

***The following message has been authorized by Tanya Rowell,
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Staying with the Present Moment during a Pandemic

We are living in a time of perpetual change, where our movements and work are shifting in phases, sometimes with unpredictable timeframes. Things we have taken for granted, such as our work week, the school calendar and social gatherings, may no longer look the same. Our minds have been processing so much overwhelming information at a rapid pace. Ultimately, our minds want to make sense of this, fit it within our internal framework and predict what will happen. Our minds want to protect us by trying to fix all of these issues. However, focusing on the future and what may or may not happen, often leads to greater personal distress. While it's good to be prepared and to problem solve, it's not helpful for us to be preoccupied with events that likely will not come to pass. What happens is that we end up not only managing and reacting to what we are currently experiencing, but also what we think may happen to us. That is a heavy mental load, which contributes to stress and emotional reactivity.

The Dilemma:

We have a personal opportunity to shift our thinking to the present moment. Think of all the times in this pandemic when your mind wandered to what the future will be like, "What will work be like this summer?" or "What will school be like this fall?" "Will I be able to travel out of province to that event?". It's natural to think of these things, but ruminating on them doesn't change the outcome. When these thoughts come up, they may be accompanied by a sense of grief or sadness. Take, for example, not being able to attend an event. To avoid those uncomfortable feelings of the uncertainty of attending the event, we may try to plan our way out of it. We may stress ourselves by coming up with unlimited contingency plans if the event goes ahead, if it's cancelled or if it's postponed, what we will do and what will we feel. Yet that doesn't resolve our feelings of grief or worry about the event, and only adds layers of distress. Instead, I would invite you to practice being in the present moment.

Being present:

When you notice yourself getting caught up in unhelpful future thinking, there are lots of ways we can gently bring ourselves back to the here and now. First, identify that your mind is trying

to solve something that isn't even happening, i.e. "What am I going to do if there is no school in the fall?" or "How will I manage the second wave?". These are future events that we can't predict, therefore, let go of the stress and energy it takes to plan for things that may never come to be. Instead, acknowledge that you are trying to solve the future. Don't be harsh or critical with yourself when you notice yourself slipping into future solving mode. We are only trying to protect ourselves from harm. Noticing gives us the ability to shift our thinking to what is happening to us right now. In the present moment, we are safe, we are healthy, and we are capable. Instead of solving all potential future problems, we can remind ourselves that whatever the future brings, you can manage it. No one could have predicted a global pandemic leading to isolation, and yet you managed it. You used your skills, resources and capabilities to manage a problem you couldn't predict. Whatever else may come, you will be able to manage it as well. Live in the now and trust yourself to manage whatever pops up in the future.

Exercises for Being Present:

There are many ways we can actively bring our minds to return to the present moment. Try some of these or find your own strategies and see if they are helpful for you.

- Noticing our breathing and what it feels like in our body when the air comes in and passes out of our body.
- Engaging each of our five senses: Identify something you can hear, see, feel, smell and taste.
- Connect with nature and feel your feet on the ground.
- Do a quick body scan and notice what is happening in your body at this moment: Is it warm/cold? Is there stiffness/pain? What sensations are there?
- Identify what emotions you are feeling right now and where they show up in your body. Don't label them as good or bad, but accept them and let them pass.
- Practice gratitude. Find three things you are grateful for right now.
- Create your present moment mantra. It could go something like, "I am safe, I am well, and I am loved." Find something personal to you.

If you find yourself overwhelmed by future planning and not able to make space for the present moment, reach out for help or support. Maybe you and a friend can point out to each other when you're thinking ten steps ahead. Setting aside time in your day and making an appointment with yourself to practice being present can also help. Also, as an employee of the Government of Prince Edward Island, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here for you. Please contact EAP, and our clinical counsellors can support you.

Here is a video with further info on being in the present moment:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py2w1-SoH58>

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