behaviours such as eating carbs, drinking alcohol, drug use, increased screen time and other addictions

INTELLECTUAL

- Impaired judgment
- Inability to concentrate
- Easily distracted
- Memory loss
- Excessive worry
- Difficulty in making decisions/procrastination
- Confusion

Sometimes those who are driven and successful may struggle from what is called **high functioning depression**.

[Here is a quick video](#) that explains high functioning depression.

As leaders we are regularly high functioning individuals who have been able to cope well up to this point through strategies unique to each of us. Now, these strategies may or may not have been healthy. Regardless, you may reach a point where these strategies no longer work, and you find yourself struggling. Try as you might, you are unable to keep up with your regular demands – and the harder you try, the more frustrated and distraught you become.

Bethany Szentesi - unsplash.com

How may this show up at work?

- Your quality of work is slipping
- You are missing appointments and deadlines due to increased forgetfulness
- While at work, your productivity is down considerably. You are physically 'there' but it takes you three times as long to complete what used to be regular tasks; your processing time has slowed.
- You have a shorter fuse and find being patient, controlling your emotions and practicing decorum with staff and parents very difficult.
- You may withdraw from some activities or meetings; you just do not feel up to participating;
- You struggle with a negative attitude when normally you are a pretty positive or at best, a neutral person
- You feel your confidence is low and you question your own judgement and decisions
- You have really low energy and drag yourself through the day
- You don't really care about aspects of your job which used to motivate you and contribute to your feeling of being valued.

BURNOUT

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** recently updated its definition of burnout in the organization's International Classification of Diseases diagnostic manual. WHO now refers to burnout as a "syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed".

Three symptoms included in the list are:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from one's job or feelings negative towards one's career
- reduced professional productivity

Look for the three part series on burnout in the June issue of [Princip\(ed\) Magazine](#). Are you struggling with Emotional Burnout? [This video](#) describes the **10 signs of emotional burnout**.





Dario Valenzuela - unsplash.com

GETTING HELP

If you find yourself experiencing some of the Early Warning Signs listed above, rest assured: with the right support, you can bounce back to the **Healthy** side of the Mental Health Continuum. It is important to know, that the earlier you get help, the greater chance you will feel better, and the more reduced your chance will be of your condition becoming chronic.

You may reach out to a family member or colleague to voice your concern in how you are feeling. Often, however, the response from others — who feel they are trying to help — may be saying “*Yeah, we are all stressed. Hang in there*” or “*You will be ok, this will pass*”. Although these individuals are well meaning, their own stigmas may delay you from seeking more direct help.

Do NOT let your own stigma (or that of others) get in your way. Reach out for help!

- **Make an appointment with your physician** to rule out any physical challenges and to lay out a treatment plan
 - E.g. often thyroid problems or even hormone imbalances can mimic these symptoms, so it is always a good idea to have a thorough review with your doctor
 - Ask your doctor about the [Bounce Back program](#) that provides free support for patients who have been referred
- **Talk to a professional**
 - As a member of the BCPVPA, you have access to humanworks through the [Early Intervention Program](#). They can provide you with confidential coaching and support, as well as direct you to the right resources based on your situation.
 - You can reach out to your School District’s **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. Through the EAP, you can access direct counselling as well as other resources specifically designed to help you build back your coping skills. Counselling is a very personal process, so if you do not feel comfortable with the counsellor assigned, you can absolutely ask for another counsellor that may be a better fit. EAP is intended to be a short form modality of counselling and may work well when you are just noticing early warning signs. However, if you have been struggling for a while, you may need a longer term option.

- You can get funding for counselling through your **Extended Health Benefits**. To understand your level of funding, go to: https://www.bcpseabenefits.ca/en/SelectDistrict_BCPSEA.asp
 1. Find your District and scroll to your *employee group*
 2. Then click *My Plan* in the top left corner
 3. Then click *Extended Health*
 4. Then click *Details*
 5. Then scroll down to *Paramedicals* and then to *Psychology* to see your annual amount available.
- This way, you can pick your own therapist and develop a longer term relationship that may be more applicable to your level of “mental injury”
- You might also find speaking to your church or spiritual leader helpful



Emma Simpson - unsplash.com

Here is a list of **community supports** that you can access:

- **Canadian Mental Health Association, BC** <https://cmha.bc.ca/>
- **BC Government mental health support** <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/mental-health-support-in-bc>
- **heretohelp BC** <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/getting-help-for-mental-illnesses>
- **Mood Disorders Association of BC** <http://www.mdabc.net/bc-resources>
- **HealthLink BC's list of resources** <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/mental-health-substance-use/resources>



WHAT ARE SOME BARRIERS TO SEEKING TIMELY HELP?



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

Rochelle Morandini

rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca

604-689-3399



Weekly Tips + Links for Your Health

bcp vpa

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.

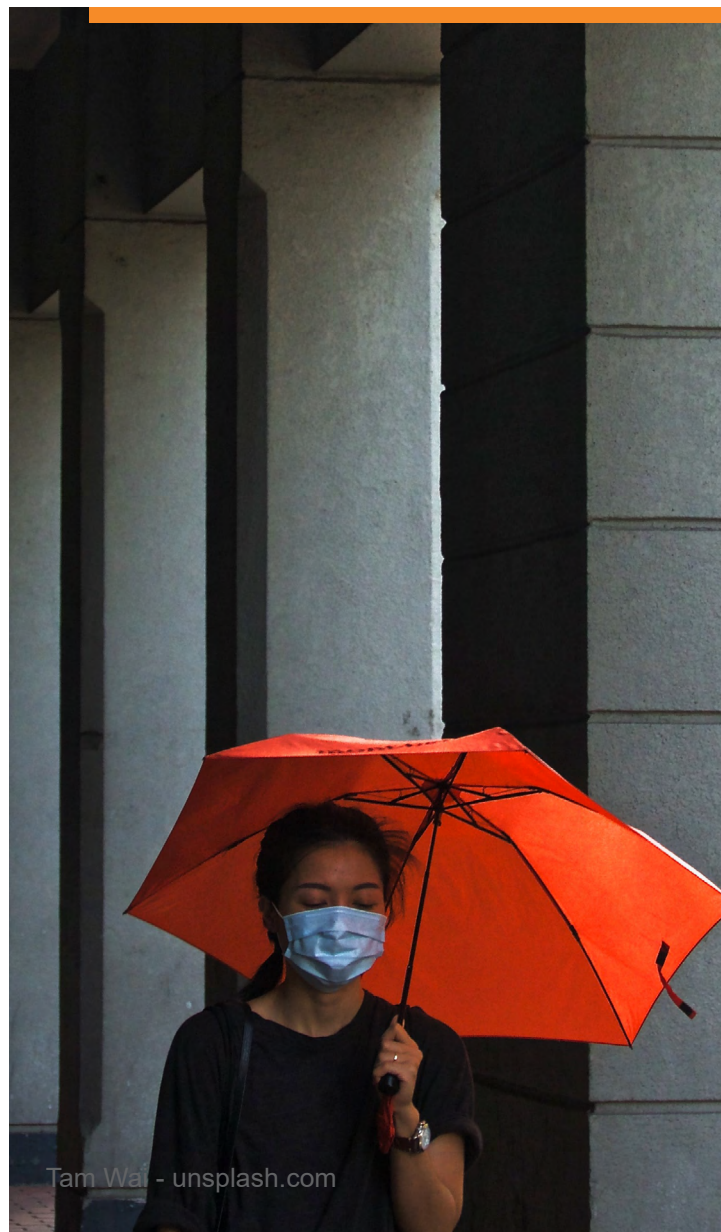
Grief

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)



Tam Wai - unsplash.com

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.



3 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
Rochelle Morandini rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca 604-689-3399



Weekly Tips + Links for Your Health

bcpvpa

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 May 1st, 2020

RETHINKING DEPRESSION

Depression is an interesting word. Many people assume that someone “depressed” is a sad, “woe is me” type of character, like Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh*. But in reality, depression is complex. Someone can be depressed and not necessarily feel “sad”. The Centre of Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) defines depression as follows: “Clinical depression, sometimes called major depression, is a complex mood disorder caused by various factors, including genetic predisposition, personality, stress and brain chemistry”¹. While it can suddenly go into remission, depression is not something that people can “get over” by their own effort.

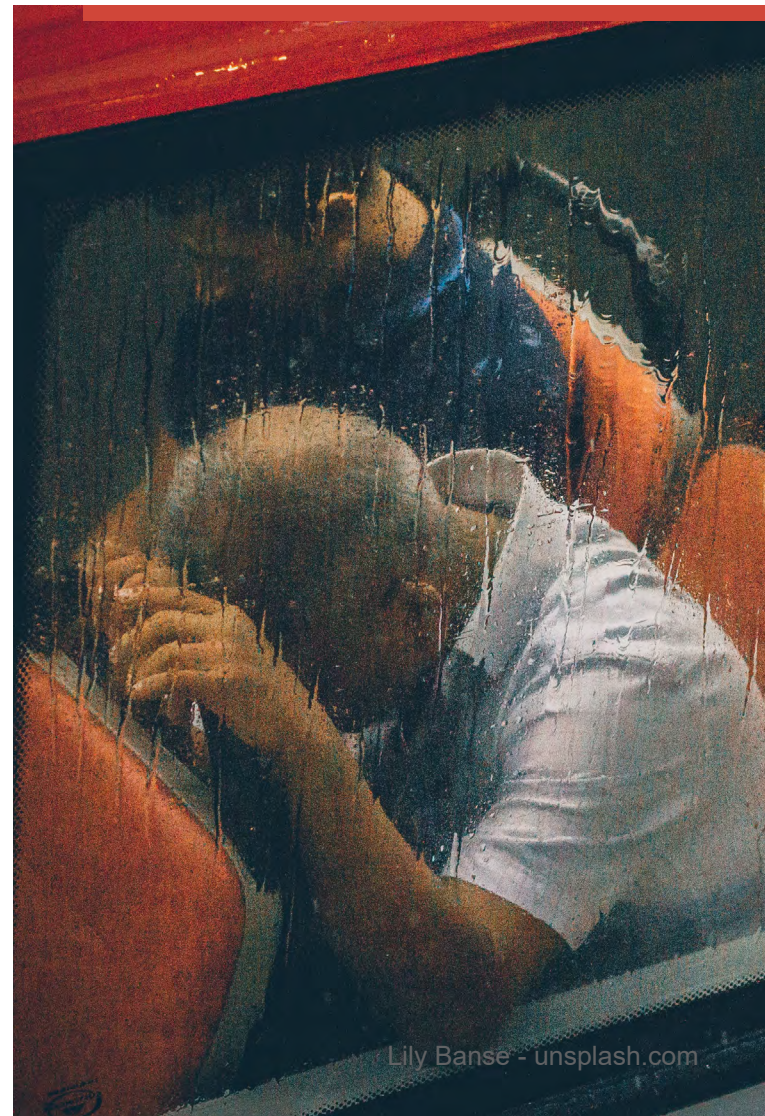
1 Source: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/depression>

In this [three minute video](#), Dr. Goldbloom explains depression and its symptoms.

If you recall in our previous issue “the Early Warning Signs of Mental Injury”, we introduced the concept of **high-functioning depression**. It can be difficult to spot the signs of someone with high-functioning depression. That’s because, on the outside, they often appear completely fine. They go to work, accomplish their tasks, and keep up relationships. However, as they’re going through the motions to maintain their day-to-day life, inside they’re screaming.

There’s no difference between **depression** and high-functioning depression. Depression ranges from mild to moderate to severe.

[Read about The 11 Truths Only People with High-Functioning Depression will Understand](#)



Lily Banse - unsplash.com

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

There is no single cause of depression. It is usually due to a combination of factors; unique to each individual. However, know that anyone can experience depression. No one is immune!

Factors that can put you at greater risk for depression:

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

- **Genetic or family history of depression:** If you have a family history with bi-polar disorder (BPD), you have a 66% chance of carrying the genetic risk for BPD. For schizophrenia it's 50%, 40% for post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 35% for depression. This does not imply you will suffer from these diagnoses, just that you are genetically pre-disposed to the level of risk. With the right support and coping skills you can minimize your chance of experiencing these conditions (*note: this genetic disposition to mental illness is greater than cancer, high blood pressure and even heart disease!*).
- Biological factors such as **imbalances in brain chemistry and in the endocrine/immune systems.**

Source: Morneau Shepell, 2015: Your Genetic Disposition Risk.

