WE LEARN AND GROW THROUGH ADVERSITY

The events in these first few months of 2020 have been an incredible test of our resilience. Our existence has been stripped down to the essentials. This global crisis has changed the world forever, and each of us will be transformed by the experience of living through it.

The term “new normal” has pervaded nearly every news story and is now even woven into the narrative of television shows and commercials. I believe that calling this our new normal suggests we are accepting that this is the way things will be from now on. Not only is this an unhealthy perspective; it does a huge disservice and undermines the heroic efforts of those on the front lines who have been doing everything in their power to keep us healthy and safe.

This is not normal, but I also believe that our behaviour pre-COVID was not normal either. Think of the prevalence of mental health issues and addiction, and the strain that families have been under. We have been operating for a long time as though everything we did was urgent and important, and we were personally and emotionally eroding under the pressure.

In a 2019 press release, The World Health Organization (WHO) announced that it was including burn-out in its 11th version of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an “occupational phenomenon.” WHO defines burn-out as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by:

- Feelings of energy depletion and exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job
- Reduced professional efficacy

In the months leading up to the pandemic, the question I was asked about most often was how to find work/life balance.

I use different language. I call it “life with work balance.” Our humanity should always come before our jobs, roles, and professions. We are people who work. However, as the WHO’s decision to include burn-out in its list of diseases demonstrates, too many people were prioritizing work over their personal lives and this was taking a toll on our health and wellness.
This is where we were before the pandemic. These feelings have not gone away and are now compounded by the fear, grief, and uncertainty that COVID has bestowed upon us. We must be aware of these risks and find ways to manage our life with work balance.

This crisis has brought many aspects of our busy, and sometimes overwhelming, lifestyles to a halt, which has certainly been difficult, but also provides a unique opportunity.

We now have a chance to pause, and reflect on priorities, purpose, and pace. In this white paper, I provide practical and sustainable strategies for practicing self-care and self-compassion to help you weather this storm, and perhaps, correct some of the imbalance that existed before. They are not complicated. They are simple adjustments to the way we move through our day, that I believe can help us emerge from adversity stronger, healthier, and wiser.
BE KIND TO YOURSELF

We are in the midst of a season we have never seen before. This is not normal. This is not the new normal either. I do not believe that a ‘global pandemic’ and ‘normal’ can co-exist. You have to give yourself permission to feel what you feel. It is natural to feel fear and uncertainty, and there will be days that you feel overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation and the weight of your life being upended.

It is important to be kind to yourself and make allowances for the fact that we are all learning to adjust to a new way of being. We cannot measure ourselves against what came before; that isn’t a fair comparison. To help manage these strong emotions and move through adversity and uncertainty as constructively as possible, it helps to consider your intention. Think about how you want to move through this situation and the behavior you want to model for others.

In my case, I decided that I wanted to be a good role model for my children and show them what it looks like to navigate a global pandemic. For me, this means:

- Following rules
- Listening to health professionals
- Respecting boundaries and adhering to practices recommended by experts
WE ARE ALL MOVING THROUGH THIS DIFFERENTLY

This is the intention I have set for myself, and yours will be different. We have to respect that others are not going to move through this the same way we do. At times, this may be challenging. You might fear that someone else’s choice is putting you at risk, or in the case of someone you are close to, you may be concerned that they are making choices that put them at risk. If you feel someone else’s actions are putting you at risk, over-compensate, be even more vigilant than you usually are. And, if you feel that a loved one or friend is making risky choices, there is no harm in raising your concerns, but, in the end, you need to respect their right to make their own decisions.

~

LET GO OF THE GUILT

We have not had a learning explosion like this since we were toddlers. In an extremely short window of time we’ve had to adapt to a new way of living, working and connecting with the people we love – much of which relies on us knowing how to use technology that we’ve never used before. It can be overwhelming and exhausting. We need to accept that this will affect each of us differently and give ourselves permission to do what we need to do to mitigate the impact. For example, let go of the parent guilt if you need to rely on the tv or computer for a while to occupy the kids while you complete a work task that needs your attention. You are juggling many things right now. And, if you find you are weary as the day wears on, do not feel guilty about taking a nap. Naps are restorative, and just as they did when we were toddlers, they can help us feel energized and refreshed to take on all that the day brings our way.

~
MANAGE YOUR FEAR

We must accept that sometimes fear does not go away so we have to do things afraid. In his Ted Talk, Why You Should Define Your Fears Instead of Your Goals, Tim Ferris shares a practice called Fear-Setting that has helped him navigate challenging times in his life. He credits this process with saving him from emotional free fall on more than one occasion and believes it is so powerful that he does it at least once each quarter and as often as once a month. It is based on a key tenet of the philosophy of stoicism, which is to focus on what can be controlled rather than what cannot. It involves three steps which Ferris says he completes on three separate sheets of paper.

