



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #10:

NAVIGATING LIFE IN MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY



For many people, 2020 has been surreal, challenging and upsetting. There has been no other time in recent history where so many significant events, from natural and man-made ecological disasters to political, cultural and social upheaval, have felt like shared experiences with people from all over the world. Each of these can build anxiety and contribute to stress that affects our mental health.

With the added complications of COVID-19, extended durations of isolation and quarantine, the need to wear personal protective equipment, economic challenges, and the constant reminders to keep your distance to avoid transmission can further erode already fragile mental health. People who are feeling particularly vulnerable and have already experienced poor mental health may find that their symptoms worsen or amplify. They could have difficulty processing distressing information. They may be susceptible to triggers that cause relapse and create mental health emergencies, affecting any progress they may have made towards recovery. The reality is that the pandemic is indiscriminate: We are all vulnerable and we need to provide support to one another.

What we may not realize is that, in some form, we all have feelings and concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced factors that are fueling added stress and anxiety and our capability and methods to process them. It's also crucial that we acknowledge the differences the pandemic has brought to the ways we can access mental health treatment and supports.

In response to the need for additional support, Homewood Health was proud to be selected as a preferred partner in the Wellness Together Canada initiative funded by Health Canada. Free to all Canadians, the website provides access to innovative resources including online and text-based supports, coaching, counselling, courses, self-assessment tools, and other helpful resources to explore. If you aren't familiar with these services, yet, they are worth looking into.



The pandemic has accentuated mental health challenges

Achieving good mental health takes a lot of focus on improving your physical and emotional well-being. Introducing structured time, routines and therapeutic activities helps to develop healthy patterns of behaviour which clarify thinking and help you feel more energetic as you navigate through recovery. With the pandemic, this has become increasingly difficult because impactful factors are now more unpredictable.

Where we may have had regular checks and balances in place to help reinforce positive structure and activities, some of these supports have been affected or unattainable during the pandemic. Think back to earlier in the year when nearly everyone was staying at home, and there was a lot of unstructured time. For some, work, school and home routines were in limbo. We feared the unknown, job losses, and financial difficulties for both ourselves and our country. For those who were able to work from home, juggling childcare, online learning, and our jobs was and remains a delicate balance and often poses unique challenges. We questioned how effective our situation was going to be because it was exhausting. We didn't know how to move forward and wondered what things would look like and feel like when patterns resumed, and restrictions gradually began to relax.

Coping with the pandemic forced feelings of isolation and loneliness to the forefront. At the same time, we were introduced to an awareness that focused on proximity and interactions and made us feel like we were losing autonomy. At home, personal space was lacking, and in public, hand washing, distancing, face masks and even the direction you were moving in all mattered.

One expert spoke about how we have been under a "steady stream of threat cues...that convey to your conscious and unconscious mind that you are in danger." As a result, we've been in fight/flight/freeze mode. These triggers are "more likely to capture the attention of people who are already anxious and depressed," and can "result in sharp increases in negative thought patterns, emotions and behaviour towards self and others."¹

As all aspects of life continue to move forward, there will be more worry about contending with returning to work, school and all of the other activities that we participated in with

ease before the pandemic. We'll re-enter these spaces with distractions and more stressors created in part by information and misinformation. At work, we'll be sensitive to the cleanliness of personal and shared areas. We may react if we hear or see someone cough or sneeze. Remember, implicitly, our brains remain on high alert. One way to reduce stress and anxiety is to avoid spending too much time on social media, as it's mostly unfiltered and can introduce narrow perspectives, false narratives and negative thought patterns.

While the cumulative affect can be frustrating and distressing, don't forget that it's important to always look at recovery as a long-term continuum. Remember that spending time on improving your mental health requires dedication and sustained effort. The resources you work with, and the path you take will evolve. Even without the influence of a global pandemic, there will be many twists and turns since no one's recovery follows a straight line. You'll have good days and bad. Acknowledging these realities and the effort required is an integral part of the process of feeling well. One of the best things you can do is be open to access a variety of supports. It can help tip the scales in favour of having more good days than bad.

Mental health recovery, pandemic style

Access to resources that help people work through their mental health challenges has been one of those evolutions. In-person supports such as therapists, meetings and support groups, and social gatherings with friends and family may have moved to telephonic or digital mediums. Embracing alternate treatment methods and accepting both the positive and negative aspects is important for you to be able to adapt. You need to bring in tools that will continue to support how you recover.