COGNITIVE FACTORS

- Psychological or emotional vulnerability; including thinking habits and patterns
- Major stress in the person's life, including trauma or recurring stress
- Isolation

BRAIN HEALTH

- Head injury
- Toxins
- Substance abuse
- General health including nutrition and level of exercise
- Sleep disturbances

Depression and physical illness

Throughout my many years of reviewing short and long term disability claims, I have seen a steady increase in mental illness claims; not only as the primary diagnosis, but also as a secondary diagnosis. What I mean by a secondary diagnosis is that the presenting or main diagnosis may be a physical illness, but is accompanied by or may trigger a mental illness.

Depressive symptoms may be:

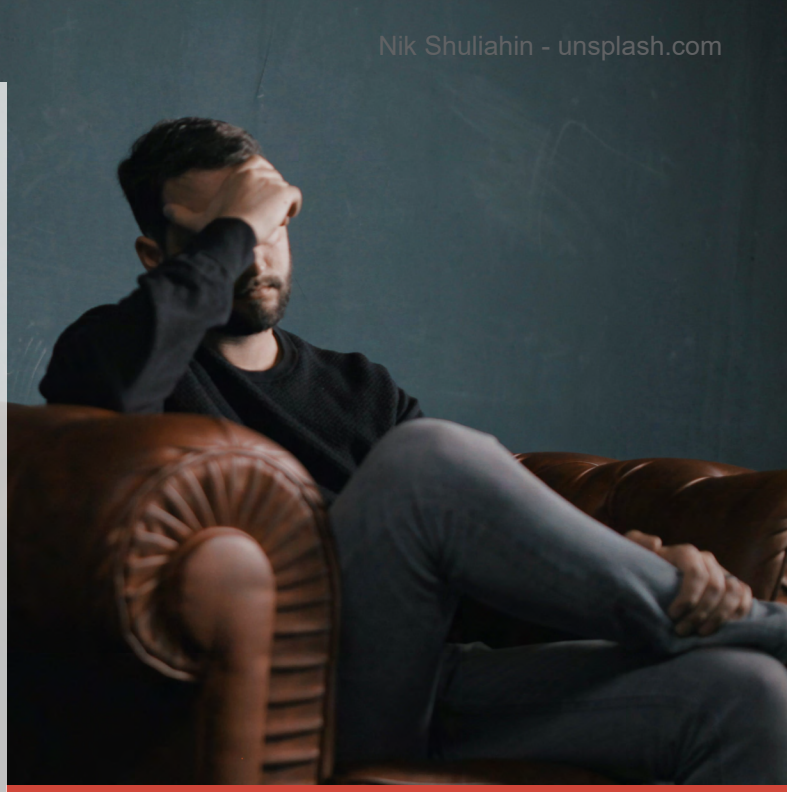
- the result of another illness that shares the same symptoms (e.g., lupus, hypothyroidism)
- a reaction to another illness (e.g., cancer, heart attack, chronic pain)
- caused by neurological changes resulting from a physical illness (e.g., stroke).



TREATMENT FOR DEPRESSION

There are different ways to treat depression. The most common are medication and counselling. As counselling takes time and vulnerability, not all are ready for this intervention. Others can be very reluctant—if not fully resistant—to taking medications. These two scenarios can lead to slow—if not stalled—access to the right treatment and can result in their depression worsening and becoming chronic.

Depression is not *mind over matter* and you cannot just think yourself better. You need help. Just continuing down the same path will not bring you different results! When in the **Injured** or **III** stage, you need treatment, just as you would for a physical ailment.



Current treatments include:

1. Pharmacotherapy (medications)

Antidepressants continue to be a growing expenditure in most employer drug plans; along with sleep aids, anti-anxiety medications, pain relievers etc. Some may even conclude that these medications are being over-prescribed.

Medications tend to be regularly prescribed for many reasons including:

- Extensive investment and research in this area
- Lobbying of pharmaceutical companies
- Drugs are a short-term strategy for physicians to help patients due to a lack of available specialists and limited office time
- Drugs are a quick fix that may work faster over counselling
- Drugs are one of the only treatments that are primarily funded through employer benefit plans

“Depression is not mind over matter and you cannot just think yourself better. You need help.”

2. Psychotherapy and Counselling

Psychotherapy for depression is a longer-term treatment plan that you would not usually access through your District's employee and family assistance program. The exception to this may be where online **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)** is being offered. According to CAMH, CBT is a practical, short-term form of psychotherapy. It helps people to develop skills and strategies for becoming and staying healthy.

CBT focuses on the here-and-now; the problems that come up in day-to-day life. CBT helps people to examine how they make sense of what is happening around them and how their perceptions can affect the way they feel. CBT:

- is structured
- is time-limited (usually 6-20 sessions)
- is problem-focused and goal-oriented
- teaches strategies and skills
- is based on a proactive, shared therapeutic relationship between therapist and client¹

¹ Source: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/cognitive-behavioural-therapy>

You could work with a psychologist, psychotherapist or counsellor and pay directly for their services; either in person or even online. You can get reimbursed for some of these fees through your extended health benefit plan. What is unfortunate, is many people often stop counselling when the benefit runs out. But, personally, I can not imagine anything more important to invest in but your own mental health!

KNOWLEDGE CHECK — What's the difference between a counsellor and a psychotherapist?

According to the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario: *"Psychotherapy is primarily a talk-based therapy and is intended to help people improve and maintain their mental health and well-being. Registered Psychotherapists work with individuals, couples and families in individual and group settings. Psychotherapy occurs when the Registered Psychotherapist (RP) and client enter into a psychotherapeutic relationship where both work together to bring about positive change in the client's thinking, feeling, behaviour and social functioning. Individuals usually seek psychotherapy when they have thoughts, feelings, moods and behaviours that are adversely affecting their day-to-day lives, relationships and the ability to enjoy life."*¹

Psychotherapy is often treatment based in response to a diagnosable mental health issue such as depression, bi-polar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, adjustment disorder, etc. It is often in-depth and used in conjunction with psychotropic medication, but not necessarily. Counselling tends to be wellness oriented, providing increased insight and learning how to effectively overcome problems and challenges.²

When someone is suffering from clinical depression, they usually will require a longer term of psychotherapy treatment. Changing thinking patterns and habits, takes effort and often personal pain to endure. We as humans often like to avoid these things. Therefore, counselling success will be dependent on many factors, including the individual's readiness, desire to change and the skills and relationship they have with their therapist.

¹ Source: <https://www.crpo.ca/what-is-psychotherapy/>

² Source: <https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/counselling-vs-psychotherapy>

[Read more here.](#)

Tayla Jeffs - unsplash.com

3. Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation

Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) involves a series of short magnetic pulses directed to the brain to stimulate nerve cells. The magnetic pulses stimulate area neurons and change the functioning of the brain circuits involved.

Rapidly changing magnetic pulses cause neurons to change their firing pattern within the brain. By changing the firing pattern of neurons in brain circuits involved in a disorder, such as depression, the dysfunctional brain patterns can change. The changes in brain activity are thought to be a mechanism through which treatment occurs.

There are a few provinces that cover these services in their medical plans. Even though TMS has been proven to help those with depression, unfortunately, British Columbia does not cover these services through our Medical Services Plan (MSP), at least not at this time. There are, however, private providers through which you can access these services.



To learn more about TMS, [watch this short video](#)
If you desire more information, [read here.](#)

4. Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a procedure, done under general anesthesia, in which small electric currents are passed through the brain, intentionally triggering a brief seizure. ECT seems to cause changes in brain chemistry that can quickly reverse symptoms of certain mental health conditions.

ECT often works when other treatments are unsuccessful and when the full course of treatment is completed, but it may not work for everyone. ¹

¹ Source: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/electroconvulsive-therapy/about/pac-20393894>

Here is a [4 minute video](#) that describes Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) in more detail.

Thankfully, brain research is expanding in leaps and bounds. I believe we will continue to see breakthroughs in mental health treatment over the next few years which will hopefully bring significant relief to so many of us who struggle with mental ailments.

Next week

Self Soothing and Addiction



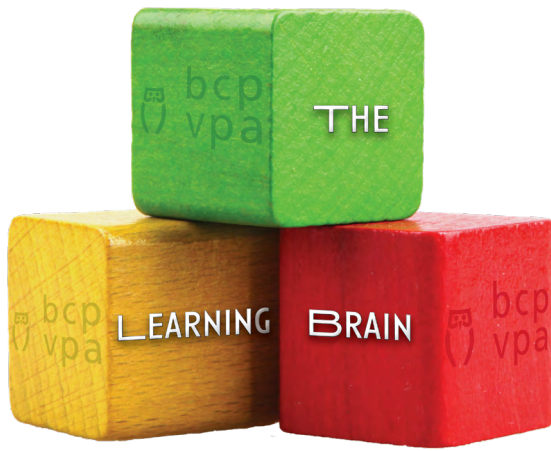
**WHAT QUESTIONS DO YOU
HAVE ABOUT DEPRESSION?**



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



Get in touch! If you have any questions about The Learning Brain series, contact
Rochelle Morandini rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca 604-689-3399



bcp vpa

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 May 8, 2020

SELF-SOOTHING AND ADDICTIONS

From the time we were babies, whenever we felt pain or discomfort, we needed to learn how to soothe ourselves by crying, sucking our thumbs or rocking. As adults, we also seek to self-soothe when we feel physical or psychological pain. Some of our methods of self-soothing may be very healthy, while some may be harmful.

HEALTHY SELF-SOOTHING

Self-soothing is a tool we can use to calm ourselves when we're **anxious** or distressed, without using medication or resorting to any negative coping strategies. It's a way of comforting, nurturing, and **being kind to ourselves**.

Self-soothing, understandably, looks different for each of us. [Click here](#) to review **9 examples of ways some people find comfort**.

- However, sometimes our tactics are not as healthy, and can even be harmful. Examples of unhealthy ways of soothing ourselves include behaviours that release our endorphins - the 'feel good' chemicals released in our brains. Sometimes, we self-soothe by 'numbing' ourselves to — or escaping from — our pain.

Examples of these techniques include:

- Eating fats, carbohydrates and processed sugars
- Shopping
- Excessive exercise
- Using alcohol, cannabis, illegal and prescription drugs
- Increasing our screen time, gaming, and gambling

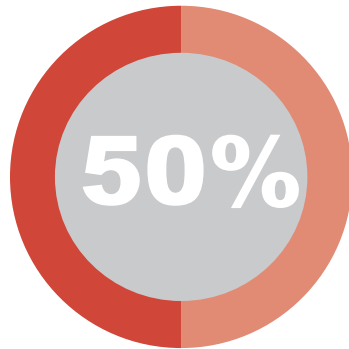


Personally, I find mindfulness helpful in helping me calm and soothe my emotions. [Here is the Calm.com short meditation on just this subject.](#)

[Here is a great article](#) on the downside of self-soothing through these behaviours. Personally, I find mindfulness calms and soothes me.

Unfortunately, those with mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, may get into an unhealthy pattern of self-soothing as they try to ease their mental pain.

Sometimes self-soothing may show up in the form of an addiction.



