

One of the aspects that is fairly hard to measure, much less talk about is stress, grief, depression, mental health and change. Here are some articles simply to help us think through what we are going through, inside ourselves as well as those around us. I offer these articles simply because I know the organization offering them, and they are good articles to reflect on.

And one area of concern that is not addressed here – haven't found an article or interview I like, is on the effect of the coronavirus and physical distancing on children – of all ages. Plus their families. There are a number of news comments and a few articles on the long term effects of Covid-19, so even if, as we wish, the physical distancing ended today, we know that there will be long term mental health effects.

Sadly, I heard of a person who committed suicide and one who threatened suicide recently. I don't know all the reasons for this tragedy, but we know these kinds of actions are like a ripple in a pond. They spread out and keep producing "waves" of various kinds, in everyone who knows their family, friends, everyone who knows the person and the community.

Plus, even though this musing and some other weekly musings or reflections are long – you can read them at your own pace, like with this one - one article a day. I offer these because I think they offer good advice, they help us think in ways we may not have before, and there is good information. And as always, your comments and suggestions for articles are welcome.

Mental Health Awareness Month: How To Cope With Social Distancing

Since 1949, the entire month of May has been recognized as Mental Health Awareness Month. It may be surprising to know that 1-in-5 individuals will experience some form of mental illness in their lifetime. Because of this, Mental Health Awareness Month aims to bring the importance of mental health to light. This May in particular is an especially important time to raise awareness for mental health as social distancing and trauma caused by the Coronavirus outbreak have taken a severe emotional toll on individuals across the globe.

This outbreak is incredibly stressful for a number of reasons. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children alike. But coping with this stress can make you, your loved ones, and your entire community stronger. Here at Penn Foundation, we understand the importance of mental health, and we want to provide you with some helpful tips and techniques that you can use to cope with the current situation.

Stay Connected With Loved Ones

Living through the frightening realities of a global pandemic is traumatic, and social isolation can amplify the effects of that trauma. Penn Foundation therapist, James M., [recommends](#) scheduling regular video or phone calls with your loved ones to check in. But rather than just making small talk and exchanging basic pleasantries, James recommends setting up an 'interview-style' conversation that dives into raw emotions and the traumatic experiences we are all trying to cope with.

Doing this creates what is known as a "timeline of experiences" that can establish an internal sense of order. This is beneficial when the pandemic has made many feel helpless and out of control.

Stay Connected With Yourself

During this time, it is also important to maintain self-awareness and reflect on your thoughts and feelings. One way of doing this is by writing a letter to yourself or making journal entries that discuss your emotions and perceptions during the pandemic. This could include many of the same questions and answers that would be covered in an interview-style conversation mentioned above, but it should also include what you want to gain from this experience. With so much normalcy stripped away from daily life, it is important to take the time to reflect on what you hope to achieve as a result of the change in routine.

Staying connected with yourself also involves taking care of your physical body. Due to the global health crisis, it has never been more important to stay healthy and provide your body with the valuable nutrients it needs to combat illness. Eating right, taking vitamins, and making time for socially distanced physical exercise are all good ways to keep yourself healthy during this time. Mindful meditation and yoga are also good activities that promote both mental and physical health.

Here at Penn Foundation, we know that these times are challenging and scary for individuals and families in our community. Mental health has never been so important. During Mental Health Awareness month, and throughout the year, we will continue to provide mental health care and substance abuse treatment to those in need. If you would like to speak to someone about the things you're experiencing, reach out about our telehealth services.

Coping With Grief During A Pandemic

Grief is a simple word used to sum up a not so simple experience. It is as unique as the individual experiencing it.

Dealing with the emotions and stress that come with loss can be the most trying thing we ever experience. Grieving is often referred to as a process, but what that process looks like and how long it takes, especially amid a global pandemic, does not have a straightforward outline.

To deal with our grief, we must first know that grief is normal, even when circumstances are not.

“Grieving is a highly individual experience. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. The grieving process takes time, and healing is gradual. There is no ‘normal’ timetable for grieving.”

Our very own Karen Kern, Vice President of Education and Training, provides some insight into the question ‘what should I be feeling?’

“Grief is a natural response to loss. Many people initially experience numbness, but denial, disbelief, confusion, shock, sadness, anger, despair and guilt are the wide range of feelings you may experience. It is important to know these feelings are normal and common reactions to loss.”

