

Words of Wellness



January 2021

A New Year for Wellness

As we enter a new, and hopefully better, year, turning to the calendar for 2021 offers a fresh start. We invite you to join us in choosing a wellness area that you would like to strengthen.



- Consider what you do and what you might strengthen to be your healthiest self, with a strong immune system, and physical resilience. Move often and energetically, eat brightly colored fresh fruits and vegetables, schedule your annual medical checkup, get enough sleep each night, and incorporate daily stress management techniques.
- Maybe 2021 is the year to learn about how your body works, especially your immune system. Or maybe learn about other cultures through history, movies, novels, virtual travel, and conversations to expand your awareness and understanding.
- Did you know that daily sunshine is an important source of Vitamin D, which helps keep your immune system healthy? Try replacing some screen time with “green time”—even if you just pop outdoors for a short fresh-air break a couple of times every day.

- Create your own spiritual mini-retreat, scheduling anywhere from 5 minutes to one day. Use the time to reflect, meditate, pray, write, or whatever you find is spiritually meaningful for you.
- How about doing a virtual jigsaw puzzle? It really works! <https://www.jigsawexplorer.com/>
- Keeping connections with friends, family, and the community, at a safe distance can help promote wellness in many dimensions.
- *For more activity ideas, visit:* <https://www.braininjurycanada.ca/ideas-social-distancing/>

New habits

While nobody knows exactly how long it takes before a new habit becomes automatic, what research there is suggests that, on average, a new habit takes over two months to settle in. Some take much longer, so be patient with yourself. Remember that any modifications made to our life requires repetition, time, and attention to fully create or strengthen a wellness habit or pattern.

References

- *Fresh start days:* Dai, H., Milkman, K. L., & Riis, J. (2014). The fresh start effect: Temporal landmarks motivate aspirational behavior. *Management Science*, 10(60):2563–2582.
- The idea of scheduling a spiritual mini-retreat comes from Sylvia Boorstein’s book *Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There*. Check out her website at <http://www.sylviaboorstein.com/>
- *Timeline for habits:* Lally, P., van Jaarsveld, C. H. M., Potts, H. W. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How habits are formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *European J of Social Psychology*, 40, 998-1009.

Managing Mental Health During a Pandemic

by *Stitch*

About 10 months into quarantine due to the spread of COVID-19 and our brains are still adapting to the changes that come along with it. You see it referred to as “uncertain times” by the media and corporations because there is no short way to describe what it’s like to live during a pandemic, especially a pandemic in which the future is genuinely uncertain. While the negative effects are more often bemoaned, and justifiably so, there are a few aspects of being quarantined for nearly a year that have opened many people’s eyes and made their outlook on their lives very clear.

As an 18-year-old, in my experience of living during a pandemic, it has felt like a never-ending transitional period. I am unsure as to where it will lead me, but I have decided to remain optimistic and do everything in my power to ensure a fruitful and satisfactory future post quarantine. For example, I have learned how to take more breaks and establish boundaries along with maintaining them. I have strengthened my will to the point where nobody can make me do anything I truly do not want to do, and I have heard accounts of this happening from many people around my age range as well as out of it.

The biggest changes I have seen, however, are people recognizing their identities and what they truly want out of life. I have seen many make job changes as well as moving, adopting pets, dating new people, and this newfound freedom has made many of us happier.

A friend of mine lives alone and recently adopted a dog of their own and they report feeling much brighter and more excited about life now that they have a furry friend to accompany them. Decisions like these that positively impact our lives in the long term are the result of us feeling more in control of our own lives.

Being isolated in our homes brings things into a much closer perspective in a highly beneficial way. It is likely that you have spent more time with yourself this year than anyone else, including any family members or partners you may have. I think everyone can agree that this year has at least allowed people to express their individuality and discover things they enjoy, possibly even their life’s calling.

More importance has been stressed on taking breaks and destressing through more personalized methods as the months have progressed onward, and thus many have adapted to and embraced their mental health as they are in their personal spaces for longer periods of time.



It is important that we all consider each other’s mental health as well as our own, and this is a sign that we are utilizing mental health as a key component in the human experience. To be truly fulfilled, we must also check in on and assist with the fulfillment of the friends and family around us and, even within the very real struggles that come with a pandemic, such as loss of employment and income, as well as the risk of losing the people closest to us, we are doing a decent job at checking in on each other.

What truly matters is that we are all trying to get through this pandemic and that we all do it together.



Being 16 in the Midst of Covid-19

By Lauren

Throughout my life, I have always relied on school and extracurricular activities to help me stay mentally sound. In March of 2020, the rhythm I had adapted to had drastically changed. I went from hanging out with a friend every day, presenting projects in front of my classes, being the lead in my school's musical, to sitting in my bedroom all day, wondering if someone would text me, call me, or ask me to be there for them.

Over the past several months, I have seen friends, teachers, peers, classmates, and strangers fall into a depression and completely change. Going through the death of an Aunt in April, a peer in September, losing friends throughout this year, and everything else, has taken a mental toll on me.

I spent Thanksgiving without seeing my family, I spent my 16th birthday with only a few friends. My sibling graduated from high school, and I couldn't attend the small ceremony. I was supposed to go to Italy this past summer, as well, but the pandemic took that away. These life milestones, traditions, vacations, and holidays that I had dreamed to happen since I was small had dissipated before me, to the point where I didn't know what to do. These events and times in my life that I had hoped to be amazing, were nothing short of a disappointment.