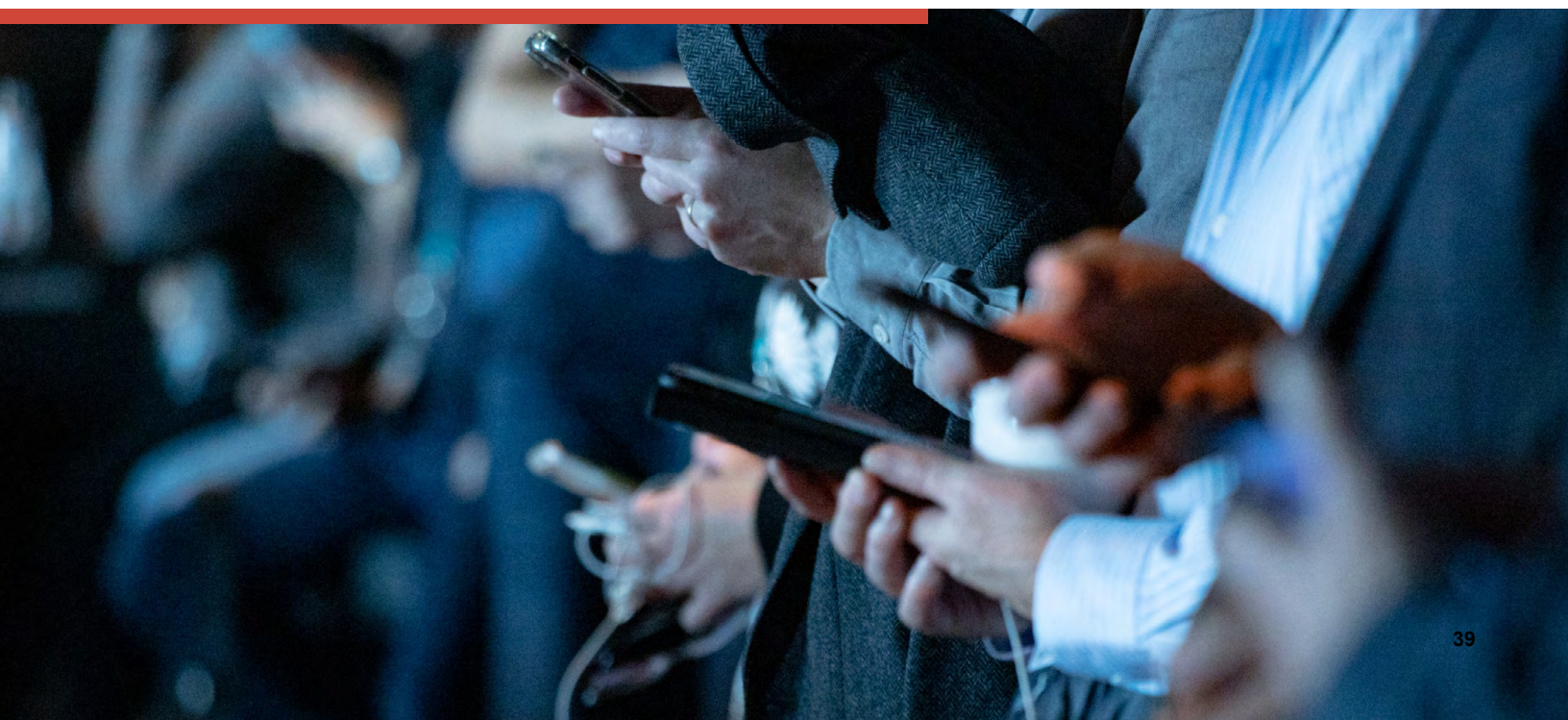
Mental health and addiction are connected. More than half of people with addiction also have mental health problems – in particular, anxiety or depression.

ADDICTION

Addiction can be broadly defined as a condition that leads to a compulsive engagement with a stimuli, despite negative consequences. This can lead to physical and/or psychological dependence. Addictions can be either substance related (such as the problematic use of alcohol or cocaine) or process-related, also known as behavioural addictions (such as gambling or internet addiction). Both can disrupt an individual's ability to maintain a healthy life, but there are numerous support and treatment options available.

Source: [CMHA](#)

Here is a quick, [interesting video](#) on reconsidering our thoughts on addiction.



A common way to identify addiction is the presence of ‘four C’s’:

- 1 Craving**
- 2 Loss of **Control** of amount or frequency of use**
- 3 **Compulsion** to use**
- 4 Use despite the **Consequences****

Alcohol

You can recognize alcohol abuse when drinking evolves from having the occasional drink to becoming an enduring habit.

Drink responsibly by following [Canada’s low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines](#).

If you struggle with alcohol addiction and need support, visit [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) to take the first step.

Gambling

It’s important to recognize when gambling shifts from a social, entertaining activity to a problematic addiction.

There are a number of gambling self-help tools available through [CAMH](#).

Digital

Social media is highly addictive, and people of all ages are suffering from digital addiction. If your screen time is interfering with other life priorities, try to be intentional about why you’re using your device rather than just using it to pass time.

See this article on [Digital Addiction](#) for more information and tips to help you cope. This [second video](#) provides a quick description of this ailment.

Cannabis

Contrary to popular belief, it is possible to become addicted to cannabis. An estimated one in 11 cannabis users will become chronic users.

Learn more about the effects of excessive cannabis use on the [Government of Canada website](#)

Prescription drugs

Prescription drugs can be highly addictive. The most common types of prescription drugs that can lead to addiction include:

- Opioids, which treat certain kinds of pain
- Benzodiazepines, which treat anxiety and sleep disorders
- Stimulants, which treat attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Prescription drugs are also popular among teenagers who take them from their parents.

Always make sure to:

- Follow your doctor’s instructions
- Keep track of your prescription drugs by counting the pills
- Keep medication in a safe and secure place
- Return any unused or expired medications to your pharmacy

To learn more about prescription drug abuse and its effects, visit the [Government of Canada website](#). If you need support, contact your physician or community resources for addiction.

GETTING HELP

If when you read this week's 'The Learning Brain' issue on self-soothing and addiction, you felt uncomfortable or started questioning if you need help, then reach out to learn more. Do not let it fester. Do not harbour guilt. This type of thinking will bring more psychological pain and a greater need to self-soothe.



Reach out and talk to a professional or one of the many community and non-profit groups that can support you. Particularly during this pandemic, there are so many great resources available to help! Ideally, the first person you should speak to is your family physician. They will know the variety of treatment options and can work with you through the process.

Here are some local and community resources and treatment options to review:

[BC Government](#)

[Canadian Centre of Substance Abuse and Addiction](#)

[Here is a direct link to their help for substance abuse during COVID-19](#)

[Centre of Addiction and Mental Health](#)

Do you have a family member struggling with an addiction? [Here is a website that may be helpful for you.](#)



WHAT OTHER HEALTH TOPICS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE?



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

**Next week on #theLearningBrain
Play and Laughter: "Serious"
Stuff for your Mental Health**



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 May 15, 2020

PLAY AND LAUGHTER

By Rochelle Morandini

We thought we would lighten up this week's issue of *The Learning Brain* and bring in some mood enhancers! No, not the kind of self-soothing compounds you buy online or in a store, but ones that are already within you—laughter and the ability to play! LOL - Let's start with laughter.

LAUGHTER

Definition: Laughter is an expression or appearance of merriment or amusement.

It's true—laughter is strong medicine. It draws people together in ways that trigger healthy physical and emotional changes in the body. To bring your mind and body back into balance, nothing works faster or is more reliable than a good laugh.

Humour lightens your burdens, inspires hope, connects you to others, and keeps you grounded, focused, and alert. It also helps you release anger and forgive sooner. With so much power to heal and renew, the ability to laugh easily and frequently is a tremendous resource for surmounting problems, enhancing your relationships, and supporting both physical and emotional health. Best of all, this priceless medicine is fun, free, and easy to use.¹



[Watch this 2 minute video](#) from the Mayo Clinic on the Surprising Health Benefits of Laughter.

¹ helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm

What does the research say?

There are many studies indicating that those with a good sense of humour tend to be more resilient.

“Humour brings together the whole brain. Several research studies have shown that after perceiving something funny, we become more creative at problem solving. Laughter increases creativity and flexibility in thought. In summary, we need to find something that will stimulate our physical body, mental state and spiritual awareness to develop a mind-body connection or acquire whole-health.”¹

A good sense of humour could—it seems—allow individuals to find humour and a cause for laughter, rather than feel threatened when faced with a potential stressor. In addition to facilitating more positive appraisals of potential threats, a good sense of humour also could have a more global effect by allowing for a generally more positive perspective about oneself and the world.²

¹ https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/laughter_can_benefit_your_physical_and_mental_health

² [Kuiper & Martin, 1993; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Martin et al., 2003](#)

A GOOD SENSE OF HUMOUR MAY BE LIKE A LENS THROUGH WHICH THE WORLD IS VIEWED.

According to an article on the website Emotionally Resilient Living, humour and the ability to get out of your own way can help us avoid becoming mired in feelings of negativity and helplessness so that we are better able to see what needs to be done to move forward.

The article offers examples of how those who have survived the most unimaginable circumstances relied on their sense of humour as a powerful survival tool.

“Laughter sets the spirit free to move through even the most tragic circumstances. It helps us shake our heads clear, get our feet back under us and restore our sense of balance and purpose. Humour is integral to our peace of mind and ability to go beyond survival.”

Captain Gerald Coffee, POW in Vietnam

The article goes on to describe how we can enhance our sense of humour by surrounding ourselves with reminders to keep events and circumstances in perspective, and to look for the humour even in the most outrageous situations.

So, how can we incorporate more laughter in our lives? Here are some ways to help us laugh more...

- Watch funny movies or TV shows.
- Learn to laugh at yourself.
- Share funny moments (even if they are embarrassing) with friends.
- Check out your bookstore's humour section.
- Seek out playful people who laugh easily.
- Begin today to remove toxic people from your life!¹



Even just smiling has been shown to have positive benefits. In case you need an excuse, here are **10 reasons to smile everyday!**²

- Smiling makes us attractive
- Smiling relieves stress
- Smiling elevates our mood
- Smiling is contagious
- Smiling boosts your immune system
- Smiling lowers your blood pressure
- Smiling makes us feel good
- Smiling makes you look younger
- Smiling makes you appear more confident and successful
- Smiling helps you stay positive

[Check out this article: Maintaining a sense of humour to cope.](#)

¹ <https://www.emotionallyresilientliving.com/how-can-we-quickly-find-humour-in-this>

² <https://www.verywellmind.com/top-reasons-to-smile-every-day-2223755>



“We don’t stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.”

- George Bernard Shaw

PLAY

Definition: A state of engagement or participation in an activity for pleasure or recreation.

Play connects our imagination with experience and stimulates brain development, creativity, relationship building, trust and emotional regulation. Play is also one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships fresh and exciting. ¹

[Check out this article](#) on the importance of play for adults. [This CNN article has a quick video](#) on why play is important for adults!

Why does our focus on play diminish as we grow older?

Our society tends to dismiss play for adults. Play is perceived as unproductive, petty or even a guilty pleasure. The notion is that once we reach adulthood, it’s time to get serious. And between personal and professional responsibilities, there’s no time to play.²

Possible factors blocking adults from play:

- Lack of appreciation or permission for play and laughter from family or origin (we are shamed or punished)
- Lack of appreciation or permission for play and laughter at workplace or in social circles (see as unproductive or unfocused)
- Lack of priority on play and laughter due to time constraints, social pressures, cultural expectations (serious tasks of survival or material pursuits and responsibilities take over)
- Lack of emotional or mental resiliency or inability to be vulnerable (we are in chronic state of overwhelm, whereas play and laughter come more spontaneously and easily from a relaxed, regulated state)³

¹ [The Resilient Mind, Laughter and Play](#)

² <https://psychcentral.com/blog/the-importance-of-play-for-adults/>

³ [The Resilient Mind, Laughter and Play](#)

So how can we incorporate more play into our lives?

Here are the top 5 ways I personally incorporate play into my life:



1. Search YouTube for funny videos (my family has our favourites)
2. Play with my children: play follow the leader on our bikes, play board games, dance in the living room, or, I will admit, I love to challenge them in *Mariokart 8!*
3. Watch animals play and/or play with them (with 4 cats and one dog – this one is easy for me!)
4. Seek out people, environments or stimuli that makes you laugh out loud every day (this is why I watch *Jimmy Kimmel Live*— from his house —every evening!)
5. We do a lot of crafts, especially during this quarantine. Neither my two boys nor I are particularly crafty, but we have been doing some easy and fun crafts: painting rocks, making sun catchers and practicing 'learn to draw' tutorials online (my sons like to draw Disney characters)

Check out these videos: Calming Crafts: [Things to Help you Relax and De-Stress](#) and [Fun DIY Projects Guaranteed to Relieve Stress](#) (I think I may try some of these next!)