Knowing that things like anger and confusion are acceptable reactions to what has happened can change how we process them. We can find comfort in gaining an understanding of our own emotions or helping others process their grief.

What else might we feel? Karen references Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief:

- DENIAL: “This can't be happening to me.”
- ANGER: “Why is this happening? Who is to blame?”
- BARGAINING: “Make this not happen, and in return I will _____.”
- DEPRESSION: “I'm too sad to do anything.”

- ACCEPTANCE: “I’m at peace with what happened.”

But, she notes that “not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages and that’s okay. Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to go through each stage to heal. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years.”

The main thing to remember is that your feelings are your own. The shape your grief takes may not look like someone else’s, but that doesn’t mean it is unhealthy. Likewise, just because you are managing doesn’t mean you don’t need an outlet for your grief.

Now, more than ever, it is important to reach out. The comfort that comes from drawing in your family and friends to remember, to memorialize, and to support may be absent in person but there are things you can do to honor your loved one and receive much needed encouragement.

Some funeral homes have started implementing virtual services for extended friends and family. For you, this may just be one way you find comfort while remaining at a distance.

Saying ‘goodbye’ often seems impossible, but remembering a life lived can bring a spot of joy into the sadness. Creating a Facebook Memorial Page is a good way to start the journey of remembering. You can look at pictures, share your favorite memories, and start discussions that you can look back on whenever you may need to.

Mourning in isolation adds a layer to our grief that can be challenging, so how do we manage it? “Allow yourself to grieve,” says Karen, “Coping with death is vital to your mental health.” Much of what we will feel is the same, maybe intensified, but the same.

Here are some of Karen’s recommendations on how to cope in isolation:

- Talk to relatives and friends who understand your feelings of loss. Talking about how you are feeling to others can help you work through the grieving process.
- Join an online support group with others experiencing loss.
- Take care of your health by eating well, getting ample rest, and if possible, spend time outdoors walking or simply observing your surroundings.
- Draw comfort from your faith by praying, mediating, or attending online religious services.
- Write about your loss in a journal.
- Make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating your loved one.
- Try to maintain your hobbies and interests. There is comfort in keeping a routine.

Even with all these tools, grief can often become unmanageable, by no fault of your own. What you are feeling with a loss is intense. If you find yourself unable to process, you may start to suffer from chronic fatigue, depression, or severe anxiety. It is important to acknowledge and address these reactions to your grief.

Karen points out that “if the pain of your loss is so constant and severe that it keeps you stuck in an intense state of mourning, you may be experiencing complicated grief or clinical depression. When this occurs, it is important to seek professional help for your grief.”

If you have found it difficult to cope with a recent loss, whether it be a loved one you deeply cared for or the loss of a livelihood due to COVID-19, please find a friend, a counselor who can help you cope. Or you can recommend to a friend, family member or neighbour that they seek help.

Spring Cleaning for the Mind

By Lauren Cogan, LCSW

As the spring season approaches, many of us focus a lot of our physical energy on cleaning out our living spaces, our cars, our gardens, outdoor areas, and even our computer's hard drive. It is natural to feel a sense of relief, and even accomplishment, when we rid ourselves of belongings that are no longer of use to us.

Spring calls for growth and renewal. As the trees and flowers bloom and the temperature changes, what if we shifted some of our energy and focus to spring cleaning our mind? Most of us do not think about our mind being a place that also needs consistent "upkeep."

According to the late Dr. Wayne Dyer, most of us experience an average of 60,000 thoughts per day. That's a tremendous amount of thinking going on in our mind! Many therapists, counselors, and psychologists engage patients in a useful and highly effective modality entitled "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy." Cognitive Behavioral Therapy was developed by psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck in the 1960s. This modality teaches people how thoughts create feelings and emotions which then impact our behavior and/or the way our body reacts. Extensive research has demonstrated how impactful this modality can be on improving symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a powerful tool because it teaches us to pay close attention not just to our thoughts but also the content of our thoughts. Paying close attention helps to identify common themes within our mind or repetitive thoughts. In helping to identify these themes within our mind, people are able to label and identify what counselors refer to as "cognitive distortions" or "irrational thinking styles."