On the first, he has three columns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEFINE</th>
<th>PREVENT</th>
<th>REPAIR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He lists his fears in detail.</td>
<td>In this column he identifies actions that would prevent fears from coming to fruition.</td>
<td>He lists the steps that could be taken to repair the situation if his fears actually came to be.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the second sheet of paper, he lists the cost of inaction. And on the third, he lists the things that might run counter to identified fears—the things that could actually go right.

Naming your fear can be a valuable exercise on its own, but Ferris says committing these thoughts to paper is even more powerful. This exercise will be invaluable when it comes time for re-entry. The world is just starting to open, and some people are experiencing nervousness, anxiety, and fearful moments. It is crucial to remember you are not your feelings. You are having nervous thoughts. You are not nervousness. You are experiencing anxious thoughts. You are not anxiety. You are feeling fear. You are not afraid. Adding that breath of space between the feeling you are experiencing and how you describe it makes a world of difference. Simple, but ultimately practical and useful.
In *Everyday Resiliency*, I outlined five core competencies that, when practiced, provide an important baseline for resilience.

In addition to these competencies, paying attention to a few key “micro habits” can help us navigate uncertainty, fear, and adversity. In the following section, I break these down under the categories of wellness and work and productivity, and I highlight the value of building each micro habit into your day.

**MICRO HABITS TO HELP US THRIVE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES**

1. **BELONGING**
2. **PERSPECTIVE**
3. **ACCEPTANCE**
4. **HOPE**
5. **HUMOUR**
WELLNESS

I wish I could express this idea to you in a way that speaks to your bones and causes an emotional echo that never ends – Wellness is not ALL OR NOTHING. You do not have to wait for Monday to be well. You do not have to wait for this pandemic to be over to be well again. Wellness is a commitment to your body, mind, and soul that you will take care of you, just as you are – no matter what. It is your vocation of honouring yourself because you matter exactly how you are today. Wellness has nothing to do with fitness or fitting in. You decide once and for all that you are your defender and your protector of your peace and purpose. Taking care of yourself is not being self-indulgent. It is important so that you can stay healthy and strong and be there to support others who need you. We do not have to earn the right to protect our time and take care of ourselves. Making a consistent effort towards body kindness and personal peace is crucial. The suggestions I have presented here are readily available to all of us. They are accessible because they are free. It will not cost you anything, but the cost of inaction is great.
BOOKEND YOUR DAY
This is one of the most important practices. Protect one hour at the start and another at the end of your day. Bookending enables you to be intentional in setting the right tone so you can start the day feeling creative, purposeful, and optimistic and go to bed feeling satisfied and with a sense of accomplishment.

INCORPORATE STRETCH BREAKS
Use the time that would have been dedicated to your commute or office breaks to build in room for exercise. Even 10 minutes can have a profound impact on the way you move through your day.

PROTECT YOUR PEACE
When you feel triggered by external events, remember that peace is within you. It is a place you can go to ground yourself. Meditation is a good way to tap into this inner peace. If meditation is new for you, start with just a few minutes a day. Do not judge your efforts; just focus on your breathing to bring you back when your mind wanders.

BREATHING
Proper breathing is a vital release mechanism. When you take a deep inhalation, it actually sends a signal to your brain to say, “we are safe.” Conversely, if you take short, shallow breaths, you signal to your brain that there is danger, and this exacerbates negative feelings and frustration.

CONNECT WITH NATURE
Find a safe way to get outside and connect with nature. Simply standing in the sun and getting a dose of fresh air and taking a quick walk can do wonders in helping you clear your mind and reframe obstacles or challenges you are facing in your day.
WORK & PRODUCTIVITY

Routine is important, particularly now, as our days are more fluid than they used to be, and many of us find ourselves trying to blend work with home life in a way that works for everyone. Routine helps to ground us at a time when we are facing unpredictability and disruption throughout the day. It isn’t about being rigid; just building in some general practices to guide you.

SET AN AGENDA FOR YOUR DAY

I believe in winning the morning. When we take control of our morning, we can set the trajectory for the day. Try to avoid checking email first thing. I call email the place that holds everyone else’s agenda. If you start your day this way, you will get sucked right into the rigour of the day before you have time to pause and reflect and set your intention. Instead of getting swallowed up by what you have “to do”, take a moment to consider your intention and how you want “to be” before you start your day.