Other ways to encourage more play in your life:

- Invite friends to join you in watching a funny movie (even if this is over Zoom!)
- Use unscheduled time to be creative, daydream, reflect and decompress—imagine places you want to see, activities you want to try, and even people you may want to meet
- Hang out with playful people (within physical distancing guidelines!)
- Try colouring or dot-to-dot books
- Try puzzle books (such as crosswords, Suduko, wordfinds)
- Write poetry or short stories
- Try new things and experience the unexpected
- Participate in a variety of arts/sports/activities whenever you can to expand your horizons
- Try karaoke (you didn't think I would leave this off the list!)

If you feel blocked in your ability to engage in play and laughter, it may be a good idea to talk to a professional. They may be able to help you understand why this block exists for you and how you can work towards a life with more enjoyment through laughter and play.



WHAT OTHER HEALTH TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT?



Let us know on our Twitter and Instagram this week!
Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!

Next week

Investing in Relationships While Social Distancing



Anna Kolosyuk - unsplash.com

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 May 22, 2020

INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS WHILE SOCIAL DISTANCING

By Rochelle Morandini



RELATIONSHIPS

Definition: Relationships are ‘the way in which two or more people are connected, or the state of being connected’. Relationships include the intimate relationships we have with our respective partners, those we form with our parents, siblings, and grandparents, and those we form socially with our friends, work colleagues, teachers, healthcare professionals and community. ¹

Relationships are essential to our psychological and physical health, yet we are often left, through trial and error, to figure out how to find and maintain them. One would think that if relationships are something so crucial to our humanity, that we would invest more into making our relationships successful.

As I am sure you will agree, even when a minor relationship becomes troubled, our lives are potentially disrupted, and our sense of happiness and fulfillment can deteriorate.²

¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

² <https://www.theresilientmind.life/resources/>



A positive relationship can be shared between any two people who love, support, encourage and help each other [practically as well as emotionally](#). You will find that people in healthy relationships often:

- ***Listen to each other***
- ***Communicate openly and without judgment***
- ***Trust and respect each other***
- ***Consistently make time for each other***
- ***Remember details about each other's lives***
- ***Engage in healthy activities together***

Watch this [video on Social Well Being – the Importance of Social Connections](#).

However, not all relationships are beneficial. It is the quality of our relationships that matters. Poor-quality relationships can be toxic and worse for our mental health than being alone. Research shows that people in unhappy or negative relationships have significantly worse outcomes than those who are isolated or have no relationships.



Why is fostering relationships so important?

Studies have shown that people who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected.

As a society and as individuals, we should be prioritizing the investment in building and maintaining good relationships and tackling the barriers to forming them. We invest in physical activity and healthy eating, but do we put in targeted efforts to improve our health through positive relationships? Maintaining a healthy social support network is hard work and something that requires ongoing effort over time.³

³ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

Relationships benefit us in many ways, including: ⁴

- ***Help us maintain a sense of hope***
- ***Help us reach our full potential***
- ***Provide safety***
- ***Build self-esteem***
- ***Help us regulate our emotions***
- ***Fulfill our need for intimacy***

[See this article](#) that provides more detail on an additional 5 benefits of a healthy relationship.

Brooke Cagle - unsplash.com



The impact of a lack of relationships

Our challenge at this exact moment is that due to the pandemic, we find ourselves in ‘forced isolation’ which can be detrimental to our well-being and makes investing in our relationships difficult. “Absence of face-to-face contact and physical contact is likely to produce symptoms of depression and anxiety,” says Lawrence A. Palinkas, PhD, a professor of social policy and health as well as medical anthropology at the University of Southern California.

We rely heavily on our social interactions for our self-esteem and as a crucial source of psychological stimulation. “It creates a diverse social environment that helps us to maintain optimal cognitive functions,” says Dr. Palinkas, who notes that people who are isolated for extended periods of time may face short-term memory loss and difficulty exercising executive function.

⁴ <https://www.theresilientmind.life/resources/>



“Surround yourself with people that reflect who you want to be and how you want to feel — energies are contagious.”

- Rachel Molchin

Dr. Leach points to ‘the looking glass effect’. Our sense of self is determined to some extent by interaction with others, he says, so when we lose that interaction, ‘psychological disintegration’ can result.⁵

This made me think of the character Chuck (played by Tom Hanks) in the movie, **Castaway**, who upon finding himself alone on a deserted island, saw a face in his bloody handprint on a volleyball and created Wilson. His unique relationship with Wilson helped Chuck go above his emotional reactions to use critical thinking, to improve decision-making, to spur his motivation, to have hope, and even to reflect on himself.

If you have ever watched the movie, you may remember the gut-wrenching scene when he loses Wilson to the ocean and repeatedly yells, “I am so sorry, Wilson”. Even we, the movie audience, blinking our tears back, have developed a relationship with Wilson! See Chuck’s relationship with Wilson in this [short video clip](#)!

Studies show that loneliness takes a serious toll on your emotional and physical health. In fact, one study found that being lonely was as lethal as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

A review of 148 studies concluded that “the influence of social relationships on the risk of death are comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality such as smoking and alcohol consumption and exceed the influence of other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity” and that “physicians, health professionals, educators, and the media should [...] take social relationships as seriously as other risk factors that affect mortality.”⁶

⁵ <https://www.wellandgood.com/good-advice/social-isolation-effects-on-mental-health/>

⁶ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

It is important to note that addressing loneliness does not just mean being around people – someone could regularly be surrounded by people and still be lonely. It is more about forming deep connections with other people.



How we interact and form relationships has changed considerably over the past decade. For example, unlike in the past when we stayed and contributed solely within our community, we now often move away from our towns and neighbourhoods. This creates distance between us and family and friends. We are not as 'available' to pop by, offer support, or ask for help. The development and reliance on online technologies, our longer working hours, and changes in how we even define community have impacted how we foster relationships.

There is evidence that a lack of social support can be associated with poor mental health. People who are clinically depressed report lower levels of social support than people who are not currently depressed. It is likely that lack of social support and feelings of loneliness can make us more vulnerable to the onset of mental health or substance-use problems like depression.

However, many of us will pull away from other people when we are experiencing mental health or substance-use problems. In this way, mental health or substance use problems can lead to problems with social support and aggravate our feelings of loneliness. For these reasons, reconnecting with others in healthy, supportive ways is often an important component of managing most mental health or substance-use problems.

<https://www.cmhaff.ca/social-support>

Fabrizio Verrecchi- unsplash.com



Investing in relationships

The more a relationship is valued, the greater the pain experienced when there is a fracture in the relationship. Although small day-to-day conflicts may not cause deep hurt or pain, ongoing unresolved conflict will. The cumulative effect of stress and strain can become a fracture on its own.

Relationship fractures threaten the foundation of boundaries and trust. Strong foundations are needed to create the atmosphere of intimacy necessary for a person to be and to become who they truly are.⁷



Ideally, we can avoid relationship fractures by investing in our relationships. For many of us, our approach to building and maintaining relationships is passive – it is something we do subconsciously and without deliberate effort. We often overlook that it requires an investment of time to maintain good relationships. Here are five things you can do to invest in your relationships!

- 1. Give time:** put more time aside to connect with friends and family.
- 2. Be present:** it can be tempting to check your phone, Facebook messages or even work emails when with family and friends. Try to be present in the moment and be there for your loved ones, and switch out of work mode whenever possible.
- 3. Listen:** actively listen to what others are saying in a non-judgemental way and concentrate on their needs in that moment.

⁷ <https://www.theresilientmind.life/resources/>

4. **Be listened to:** share how you are feeling, honestly, and allow yourself to be listened to and supported.
5. **Recognise unhealthy relationships:** being around positive people can make us happier; however, our wellbeing can be negatively affected by harmful relationships, leaving us unhappy. Recognising this can help us move forward and find solutions to issues.⁸



Building Social Connections While Social Distancing

Quality of relationships is more important than quantity. Having 3 – 4 close relationships with people you trust and respect are better than having 300 on Facebook! During this pandemic, much of our social interaction is on online video meeting apps like Zoom. Assuming your online relationships are good, this form of connecting is better than no interaction. Hopefully, you have video calls with those relationships that mean the most to you — not just from work!

However, communicating over phones and computers is not the same as being face-to-face and in the same room as someone. It is the neurochemical response that occurs during face-to-face interactions that contributes to our wellbeing.

As restrictions are easing this week, where it is safe for you, take advantage of small gatherings where you can interact with others without a screen in between. Get better acquainted with neighbours, reach out to old friends, or meet someone for coffee.

⁸ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/guide-investing-your-relationships>

DEVELOPING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

We have established that strong social support is important to staying psychologically healthy. There are many types of social support including these from the [Here to Help website](#)⁹:

Emotional Support

This is what people often think of when they talk about social support. People are emotionally supportive when they listen to you, show empathy, and tell you that they care about you. For example, if you separated from your partner or lost your job, a close friend might offer you physical comfort, such as a hug or call every day for the first few weeks afterwards just to see how you are doing.

Practical Help

People who care about you might give you practical help or services, such as gifts of money or food, help with cooking or child care, or help moving house. This kind of support helps you complete tasks in your daily life and ease some of the daily stressors you may experience.

Sharing Points of View

Some people help by expressing their confidence in you or by encouraging you. They may remind you of your strengths and help you maintain a helpful and realistic perspective of the situation. For example, a classmate might remind you of your strengths as a speaker and your past successes before an important presentation at school.

Sharing information

It can be very helpful when family, friends or even experts give factual information or share their point of view on a particular situation. For example, a friend who recently married might provide information on the cost of their wedding and tips on how to stick to your budget, someone who has previously lost their job may share resources for networking or tips on coping with the change, or a cancer survivor might provide information on different types of cancer treatments.

Many of the people in your life can provide social support. These can include your parents, spouse or partner, children, siblings, other family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, health professionals, support groups, and sometimes even strangers. Different people in your life may provide different kinds of support, so it's unlikely that one person can provide all the support you need.

⁹ <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-3-social-support>

If you want to build up your social circle, [see this video about ideas to become more social.](#)

For even more ideas, [check out this article on 'how do I improve my social network?'](#)



**WHAT OTHER HEALTH
TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO
LEARN MORE ABOUT?**



Let us know on our Twitter
and Instagram this week!
Follow **@bcpvpa** to read,
engage, share and comment!

Next week

**When Someone You Care
About Has a Mental Illness**



Joseph Pearson -
unsplash.com



Weekly Tips + Links for Your Health

bcp  vpa

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 May 29, 2020

LOVING SOMEONE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

By Rochelle Morandini



It is heartbreaking to watch someone you love struggle with any type of pain – whether it be physical or psychological. You want to help, ease their pain and be their support and positive energy.

Do what you can to support them. At the same time, you need to monitor your own energy levels and psychological health because caregiving can have its own cost to you.

Our current situation in this pandemic has led to significant mental strain for everyone. It is particularly impactful on those who were already struggling with their mental health. The symptoms that people around us are exhibiting in this pandemic certainly reflect the symptoms of a significant mental illness.

During this pandemic, they may experience or exhibit:¹

- **Feelings of hopelessness:** worried about their job, unsure of the future, increased anxiety, fear of the pandemic, feeling trapped at home
- **Loneliness:** socially isolated from family and friends, withdrawal due to inability to cope
- **Harmful self-soothing behaviours:** increase in alcohol and drug use
- **Mood changes:** can be dramatic
- **Tiredness and agitation:** leading to more conflict and challenge
- **Riskier behaviours**



SUPPORTING SOMEONE YOU LOVE

What can you do if you're concerned that someone you love may be struggling?

Here are some of the signs that a loved one may have a mental illness and could use your help:

- They suddenly no longer have interest in hobbies they used to love
- They seem to feel angry or sad for little or no reason

¹ <https://conferenceboard.wistia.com/medias/v95s3v3nkm>

- They don't seem to enjoy anything anymore
- They have told you about, or seem to be hearing, strange voices or having unsettling thoughts
- They seem emotionally numb, like they don't feel anything anymore
- They used to be healthy, but now they're always saying they feel a bit sick
- They eat a lot more or less than they used to
- Their sleeping patterns have changed
- They seem to be anxious or terrified about situations or objects in life that seem normal to you and others
- They have been missing more and more time from work or school
- They have been drinking heavily and/or using drugs to cope
- They are talking about taking their life
- They feel hopeless
- They are avoiding their close friends and family members

[Watch this video:](#) *Can you make someone get help with their mental health?*

What if they deny there is anything wrong or do not want help?