Irrational thinking styles are powerful indicators into the landscape of our brain. Often times, as people begin to investigate their inner most thoughts, they are able to recognize unhealthy patterns in their thinking. Some common forms of unhealthy thinking styles are all-or-nothing thinking, magnification, labeling, disqualifying the positive, mind reading, and catastrophizing. All-or-nothing thinking styles lead people to view commonalities within their life or situation as only having two solutions: bad or good or right and wrong. Labeling can lead to a negative belief about ourselves: "I am not good enough" and "I am worthless." Disqualifying the positive leads to thoughts that discount all the positive qualities of ourselves, our lives, and events. Mind reading leads people to believe that they know for a fact what others are thinking. Lastly, catastrophizing thoughts lead people to imagine the worst possible outcome and will often experience "what ifs." Unhealthy thoughts in our mind can often become a habit, and they repeat themselves in our mind over and over again, leading to feelings of worry, anxiety, and sadness.

Here are some tips to get started on spring cleaning your mind:

1. Make a conscious effort to pay attention to your thoughts, your ideas, and your beliefs. Most people find that they think about the same negative thoughts every day! Once you have a mental or physical list of these thoughts, ask yourself: What do I worry about most? Where did these negative thoughts come from? Did someone tell me this thought? Do I truly believe this to be true? How does this thought make me feel? Is this a fact or an opinion? A journal can be very helpful.
2. Look outside this busy head space, and try viewing your thoughts as a story. What is my story? Is it helping me solve problems? Is my story creating feelings of stress?

3. Get outside and do things that you enjoy! Maybe even do something that you've always been scared to do. Engaging in something that makes us uncomfortable can help to challenge negative thoughts and transform them from "I can't do this" to "I tried it, and I am okay."

4. Let go of worries and improve your ability to accept. If you experience the same repetitive thought that you just can't seem to let go, ask yourself: Is there something I need to do to be able to let this thought or idea go? Is there something about my life in this moment that is keeping me from letting this go? Do I need to reach out to someone or change a relationship that is impacting me?

5. Put effort into changing negative thinking styles and negative stories. We cannot get rid of our thoughts, but we can change the atmosphere of our head space. We can think in healthy, rational ways that help clear our mind of stressful, unwanted thoughts, ideas, and beliefs.

6. Be patient! Cleaning out unhealthy thoughts takes time and lots of practice.

Lauren Cogan, LCSW, is a child, adolescent, and adult therapist at Penn Foundation, providing individual and family therapy, wellness groups for adolescents, and women's trauma groups. Lauren uses an eclectic approach to counseling that encompasses many modalities in order to bring about lasting change. She earned her Master's degree in Social Work from Temple University and has a specialization in the areas of depression, anxiety, trauma, emotional regulation, family and parenting issues, and self-esteem.

Loving Someone With Depression

According to the World Health Organization, there are approximately 264 million individuals living with depression around the world. Because depression is common, you are likely to know someone who is living with this condition. Depression is different from typical fluctuations in mood and short-lived emotional responses to everyday challenges. Especially when long-lasting or with severe intensity, depression can become a serious health condition, affecting nearly all aspects of life. If there is a loved one in your life experiencing depression, there are a few things you can do to help them feel loved through their downswings, promoting a full and meaningful relationship for you both.

Listening can be one of the most effective ways to show your loved one that you care. If they're willing to talk to you about how they're feeling, listen without trying to correct them or give advice. You can make them aware that you care for them and want to be present in their life. Don't be afraid to ask questions either. You can ask them questions about how they're feeling and ways that you can show your support.

Depression can cause a variety of challenges that can create tension in relationships at times. In those moments, it's okay to experience and acknowledge feelings of frustration and anger. It is also important to take a step back and examine how you can be helpful to your loved one, while also maintaining your sense of happiness and fulfillment. This can be difficult, but it is important to communicate your concerns and explain any boundaries you need to create within your relationship. If you can be patient and are willing to compromise, you will be more likely to find a solution that works for both of you.

Loving someone with depression is not always easy, but our team at Penn Foundation can support you and your loved one. If you notice signs of depression or are seeking support for someone you care about with depression, you can visit our [Mental Health Services webpage](#) for more information about our programs, resources, and other services.

Penn Foundation is based in Pennsylvania, US, so I recommend finding resources close by, here in Canada and hopefully near home. There are social workers, counselors, therapist and agencies locally.