Spending time figuring out how to access these through new technologies such as video conferencing (even the notion of sitting "on camera" on a video call) can induce anxiety. Long hours on video calls and teleconferences can also be tiring. While the benefits of participating in the discussion are many, there is also an appreciation that adding more stressors puts people in active mental health recovery at further risk.

During the pandemic, being able to do something as simple as renewing a prescription comes with increased complications. Still, everyone is working together to address these. For example, many insurance companies have relaxed limits on the quantities of medication that can be dispensed at one time. People can continue to access their prescriptions so they can continue to take them as prescribed.² It may seem like a little thing, but it can provide a release of worry and relief.

Accumulated stress can create dangerous health emergencies where the next steps to take can seem unclear. In healthcare emergencies like a heart attack, or a mental health crisis should you try to visit a doctor or go to an emergency room? Will you be exposed to COVID-19 along the way? To help ease your thoughts, it may be worthwhile getting clarity on different scenarios. With this information, you will be able to plan and have a better idea of what will happen. It also gives you a chance to discuss how any special arrangements or necessary supplies you could require can be accommodated.

Don't be afraid to reach out to your regular support system. You can still speak with friends, family and even colleagues when you need to. While it may not be in person, being willing to adapt to different methods puts this vital network within reach. Don't be surprised if people reach out to you because they care.

Tried and true ways to continue on your recovery journey

Helping yourself move forward is also important to maintain. Don't forget that one of the healthiest things you can commit to is movement and regular exercise, whether it's going for a short walk, dancing to a song or doing laundry. Ensuring that you are eating well, maintaining good nutrition, and getting at least 7 hours of sleep each night can work wonders for your mental health. Nourishing your body and mind will help you propel forward.

While it may be more difficult to practice self-care, look at new examples that you may not have considered before. Dressing up for a special dinner at home instead of staying in your comfy clothes can give you a pick-me-up. Perhaps you've embraced a new hair colour or longer hairstyle due to restrictions. Here are additional considerations and more subtle ways of being kind to yourself:

- Make a list of 20 things you want to do and then commit to doing just one of them each day. It will help give you direction and renew your focus. Plus setting the goal of completing one a day will relieve the pressure on you.
- Create a gratitude journal where you take time to notice and record the little things that inspire happiness and bring you joy. This practice takes only a few minutes each day. Still, it helps you develop good coping behaviours and strategies and avoids unhealthy ones which may put you at risk.
- Acknowledge when you need to retract or retreat from information or people whose viewpoints don't line up with your own. These interactions can be toxic and bring up trauma that triggers long-term effects. It's more than okay to take extended breaks from social media and news in favour of your mental health.

Being gentle with first responders, front-line workers and caregivers

The pandemic has certainly created painful and stressful circumstances for first responders, front-line workers and caregivers. They have experienced personal risk and significant grief. These factors have served as the catalyst to a host of health issues and trauma that have may amplified mental health concerns. While many would say that this is simply part of their jobs, healthcare workers and caregivers may have experienced a loss of life for patients where family members could not be present, bridging a tough time being the intermediary. With an increased need for workers, they will have lost time and made significant sacrifices to protect their friends and families. They may have missed out on important events in their lives to help protect someone else's. They may feel despair and anger at non-essential workers and members of the public who are laxer in minding public health recommendations. They need time to decompress and try to work through what they have experienced. Listening, showing appreciation and paying attention is essential. Empathizing with their pain, sorrow, and hearing about what they are grateful for can help. Again, it's the kindness in the little things that will start their recovery process.

We remain connected, so that we can help each other

Reaching out when help is needed is part of human nature. Historian, Rutger Bregman, argues that we've proven time and time again that our true nature stands outside of the negative views most often presented by news media. He explains that scientific studies have revealed that "in a moment of crisis, there is an explosion of altruism," and people want to help.³ Offering a conversation to check in on others during these unusual times is critical. It can mean the difference between someone suffering in isolation and being able to feel heard, valued, appreciated and have a plan created to help move forward in recovery.

References:

1. Vieten, Cassandra, Ph.D., (2020, March 22). Living With Mental Health Challenges During the Pandemic. Psychology Today. Retrieved on June 3, 2020 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/consciousness-matters/202003/living-mental-health-challenges-during-the-pandemic>
2. Ibid.
3. Bregman, Rutger. ((June 12, 2020). [Interview] Historian Rutger Bregman Uncovers Humankind's Biggest Misconception, related to Humankind, A Hopeful History.



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