It is important to listen and remain available. Always keep the door open for someone if they ever want to get help or talk about it. [Here is a link](#) to supports for when you want to help, but your loved one does not feel they need support.

What if your loved one stops their treatment?

There may be times when your loved one is starting to feel better and they decide to stop taking their medication or cease seeing their counsellor. Instead of insisting that they should continue their treatment, help them focus on what made them start to feel better.

What was the difference that led to the easing of their symptoms? What was it that made them improve their mood and function? What are they doing now that they were not doing before? What do they think will happen if they stop the treatment? What was the specific thing they felt was making an impact? For example, were the medications helping their brain chemicals? Were they working on learning new skills?

Discuss how discontinuing these things may bring back their challenges and pain.²

British Columbia resources for family members of those with mental illness and addiction

[“Confident Parents, Thriving Kids” \(CMHA\)](#)

A great program by the Canadian Mental Health Association that supports parents of children who may be struggling with their mental health. I took this course and it was excellent.

[Mood Disorders Association of BC](#)

[OpenMind BC: Parents of youth with mental health challenges](#)



Jude Beck - unsplash.com

OPENING UP ABOUT SUICIDE

In my 25+ years of consulting with organizations on employee health, the past five years have been riddled with increasing stories of employees threatening suicide, and suicide happening at the workplace. Please know that I am not an expert in suicide awareness or prevention, but I do know that we need to talk more openly about suicide.

² <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-suicidal>

We need to talk about it and make it safe for people who are struggling to come forward.

We need to talk about how people who have been suicidal can get help and turn their lives around.

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW NEEDS HELP:

National suicide hotline 1-833-456-4566 and text 45645

crisisservicescanada.ca

crisiscentre.bc.ca

Call 1-800-784-2433 or 1-800-SUICIDE or talk to someone on live chat

We need to talk about it – it will not make things worse – but not creating awareness might.

When people are feeling hopeless, they often feel that no one else feels the same way as them. Their perception of their potential future is distorted. Unfiltered thoughts in their mind come and go all the time. When they can't filter them out anymore, the thoughts just continue to breed and cycle — causing more grief and despair.

The symptoms of someone considering suicide are not always obvious. People may not tell you they are thinking of hurting themselves. They may, however, show patterns of behaviour that may indicate something is not right.

Suicidal warning signs may include the person:³

- Planning to or saying they want to hurt or kill themselves or someone else
- Talking, writing, reading, or drawing about death, including writing suicide notes and talking about items that can cause physical harm, such as pills, guns, or knives
- Saying they have no hope, they feel trapped, or there is no point in 'going on'
- Buying guns or bullets, stockpiling medicines, or taking other actions to prepare for a suicide attempt. They may have a new interest in guns or other weapons

³ <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/hw29139> and <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/suicide-prevention/warning-signs.html>

- No longer wanting to see people and wanting to be alone a lot
- No longer taking care of themselves or following their medical provider's advice
- Giving away their things and/or hurrying to complete a will
- Withdrawing from family, friends, or activities
- Feeling like they have no purpose in life or reason for living
- Increasing substance use, like drugs, alcohol, prescription meds and inhalants
- Feeling hopeless about the future or feeling like life will never get better
- Talking about being a burden to someone or about being in unbearable pain
- Experiencing anxiety or significant mood changes, such as anger, sadness or helplessness

Watch this video: [“Mental illness consumed my marriage - until this epiphany”](#)

Note: the [warning signs for children, teens, and young adults](#) may be different than adults. They may include running away from home or doing risky or dangerous things, such as drunk driving.

“We know that those at risk for suicide do not necessarily want to die but do want help in reducing the pain they are experiencing so that they can go on to lead productive, fulfilling lives. There is a lot of ambivalence surrounding the decision to take one's own life, and by recognizing this, and discussing it, we can help the suicidal person start to recognize alternative options for managing their suffering. Often suicidal people are experiencing intolerable emotional pain, which they believe to be unrelenting. They often feel hopeless and trapped. By helping them to recognize and explore alternatives to dying, you are planting the seeds of hope that things can improve.”

- [Crisis Centre BC](#)



HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN DO

If a friend or loved one is thinking about suicide, they need professional help even if suicide isn't an immediate danger. Always take it seriously. It is important to show a potentially suicidal person that you care and are concerned for their safety. This shows that we are taking their feelings seriously. We need to listen to the person without judgment and show them empathy.

How can you help?

As discussed in *The Learning Brain* last week, support from family and friends is an important and valuable part of helping someone who is going through a mental illness. This includes emotional and practical support. If you are currently supporting or want to help a friend or family member, [HeretoHelpBC](#) provides good and practical ideas of how you can support them from:

- recognizing when someone needs help, to
- helping with medications, appointments and treatments, to
- supporting a healthy lifestyle, to
- providing emotional support.

A recent review found that when a family was educated about the illness, the rate of relapse in their loved ones was reduced by half in the first year. The reality is that finding a treatment that works is often a process of trial and error. Therefore, family members can be key in helping identify signs of improvement.

Taking care of an ill family member or friend can be stressful. Remember that you need emotional support too. It may be helpful for you to talk to others about what it is like to support someone who is struggling with mental illness. Be open with loved ones and confidants about what you are going through – talk about it.

You may want to consider joining a support group for family members of people with mental illness. There, you can connect with other people going through the same things and they can help you work through your own emotions. It's very important to make sure you are taking care of your own mental health as well. If you are struggling yourself, seek help.

Take it seriously

If a friend or loved one is thinking about suicide, they need professional help even if suicide isn't an immediate danger. Always take it seriously. It is important to show a potentially suicidal person that you care and are concerned for their safety. This shows that we are taking their feelings seriously. We need to listen to the person without judgment and by showing empathy.

Tip: Be prepared by saving the crisis line number (1-800-784-2433 or 1-800-SUICIDE) on your phone for quick access before your discussion.

What to do when someone is suicidal, according to Mayo Clinic:

[For more information see this link.](#)

- **Encourage the person to call a suicide crisis number.** If they are too distraught or do not have the energy – ask if you can dial the number and get someone on the line and then pass the phone back to them.
- **Encourage the person to seek treatment.** A person who is suicidal or severely depressed may not have the energy or motivation to seek help. If the person doesn't want to consult a doctor or mental health provider, suggest finding help from a support group, crisis center, faith community, teacher or another trusted person. You can offer support and advice but remember that it's not your job to substitute for a mental health provider.
- **Offer to help the person take steps to get assistance and support.** For example, you could research treatment options, make phone calls, review insurance benefit information, or even offer to accompany the person to an appointment.
- **Encourage the person to communicate with you.** Someone who's suicidal may be tempted to bottle up feelings because they feel ashamed, guilty or embarrassed. Be supportive and



understanding and express your opinions without placing blame. Listen attentively and avoid interrupting.

- **Be respectful and acknowledge the person's feelings.** Don't try to talk the person out of their feelings or express shock. Remember, even though someone who's suicidal isn't thinking logically, their emotions are real. Not respecting how the person feels can shut down communication.
- **Don't be patronizing or judgmental.** For example, don't tell someone, 'Things could be worse' or 'You have everything to live for'. Instead, ask questions such as, 'What's causing you to feel so bad?', 'What would make you feel better?' or 'How can I help?'.
- **Never promise to keep someone's suicidal feelings a secret.** Be understanding but explain that you will not be able to keep such a promise if you think their life is in danger. At that point, you must get help.
- **Offer reassurance that things can get better.** When someone is suicidal, it seems as if nothing that can make things better. Reassure the person that with the appropriate treatment, they can develop other ways to cope and can feel better about life again.
- **Encourage the person to avoid alcohol and drug use.** Using drugs or alcohol may seem to ease their painful feelings, but ultimately it will make things worse. It can lead to reckless behaviour or feeling more depressed. If the person can't quit on their own, offer to help find treatment.
- **Remove potentially dangerous items from the person's home, if possible.** If you can, make sure the person doesn't have items around that could be used for suicide such as knives, razors, guns or drugs. If the person takes a medication that could be used for overdose, encourage them to have someone safeguard it and give it as prescribed.

[This 5 min video that forever changed my understanding of suicide.](#)



Victor He - unsplash.com

If someone has attempted suicide:

- Don't leave the person alone.
- Call 911 or your local emergency number right away. Or, if you think you can do so safely, take the person to the nearest hospital emergency room yourself.
- Try to find out if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs or may have taken an overdose.
- Tell a family member or friend right away what's going on.

If a friend or loved one talks or behaves in a way that makes you believe he or she might attempt suicide, don't try to handle the situation alone:

- Get help from a trained professional as quickly as possible. The person may need to be hospitalized until the suicidal crisis has passed.
- Encourage the person to call a suicide hotline number.
- Contact 911 immediately if the person is at imminent risk and is alone or has quickly left your location.

Maybe the person contemplating suicide is you.

If you are thinking about suicide, you are not alone. Many people have thoughts of suicide, for a number of reasons. Thoughts of suicide can be very scary.

You—or the person you love who is at risk—may be hurt, confused, overwhelmed and hopeless about your future. You may feel sadness, grief, anger, guilt, shame, or emptiness. You may think that nothing can be done to change your situation. It may seem like your feelings are just too much to handle right now.

It is important to know that thinking about suicide does not mean that you will lose control or act on these thoughts. Having suicidal thoughts does not mean you are 'weak' or 'crazy'. Many people think about suicide because they are looking for a way to escape the pain they are feeling.

When someone is thinking about suicide, they often feel their situation seems hopeless and wonder if they can stand another minute of feeling this bad. But there are ways to get through this and feel better. **No one has to face this situation alone. Help is available.**

LifeLine Canada: [learn more about coping with suicidal thoughts.](#)

[See this article on Coping with Suicidal Thoughts.](#)



Hope and healing after suicide

I have two friends who have each lost a sibling to suicide. One, where the suicide was a complete shock to my friend and his family. My other friend watched her sibling struggle and struggle, and despite everyone's effort to help, her sibling chose to end his life.

What I saw in these friends — in the aftermath of suicide — was shock, pain, disbelief, grief and sadly, so much guilt. *'Why didn't I see what was happening? I should have tried harder to help'*. These are complex and raw feelings of friends, who themselves, now need support.

If you or someone you know has been or is in this situation,
[please access this valuable handbook](#): *Hope and Health after Suicide*.

Crisis Services Canada: [Get support and see more information here](#).



**WHAT OTHER HEALTH
TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO
LEARN MORE ABOUT?**



Let us know on our Twitter
and Instagram this week!
Follow **@bcpvpa** to read,
engage, share and comment!

Wes Hicks - unsplash.com



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 June 5, 2020

GLOWING WITH GRATITUDE

By Rochelle Morandini



WHY IS GRATITUDE IMPORTANT TO MY HEALTH?

The word **gratitude** is derived from the Latin word *gratia*, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives — whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives. In the process, people usually recognize that at least part of the source of that goodness comes from something outside themselves. As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals — whether it be to other people, nature, or a higher power.¹

I find it interesting how religious teachings from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism all encourage people to cultivate gratitude, as it is seen as an important moral virtue. It is an attribute that has been valued for centuries.

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

Now, over the past decade, there have been many studies demonstrating that people who consciously count their blessings tend to be happier and less depressed. Other research conclusions show that gratitude not only boosts your mental health but also your overall well-being.

By doing an **MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging)** scan on the brain, researchers were able to prove that gratitude changes the neural structures in the brain and makes us feel happier and more content. Feeling grateful and appreciating others when they do something good for us triggers the 'good' hormones and regulates effective functioning of the immune system. Therefore, like natural Prozac, gratitude can boost the neurotransmitter serotonin and activate the brain stem to produce dopamine.

Frank Busch - unsplash.com



When you feel grateful, you experience a synchronized activation of many parts of your brain, which results in positive effects. Scientists have suggested that by activating the reward center of the brain, the way we see the world and ourselves changes for the better.