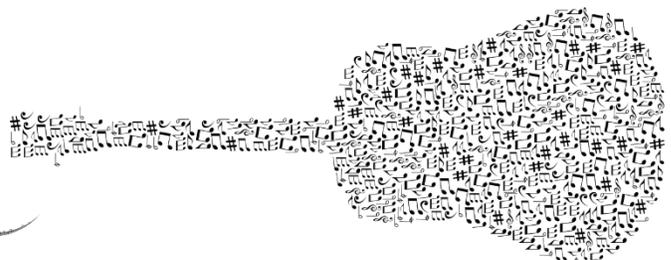
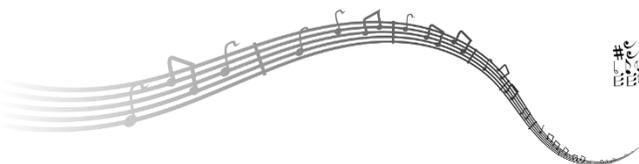
But despite the hardships I, like the rest of the world, have faced within these difficult times, I have somehow managed to stay resilient, productive, and more creative than ever before. In June, after some of my childhood friends decided I wasn't worth their while, I started to learn how to play the guitar, which eventually led to songwriting.

Now, since then, I have written nearly 40 songs, expressing myself, my feelings, dreams I've had, life goals, and so much more, I had reached what I felt was my "bottom", and brought myself out of a dark, lonely place with the thing I loved most. I have loved music of all sorts, playing it, singing it, listening to it, since I could fathom what music was. Getting myself involved in this thing that seemed so simple, I didn't know that it would change my life forever, but I am forever grateful that it did.

Now, music is the joy and epicenter of happiness in my life, like I had always dreamed it to be. When some dreams are crushed, others come to light, and that's how it's going to be. What this pandemic has taught me is that you can't have it all. Your friends aren't going to stay the same forever, school and work are going to suck, even if extremely necessary. You're going to have falling outs, fights, and moments of what may seem like failure, but that never means that you should lose sight of what is most important to you.

By losing family, friends, and motivation I was brought back to the one thing that made me most happy. The world may seem like it is ending, or like it has come to a halt, but life will go on. The dreams and aspirations that you desire most aren't going to go anywhere if you sit around and wait for them to. The passion and love for music that I have acquired came from hard work, playing guitar every day, and getting good at it to be able to express myself, which is where my passion came from. The harder that I worked to get better, the more passionate and motivated I felt to continue incorporating music into my life.

Whatever one's passion may be, no matter the limitations that stand in your way, you will find it and thrive in it, if you continue to push through.



Big Emotions in Small Bits

By Anna Jacus

I once asked a friend who lost her sister, “How are you feeling?” She was shocked at my question. “What kind of question is that? My sister just died. I’m sad! What else could I be feeling?” After acknowledging her immense sadness, I invited her to discuss memories of her sister.

My friend, Hilda, told me her sister taught her to play softball. She was very athletic, popular, and funny. Unlike many older sisters, she included my friend in activities with the older, popular teens, which raised my friend’s popularity in her own class. As my friend talked, she was thoughtful, at times laughing with delight, at times expressing wistfulness, longing, gratitude, respect, love, admiration, indignation, curiosity, jealousy, grief, and nostalgia.

As we reflected on the many feelings these memories evoked, Hilda noted that her sadness was like an onion with many layers. She was able to see her sadness as richly flavored by a lifetime of shared experiences with her sister.

Research has led to the discovery that the ability to practice emotional granularity is an indicator of emotional wellness. Like a lump of sugar, a big emotion can present as an impenetrable block of feelings. It can be difficult to manage any other tasks or emotions in its presence. Because it is stuck together, it’s strong and unavoidable, drawing energy and attention away from everything else.

So how can emotions be granulated? Hilda learned that by breaking down the big emotion into small bits, like a lump of sugar turning to granules, they can flow again into the stream of daily life.

We talked about the benefits of listing emotions on paper.



Hilda wrote a letter to her sister, which helped her process her feelings. She plans to read it each year on the anniversary of her sister’s passing.

Sorting it Out . . .

My friend also learned how to practice awareness of her emotions daily by starting with bodily sensations such as tension, aching, itching, temperature, pressure, nausea, urgency, etc. Hilda targeted a sensation and asked: “What am I experiencing right now? Where do I feel it in my body? How strongly am I feeling this?” For instance, she may have noticed tension in her shoulders as an intense knot of pain.

Next, Hilda asked, “What emotion do I feel when I experience this painful tension in my shoulders?” Staying with this question, without distractions, made her feel uncomfortable. But she was rewarded when focusing on her shoulder pain helped her notice how overburdened she felt by the challenges of recent months. She realized she was feeling another overwhelming lump of emotions . . .

Finally, Hilda turned her attention to her thoughts. “What thoughts lead me to feel so overburdened?” This didn’t help, so she tried it another way, “What do I believe about my responsibilities?” She realized she saw herself as responsible not only for her own welfare and happiness, but those of others. By returning responsibilities to their rightful owners with the help of her therapist, she was able to lighten her burden.

My friend learned that (1) noticing her bodily sensations led to (2) awareness of the emotions that caused them, which helped her (3) discover the beliefs/ thoughts that shaped the emotions.

She was free to shape her emotional wellness by practicing this new skill!

It’s something any one of us can do.

Reference: Barrett, L. F. (2004). Feelings or words? ... *J Pers & Soc Psych*, 87(2), 266-281.