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Setting high expectations and not meeting them is a one-way street to distress. Be mindful of your situation. And, be prepared to flex. As our work and personal lives collide, we must be more flexible with our expectations.
WORK SMARTER NOT LONGER

Many believe that working harder and longer will produce greater results. In actual fact, research suggests that scheduling and following through with blocks of time is more helpful and productive compared to working longer hours on a problem. For example, working for 50 minutes and then taking a 10-minute break every hour. It is also important to set realistic goals for the day, set reasonable hours, and allow adequate time for rest and renewal. This practice may be particularly useful for those who are working from home for the first time.

MANAGE AVAILABILITY

If you find yourself taking on too much and you believe you’re slipping toward burnout, it is important to STOP, DROP and EVALUATE to be sure you are tending to the priorities and relationships that are most important.

TRY MONO-TASKING

To the extent that you can, block times of the day that you know you perform certain tasks best. For example, if you find mornings to be the best time to write, block and protect that time, and use the afternoon for tasks that require less focus and attention. When we focus this way, our performance improves, creativity is heightened, errors are reduced, and we avoid feeling scattered and overwhelmed.

BE SMARTER THAN THE SMART PHONE

When we constantly check our phones, we allow too much room for work to bleed into our personal lives and vice versa. We need to set phone boundaries and schedule windows of time with no phone use to honour our priorities and allow ourselves the space to focus on family and other tasks that should not be interrupted. Constant scrolling not only depletes our energy and creativity, and it can significantly erode our ability to concentrate. Interesting to note that much of the mindless scrolling is actually a mild form of self-punishment by social comparison. We evaluate ourselves based on the high-lights other people are posting. Over time, this erodes our confidence, our motivation and decreases empathy and self-acceptance.
TRUST YOURSELF

You are stronger than you know, and you are equipped to weather this storm. Trust your judgement when it comes to figuring out what you need and how best to keep moving forward.

My Resiliency Trajectory Model, shown below, illustrates how we move through adversity in a positive way. There is a natural period after we have experienced an adverse event where we slip into decline. However, when we give ourselves the room to do so, and we are vigilant in practicing self-care and self-compassion, we adapt, reclaim things we have lost or embrace new ways of doing things, and begin to rise up. How we progress through this model will be determine by our habits. If we choose positive habits, we will grow. There will be discomfort, unpleasantness, difficulties, and challenges but we will grow. If it does not challenge us, it would not change us. If we lean too heavily into negative coping strategies or habits, we will prolong the decline phase. The choice is ours to make.
CHECK IN ON YOURSELF - YOU ARE YOUR OWN EXPERT

A helpful strategy that I use when coaching people is the ideal of doing a personal weekly check-in. This is the practice of taking a personal inventory on how you are doing in each life area. The goal is not perfection, it is being present. The aim is to be mindful of all the life areas that matter, and choose to make what matters most, matter most. It is investing in yourself and sharpening your focus on your priorities. So, here is my invitation – once per week, score yourself in each area out of 10 points. Be honest with yourself. You have nothing to prove to anyone else. This is for you. How are you showing up in each area? Rate each category. Next, take note of your top two scores and your bottom two scores. Now you have a focus point for next week. Recognize what is working well and put intention next into the areas that need some encouragement. Again, the goal is never 100%. The goal is to be sure you are aware of what is working and what needs your attention.
CONCLUSION

These are extraordinary times. There are many aspects of our current situation that are well beyond our control. However, the intention we set for ourselves, the way we move through our day, and the practices we adopt to stay healthy and safe are all fully within our control.

We must be as vigilant about protecting our mental and emotional health as we are about physical health and safety. When we are depleted and overwhelmed, we have little cognitive and physical energy to devote to ourselves and others. We are more resilient when we take care of ourselves, and resilience enables us to navigate change, manage stress and persist toward goals despite adversity and uncertainty.

The tips and strategies in this paper are intended to help you focus on what matters most. It may be that you find value in adopting all of them, or maybe you will only use a few. In the end, it is really up to you. Only you truly know what is best for you. Whatever the case, I hope you discover your own individual roadmap for wellness that helps you move through challenging times feeling like the best version of yourself.
ABOUT

Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe is a multi-award-winning psychology and education instructor who specializes in resiliency, navigating stress and change, and personal wellness in the workplace. Described as transformational, engaging, and thought-provoking, Robyne’s keynotes provide practical strategies grounded in global research and case studies that help foster resiliency within others and ourselves. Robyne is available for consultation, training and professional development opportunities ranging from one-to-one to company-wide initiatives.

To learn more about Robyne, visit www.robynehd.ca

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