Researchers also explored how gratitude influences the **hypothalamus**, the region of the brain that controls many essential bodily functions necessary for good health, including sleep, eating, and drinking. The hypothalamus also impacts your stress levels and metabolic rate, which can affect your weight and overall health.

When you experience gratitude, this has a positive effect on the hypothalamus region of the brain, indicating that regular practice of this emotion can help to regulate many behaviors and functions that contribute to your health and well-being.

When your brain releases dopamine, you feel good. It's something you will want to do again. Dopamine also plays a significant role in initiating action, making it more likely that you will repeat the positive behaviors. This can help you engage in many healthy activities that enhance your physical and mental health.²

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES!

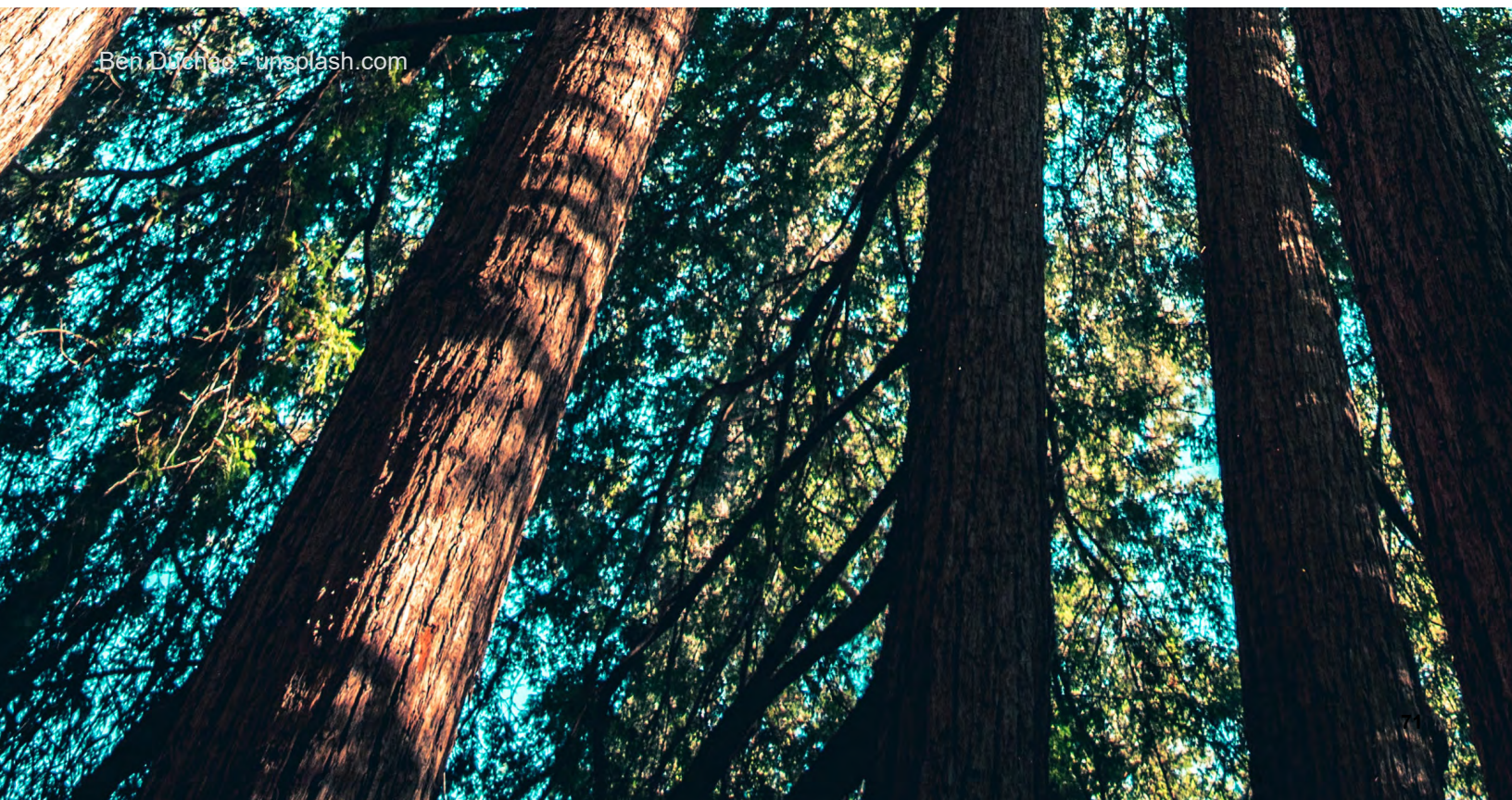
The University of Berkeley has a fair amount of information on this topic. If this is an area of interest to you, [follow this link](#) for more interesting insights on gratitude.

Here is a great [video](#) (under 3 minutes!) on the benefits of gratitude – share with those you love!

Here is a great gratitude experiment you can do on your own, with your family, or even students: [The Gratitude Experiment by WellCast](#)

See, *isn't gratitude amazing?* What's also good to know is that regardless of your personal level of gratitude, it is a quality that you can always nurture and grow.

² <https://medium.com/change-your-mind/how-gratitude-rewires-your-brain-and-how-to-make-it-work-for-you-894e8bf73c59#:~:text=In%20short%2C%20just%20like%20Prozac,brain%2C%20giving%20you%20positive%20effects>



Ben Duchesne - unsplash.com

HOW CAN I PRACTICE GRATITUDE?

There are many ways you can cultivate gratitude on a regular basis.

Many nights before bed, my boys and I name three things we are grateful for in our day. This is a pleasant way to end the day and settle into sleep! Another way I cultivate gratitude is to identify something I am grateful for even in a difficult situation or challenge.



Here are some suggestions to increase your opportunities to practice gratitude followed by some links for additional ideas:

Appreciate everything. Gratitude doesn't have to be saved for the 'big' things in life. The habit of being grateful starts with appreciating every good thing in life and recognizing that there is nothing too small for you to be thankful for.

Write a thank-you note. You can make yourself happier and nurture your relationship with another person by writing a thank-you letter expressing your enjoyment and appreciation of that person's impact on your life. Send it — or better yet — deliver and read it in person, if possible. Make a habit of sending at least one gratitude letter a month. Once in a while, try writing one to yourself.

Thank someone mentally. No time to write? It may help just to think about someone who has done something nice for you, and mentally thank the individual.

Keep a gratitude journal. Make it a habit to write down, or share with a loved one, thoughts about the gifts you've received each day.

Find a gratitude buddy. Find a gratitude buddy for your daily practice – it can be your spouse, your kid, or your friend at work. Set aside some minutes every day where you two (or more if you have more buddies) sit together and discuss the things you are thankful for. Ask questions of each other and open up informally. Sharing thoughts of gratefulness with someone is a great way to sustain motivation and strengthen your emotional skills.

Count your blessings. Pick a time every week to sit down and write about your blessings — reflecting on what went right or what you are grateful for. Sometimes it helps to pick a number of things — such as three to five — that you will identify each week. When writing, be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.

Pray. People who are religious can use prayer to cultivate gratitude.



“Gratitude makes sense of your past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

– Melody Beattie

Meditate. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. Although people often focus on a word or phrase (such as 'peace'), it is also helpful to focus specifically on what you're grateful for (such as, the warmth of the sun or a pleasant sound).

Volunteer. For many people, the key to having more gratitude is give back to others in their local community. Not only will giving back make you more grateful for the things that you may take for granted, but studies have shown that volunteering for the purpose of helping others increases our own well-being, and thus our ability to be more grateful. ^{3, 4}

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/womensmedia/2016/07/08/8-ways-to-have-more-gratitude-every-day/#22929ae21d54>

⁴ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

For even more ideas, check out these resources:

<https://albertonrecord.co.za/228790/gratitude-changes-brain/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>

“Be thankful for what you have, you’ll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don’t have, you will never ever have enough.”

– Oprah Winfrey



WHAT OTHER HEALTH TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT?



Let us know on our Twitter and Instagram this week! Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!

Next week

Diversity & Inclusion: Mental Wellness for the Whole Community

Henry Be Licyia - unsplash.com



bcp  vpa

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 June 12, 2020

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION:

MENTAL WELLNESS FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

By Rochelle Morandini



HOW CAN WE FOSTER A MENTALLY HEALTHY COMMUNITY?

Over the last two weeks, as we have watched with dismay the events in the U.S. and the overwhelming pain and conflict in relation to the safety and well-being of African-Americans, I find it daunting to imagine how society can move forward and turn the tide.

This tide is in a large ocean of deep currents. How can one person — one pebble dropped in the sea — and its accompanying ripple, make a difference?

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”

— Dalai Lama

Canada is certainly not innocent of discrimination and questionable inclusion. From the long-standing racism against Indigenous people and Black communities, to heightened discriminatory acts towards those of Asian descent due to COVID-19, we have much to do in promoting inclusion and boosting our community's well-being.

“Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance”

— Verna Myers, diversity and inclusion expert

Many private sector employers speak of being a diverse and inclusive workforce. In my experience, I do believe that the diversity in the workplace has increased as society's composition has expanded — but I certainly do not believe that the workplaces of most organizations reflect the diversity of their communities. Furthermore, what is less prevalent in the workplace is a level of inclusion in roles of leadership, decision-making and influence.¹

You — yes little 'ol you — can have an amazing, positive impact on the mental well-being of your community by practising the tenets of diversity and inclusion. There is a direct link to an individual's well-being and whether they feel welcomed, feel that they belong, and feel that their contribution is valued. We can all make a difference - **please watch and even share this [video: 'Inclusion starts with I.](#)**



Luis Galvez - unsplash.com

THE DARK SIDE OF DISCRIMINATION

Being the odd one out in an otherwise homogeneous workforce or community can lead to feelings of isolation, and can leave someone vulnerable to abuse, harassment, and bullying. These effects, in turn, can lead to loneliness, lowered self-esteem, more serious mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, and — subsequently — an overall decrease in their quality of life.

¹ <https://www.madworldsummit.com/news/the-interplay-between-inclusion-diversity-and-well-being>

Neuroscience evidence suggests that the brain processes social/emotional feelings of pain (e.g. from ostracism), similarly in how it processes physical pain. The same area of the brain that we know to be involved in processing physically painful feelings—the *dorsal anterior cingulate cortex*—is also relatively active when people have just been excluded.²

Feeling left out significantly impairs our psychological function. Experts tell us that achieving a sense of social belonging is a fundamental psychological *need*. Ostracism alone reduces feelings of belonging, but being outright rejected can reduce one's self-esteem and sense of control.

[Watch this video](#) on the impact of ostracism on your brain.



Papaioannou Ko - unsplash.com

The costs associated with discrimination in the workplace range from negative attitudes among employees towards the organization, disruption in employee cohesion and reduced job performance, to a loss in job productivity and lowered job satisfaction. Homogeneous workforces can cause a negative ripple effect on the well-being of individual employees in the organization. Turnover is often high, environments become toxic as competition is fierce, and individuals are often pushed aside or ignored in favour of a desired persona.

In these organizations, there is an expectation to adopt a 'cultural fit'. These workplaces that promote a 'cultural fit' seek to assimilate employees to a dominant norm by rewarding desired behaviours, traits and characteristics, while penalizing deviances from the norm. In these types of situations, individuals actively mask or downplay their differences so that they can fit in and be successful.

² <http://socialpsychonline.com/2015/11/psychology-ostracism-feeling-excluded/>

Studies indicate just how demoralizing and taxing it is for employees to actively hide aspects of their identity. If you suppress who you are and try to be something you are not, it's easy to imagine the detrimental impact it could have on your well-being.³

When it comes to mental health and diversity and inclusion, research studies in the UK and U.S. demonstrate some troubling findings:⁴

- One in 25 people under the age of 24 in the UK identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. LGBTQ+ people are less satisfied with their lives and experience mental health issues at a rate that is about a third higher than non-LGBTQ+ employees
- [More than half of LGBTQ+ people have experienced depression](#) in the last year and almost half of trans people had thought about taking their life.
- [LGBTQ+ youth are four times more likely to self-harm](#) than their heterosexual peers.
- As a result of the discrimination they face, LGBTQ+ employees are less likely to seek support for mental health issues for fear of more discrimination.
- In one year, [one in three UK adults](#) experienced or witnessed [racism at work](#). Around [a third of employees](#) who have been subjected to racism at work have said they've taken a period of sick leave as a result.
- [New research](#) has revealed that racism shortens lives and hurts the health of Black people. Research found a [73% increase in suicide attempts](#) among Black teens in the U.S.
- [Almost half of Black and Latinx employees](#) in the U.S. have left a job at least partly for mental health reasons.

