

Safeguarding Your Mental Health During COVID-19

One of the leading researchers and writers on the topic of psychological trauma, Bessel van der Kolk, recently shared his thoughts on what we are now experiencing as a global community. According to van der Kolk, this pandemic has the potential to be psychologically traumatic and we must pay attention to this and safeguard ourselves. The good news is that with awareness and intention, we can take action to care for our mental health. In the days ahead, be aware of the following:

1. The need for predictability

During times of crisis when life feels chaotic and out of control, our ability to create a sense of order in our day becomes critical to our mental well-being. Make sure that you create a daily and weekly schedule of activities. Schedule something every week to look forward to and schedule time for fun and connection with others (for example, a virtual game night with family/friends, ordering take-out one night a week, a bike ride).

2. The need for movement

We have stress hormones that drive us to move and protect ourselves during times of high stress. The lack of movement puts us at risk of holding this stress in our bodies, so we need to take action, to move. What are you doing to stay active? Even while staying at home, we can find movement through walks, household chores, online yoga, playing with the dog... It can be difficult to motivate ourselves to move at times like this. Remember the great line from Frozen II, "When one can see no future, all one can do is the next right thing." Keep moving.

3. The need for connection

We are social beings and don't exist as individuals in isolation, even at this time of physical distancing. Interacting with others shapes who we are. When we cry or laugh, we need others to cry or laugh with us. When we are connected to others, we feel alive. Take time to connect through family meals, games, story-telling, music-making... Use Zoom, FaceTime, or phone calls to stay in regular touch with family and friends not in your home.

4. The need to connect with ourselves and not numb or space out

Numbing out is an attempt to protect ourselves from pain and terror, yet we must be able to feel our body safely in order to be in touch with ourselves and connect with others. There are many ways that we can numb out, such as through excessive time watching TV, use of social media, or use of alcohol or drugs. Learning to regulate our emotions, behaviours and thoughts safeguards our mental health and keeps us from

feeling out of control and simply reacting to a situation. Learn to observe your emotions and thoughts by practicing mindfulness. Once you can observe what is going on with you, you are better able to take control and make choices. Having someone to talk to about what you are observing, or writing in a journal, can be helpful tools that grow self awareness. See the link below for some great resources to support you in this:

<https://blog.calm.com/take-a-deep-breath>

5. The need to maintain a sense of time and sequences

Right now, it feels like time has stopped and this pandemic will last forever. But, if we pay close attention, we will notice that every moment is different from the next. Time does not stand still. Mindfulness helps us notice shifts in thoughts and feelings. These things pass. Living with an inner sense of the passage of time and shifting of experience safeguards us from trauma.

<https://www.besselvanderkolk.com/blog/licia-sky-on-coming-to-your-senses>

6. The need to feel safe

We all need safety. From birth, the nurturing touch of others provides physical and emotional safety; and as we grow, we seek private spaces to which we can withdraw and create safety. While we don't have complete control over our environment and are at times vulnerable, we can do our best to create a physically and emotionally safe space for ourselves right now. Following safety guidelines related to COVID-19 and practicing these mental health guidelines can provide you with an increased sense of safety. Unfortunately, we do know that there has been an increase in domestic violence during this pandemic. If you are in an unsafe space please reach out to one of the following community agencies:

*Women's Crisis of Waterloo Region (KW: **519-742-5894**) (Cambridge: **519-653-2422**)*

*Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region at **519-741-8633***

*Waterloo Region Sexual Assault Domestic Violence Treatment Centre at **519-749-6994***

*Canadian Mental Health Association Here 24/7 crisis line at **1-844-437-3247***

*Emergency Services at **9-1-1***

7. The need to have a sense of purpose

Throughout our lives we need a sense of meaning, and in times of crisis, this becomes even more important. Being physically isolated at home doesn't have to keep us from maintaining a sense of purpose in our days. What are you good at? Practice and indulge. Help others, cook meals, read to kids, sing, make masks.... Stay in touch with your culture, spirituality, and professional identity.

While this pandemic has the potential to be traumatic, we have the potential to grow beyond the trauma. We have an opportunity here. We are being forced to slow down and think about what we need and what we value as individuals and in our community. We can use this newfound experience and wisdom as we move forward into the weeks and months ahead.