³ <https://www.hrzone.com/engage/employees/diversity-and-inclusion-how-to-build-more-inclusive-well-being-strategies>

⁴ <https://www.mercer.com/content/dam/mercer/attachments/global/gl-2018-diversity-in-wellness-mercer.PDF>



It has been suggested that in addition to the discrimination within healthcare systems, Black youth are less likely to seek and receive mental health treatment because the mental health stigma is more prevalent in some Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. The discussion around diversity and inclusion is about more than race, culture and gender identity. To embrace diversity is to offer support to communities facing unfair stigmas. This certainly includes the millions of us struggling with mental health problems.



Research carried out by Business in the Community for the Mental Health at *Work Report 2017*, found that employees experiencing poor mental health feel stigmatized by mental illness more than almost anything else. Those surveyed said they felt more comfortable talking about seven other diversity indicators, including their race, age, physical health, and religious beliefs.

Only one in 10 (11%) of the people surveyed said they felt they were able to disclose a mental health issue to their line managers.



THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF INCLUSION ON EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Inclusiveness is about being open to others who are not like you – perhaps a different age, [gender](#) or ethnic background. It is about adjusting the way you communicate to build relationships with people from cultures and backgrounds that are different than your own, and to speak up to challenge stereotypes and [prejudice](#).

How does an inclusive work setting positively impact employee well-being?⁵

(For more details go directly to the [source](#)).

Inclusive workplaces support positive self-concept

Our cultural and social identities (e.g. nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, health status) form an integral part of our self-concept and self-esteem. [Self-affirmation theory](#) posits that individuals are motivated to maintain the integrity of the self. Integrity refers to one's sense of 'worth' — an individual's belief that they are a 'good person'. [Self-affirming techniques](#) reduce distress and promote more adaptive responses in the face of threats to integrity. When we celebrate, encourage and value the expression of an individual's unique identity, their self-esteem and integrity are better supported.

Inclusive workplaces support professional achievement and job satisfaction

Inclusive workplaces seek to remove obstacles that can threaten the career progression of diverse talent. Workers in inclusive teams are twice as likely to receive regular career development opportunities and ten times more likely to be effective than workers in non-inclusive teams. Workers in inclusive teams are nineteen times more likely to be very satisfied with their job than workers in non-inclusive teams. [See this PDF for more information.](#)

Inclusive workplaces support work-life balance

Inclusive workplaces also foster well-being through efforts to [increase flexibility regarding when and where work is performed](#). Workplaces that endorse flexible working allow workers greater control over balancing work commitments with non-work demands. [Improved work-life balance](#) reduces stress and increases physical and mental well-being.

Inclusive workplaces promote connection with others

[Workers in inclusive settings](#) benefit from improved interpersonal interactions and connection with others. Employees will experience a [greater sense of belonging](#). Our need for social connectedness is hard-wired. Studies show that the neural networks that promote social activity are the same networks that promote the satisfaction of physical needs like food and water.

Inclusive workplaces promote pro-social behaviour

Workers in inclusive settings are [more likely to receive help](#) from their colleagues. Instrumental and emotional support from colleagues buffer work stress. Employees are also [less likely to experience prejudice, harassment, or discrimination](#) when their workplaces are inclusive. Studies show that [helping others makes us happy](#) and supports physical and mental health and well-being.⁶

⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/do-something-different/201609/diversity-and-inclusiveness-is-good-your-well-being>

⁶ <https://cultureplusconsulting.com/2018/08/17/how-does-employee-well-being-link-to-diversity-and-inclusion/>



How does feeling inclusive impact an individual's work experience?

Research performed by the Diversity Council Australia suggesting that Australians working in inclusive teams are:⁷

- *Nineteen times more likely to be very satisfied with their job than workers in non-inclusive teams;*
- *Four times more likely to stay with their current employer;*
- *Two times more likely to receive regular career development opportunities; and*
- *Almost seven times less likely than workers in non-inclusive teams to have personally experienced harassment and/or discrimination in the past year*

Does being inclusive improve your own well-being?

Research performed by the University of Hertfordshire, as part of their Do Something Different program, identified a strong relationship between employee's diverse and inclusive behaviours and their own individual well-being. The researchers were interested in whether being more inclusive might have personal benefits for their own staff in terms of their well-being.

They measured well-being using a reliable scale composed of factors around coping, [happiness](#), physical health, decision-making, being valued, talking to others, having meaning in life and close relationships.

⁷ <https://theprofessionalsecurityofficer.com/the-important-links-between-well-being-diversity-and-inclusion-by-dr-alison-wakefield-fsyi/>

The results showed a strong relationship between being diverse/inclusive and well-being – the statistical tests produced highly significant effects:

- *Someone with high inclusiveness was about four times more likely to have high well-being, compared to someone with low inclusiveness.*
- *Someone with medium inclusiveness was twice as likely to have high well-being, compared to someone with low inclusiveness.*
- *Someone with high inclusiveness was very unlikely (only 3% chance) to have low well-being.*



This research tells us that being inclusive of people who are not like ourselves is actually healthy! This study showed that well-being and openness to change are strongly linked to inclusiveness - ***the more inclusive a person is, the better their well-being***. Basically, those people whose inclusiveness increased during the study experience greater improvements in well-being.⁸

HOW CAN YOU, AS A LEADER, HELP TO MAKE YOUR WORKPLACE MORE INCLUSIVE?

What can you do today to be a more inclusive leader? The following five moves are a good place to start. ⁹ [Check out this link](#) for examples and more detail.

⁸ <https://www.employee-well-beingcongress.co.uk/news/how-diversity-can-positively-impact-the-emotional-and-mental-well-being-of-a-business>

⁹ <https://open.buffer.com/7-simple-ways-to-to-be-more-inclusive-in-work-and-life/>

1. Recognize Your Unconscious Bias—and Be Humble About It

It's impossible to understand all of the values, beliefs, norms and rituals that are important to every person at work. But work to understand your own unconscious bias about what you assume about others.

2. Make the Unwritten Rules Obvious

Every group and organization has cultural norms. But if they aren't written anywhere, and are treated as understood, it can be harder for new members of [diverse groups](#) to know them. This is especially true on international teams where people from different cultures or backgrounds don't know the rules and accidentally misstep. Proactively look for ways to make sure all employees are comfortable.

3. Don't Overlook the 'Small' Stuff

When you witness someone being rude or dismissive to someone else, call it out. Don't focus on finding fault but on stating what you notice and suggesting alternatives that include everyone.

4. Understand the Advantages You're Born With

Each person's race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, physical ability, and religious practices afford them different levels of access and privilege.

Inclusive leaders recognize that members of their team have different considerations. So, along with striving to be thoughtful, it's also important to be understanding if your employee approaches a situation differently.

5. Believe That People Are Created Equal, But Not the Same

Inclusive leaders are able to notice and talk about difference without making anyone feel objectified or singled-out. Leaders are [more successful](#) when they see the unique qualities of each individual on the team.

Check out these two articles:

[5 Things All Inclusive Leaders Do Every Day](#)

[7 Ways to Make People Feel Important](#)

PROGRESSING FORWARD

The topic of inclusion and diversity is broad and complex, and goes beyond the breadth of this document. Talking about inclusion can be intimidating because it's not always clear what role you can play as an individual.

Well, you do not need to tackle this alone. Consider yourself a piece of a larger puzzle and focus on what you can do to improve your work environment, neighbourhood and other spaces. By taking these small — yet incremental — steps, you can start a ripple effect to encourage diversity and inclusion in your environments. How can **you** make a difference?



**WHAT OTHER HEALTH
TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO
LEARN MORE ABOUT?**



Let us know on our Twitter
and Instagram this week!
Follow **@bcpvpa** to read,
engage, share and comment!



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

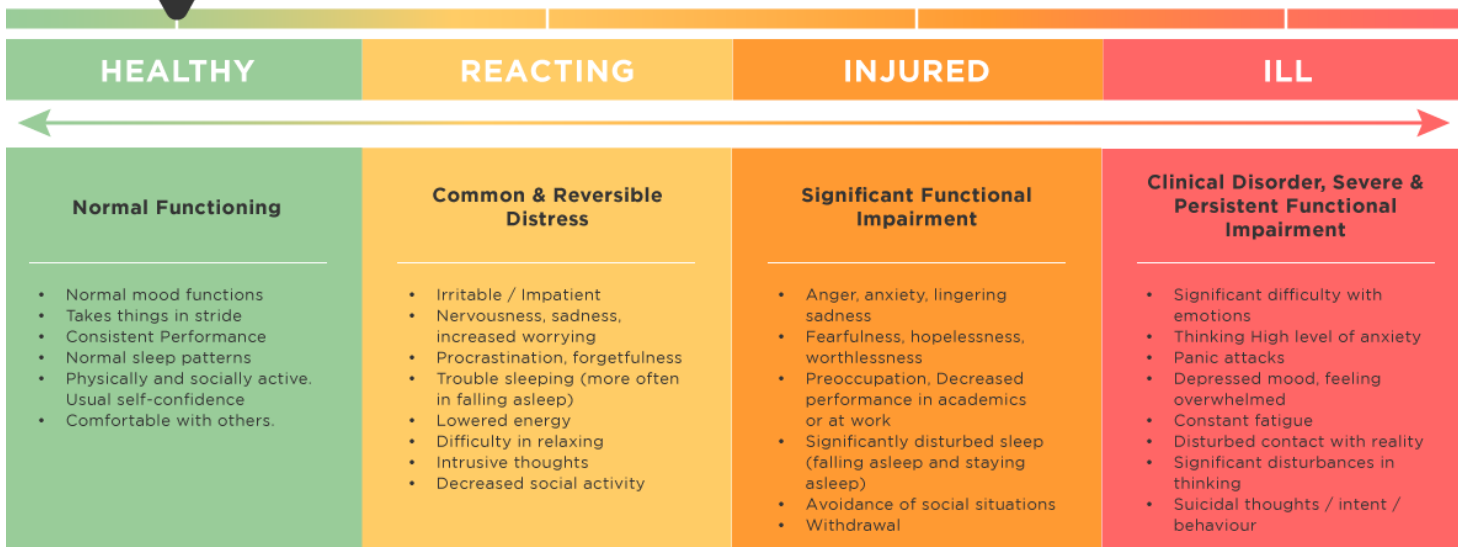
Friday June 19, 2020

A SUMMER OF OPPORTUNITY

By Rochelle Morandini



The Mental Health Continuum



Source: sapience.com.au

The last few months have certainly felt strained and have been full of concerning news. Our lives are certainly different now than they were when I started this series. However, the learnings are more important now than ever!

Take a moment and do a check-in. Where are you right now on the mental health continuum?

Soon, the summer break will be here. Ask yourself: what can you do for yourself this summer? What commitment can you make to yourself and to those you support, that will help you move 'leftwards' on the continuum?

RESILIENCE - STRENGTHENING IN THE SUN

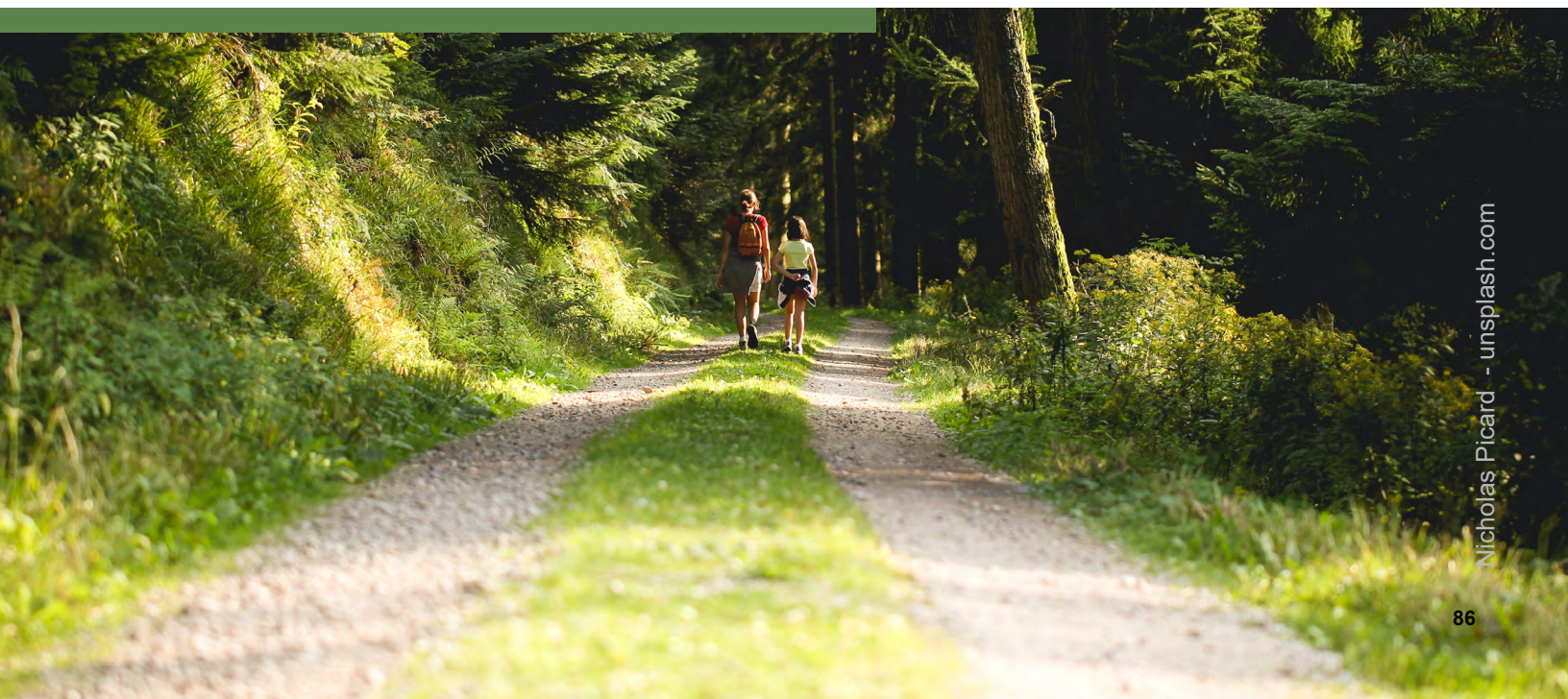
What better time is there to invest in yourself than the next two summer months? You can take small steps to build your resilience. By building resilience, you can start work in September with more energy and enhanced well-being!

Build your resilience by:

- Getting connected, and investing in and nurturing relationships
- Setting a goal each day that is meaningful for you
- Remaining hopeful
- Considering how to change your perspective when you are trapped in negative thinking — be creative!
- Being proactive: don't ignore problems – make a plan and move forward one step at a time

Boost resilience and practice self-care for 10 weeks by:

- **Exercising:** elevated cardio, in particular, has shown to have a tremendous impact on our mood and mental health.
 - Schedule in 30 minutes a day! It does not have to be all at once. Even if it is 10 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise 3 times a day. [Watch this video](#) to find out what intensity level is right for you!



- **Eating the right foods:** Fuel your body with food that supports your overall well-being.
 - June to September are great months for us British Columbians, due to all the wonderful local foods in season, such as salmon, Fraser Valley berries, and Okanagan fruit.

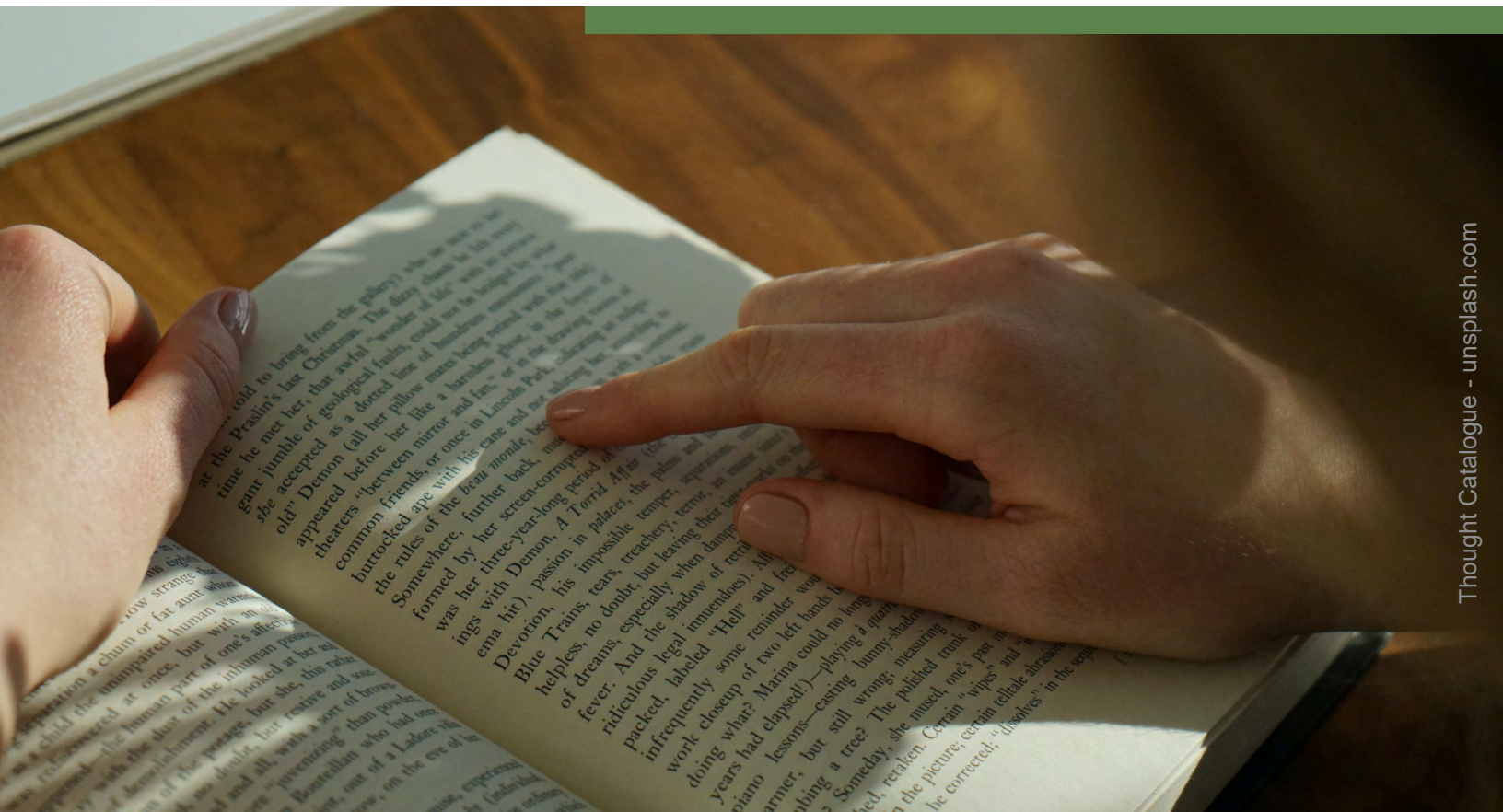
Stick with these great foods for the brain:

- Green, leafy vegetables – don't forget broccoli as well!
- Fatty fish
- Berries – particularly blueberries
- Oranges
- Nuts and seeds – particularly almonds, walnuts and pumpkin seeds
- Coffee and green tea (in moderation)
- Turmeric
- Eggs

For more information, check out [this link!](#)



I don't know about you, but for me, summer time means patios, champagne by the campfire, and Baileys in my coffee (not all at once!). It is nice to have these treats as we relax and enjoy some festivities; however, it is important to be cautious with these self-soothing activities and other substances. When not managed carefully, they can often add to your stress and worsen your mental health.



REST

This is a critical one! Our body and our brains rely heavily on rest and sleep to *develop, learn, recover and restore*. We often sacrifice our rest to squeeze more things into our day – but what are we sacrificing in the end?

More than 40% of people with chronic health conditions also suffer from insomnia. And this statistic gets even more alarming when you look at the relationship between poor sleep and mental health.

So: do your body, brain and nerves a favour. Develop habits this summer that help you rest and refresh your body. And then, hopefully, you can carry these habits with you into the fall.

Here are some habits that encourage rest:

- Breathing techniques to help you regulate and calm your system. This is easy to do, several times a day for only a few minutes each time. These short spurts will minimize the tiring impact of stress on your well-being.
- Get the right amount of sleep! Take time this summer to set a better sleep pattern and rhythm for the fall.
 - Remember, the Public Health Agency of Canada recommends that adults get 7-9 hours of sleep a night.¹



Annie Spratt - unsplash.com

Here are 10 tips to help you sleep better: ²

1. **Avoid drinking caffeine close to bedtime.**
2. **Avoid drinking alcohol close to bedtime.**
3. **Unwind:** Stress has a big impact on sleep, so it's important to take time to relax before bed.
4. **Exercise before bedtime — but not within 2 to 4 hours of sleeping.**

¹ <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

² <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

5. **Follow the same routine.** Try to keep the same sleep and wake schedule every day—including weekends.
6. **Avoid naps if you experience sleep problems.**
7. **Avoid going to bed too hungry or too full.**
8. **Get up if you do not fall asleep within half an hour.** Go back to bed once you feel drowsy.
9. **Make your bedroom comfortable and only use it for sleeping.**
10. **Challenge the belief that you can't function without a perfect night's sleep.**



See the [full version here!](#)

If you are struggling to get a good night's sleep or want to sleep better (quantity and quality!), there are helpful apps and even sleep treatment (check out [Haleo](#)) available.

Cognitive behaviour therapy via [Haleo](#) and assessment tools via the app can really help get you on the right path. And even better, this type of therapy can be covered by your extended health benefits.

POSITIVE THINKING TO START YOUR HOLIDAYS

It may take some effort, but our brains and physiology could benefit from some positive vibes these days. Perhaps try practising some positive psychology:

1. ***Start the day with positive affirmation.***
2. ***Focus on the good things, however small.***
3. ***Find humour in bad situations.***
4. ***Turn failures into lessons.***

5. Transform negative self-talk into positive self-talk.

6. Focus on the present — not today, not this hour, only this exact moment.

7. Surround yourself with positive friends, mentors and co-workers.



For those of you finding yourselves struggling in the middle to the right side of the continuum, summer is an excellent time to seek help.

Please don't hesitate to...

- Visit your physician – virtually or in person.
- Book a counsellor.
- Contact your [Employee Assistance Program](#) or the [EIP](#).
- Research other treatment modalities, such as neurofeedback, and see if it is right for you.
- Please **DO NOT** let stigma get in the way of your path to feeling better. The next 8

weeks can make all the difference in turning around how you feel and enhancing your well-being. Reach out and get support.

- Get in touch with me at **604-689-3399**! I can direct you to resources.



Last word, for now...

- Take care of yourself.
- Remember to take time to play.
- Laugh loud and often!
- **And, if you haven't yet, try mindfulness meditation** – or just find ways to calm your mind a few times a day. There are lots of guided meditation options on YouTube if you just want to try. Try one with your kids! It will be safe.
 - Check out mindfulness apps, such as Calm, Headspace, or Buddhify

Mindfulness can benefit our mental health in many ways. To name a few ways, mindfulness can:

- *Calm our mind;*
- *Reduce our stress;*
- *Improve our memory and concentration;*
- *Enhance our creativity;*
- *Decrease our emotional reactivity;*
- *Increase our empathy; and,*
- *Improve our mood and resilience.*

We wish you a wonderful summer, full of song, dance, and relaxation — like this guy in this [quick video clip](#)!

Stay tuned for The Learning Brain series to start up again in the Fall!

We will explore different coping skills and how to identify and develop those skills to strengthen our mental fortitude.



WHAT OTHER HEALTH TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT?



Let us know on our Twitter and Instagram this week!
Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!