

Creating meaning, purpose & connection in a COVID-19 world



▶ THE DOCTOR IS IN
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Without a doubt, we are living in very difficult times. It still feels surreal when going outside seeing the entire world in masks.

I keep wanting to write about something other than COVID-19, but cannot yet while the world is hurting to the degree that it is and people are struggling to cope despite tremendous emotional and financial pain, when the country has pandemic fatigue, exhausted by all the restrictions, and all continues to feel so uncertain and scary.

Our assumptive world has been forever changed, and our naivete lost. While we pray that this will be the only pandemic that we, our children and our children's children will ever know, perhaps we are being taught that if we, as individuals and collectively, don't take good care of our world and all of our treasures (both human and otherwise) within it, we may experience much worse and ultimately no longer have a world in which we can live.

The time has come for us to do our own personal accounting in order to learn from all that has happened in this past year, find a way to make meaning of it all, not waste our precious time and resources, and work hard to emerge from it all as better people in a better world. We must each find a way to appreciate whatever and whomever it is that we treasure, learn what it is that we value and want to pass on to future generations, and find a way to achieve it.

It will be up to us to decide how we'd like to live each day

As a clinical psychologist, I've been deeply saddened by the depth of desperation that people have endured, witnessed their feelings of chronic isolation and helplessness, and like others have seen the lack of cohesiveness and unity in our tiny country and throughout the world.

We must all work together to fight this coronavirus. We have shown our ability to come together in the past and must do so now with a greater understanding of how the very fabric of our society has come unraveled, setting us apart from others instead of drawing us together.

We can't simply go back to our previous lives as though this pandemic were a mere blip in time, even if we wanted to. Our old world as we once knew it has been transformed in every way, and while some things may ultimately return to a state of "what once was," many other things will never be the same. The "new normal" may be anything but normal.

IT WILL be up to us to decide how we'd like to live each day, how we choose to define who we are, how we infuse our life with meaning, what our purpose is and with whom and how we'd like to spend our time.

This can turn out to be a remarkable opportunity for change in the right direction, and the pandemic has hopefully given each of us the impetus to think very seriously about these issues.

Hatred must be turned into hope through the cultivation of respect for one another, and we must learn to let go of our divisiveness and focus instead on learning how to live with each other, if we are to survive. Relationships must be paramount because, at the end of the day, there is no place for an "I" world.

As I look outward, grateful for the mask which makes it safer to be around others, I personally feel deeply challenged by the lack of others' smiles, the inability to discern someone's facial features and at times to hear their muffled words.

Now, more than ever before, we must each find a way to understand one another,



REACH OUT to others and check in to see how they really are doing. (Pixabay)

appreciate the positive, grow from these challenges and open ourselves up to a world of new opportunities.

Here are some suggestions for beginning this process:

1. Reach out to others and check in to see how they really are doing. Lend an ear. Be supportive, listen to people, give encouragement and let others know that you care and are there for them.

So many people are feeling so lonely, depressed and anxious right now and would very much appreciate any contact.

- Go outside of your comfort zone and pick one or two people each day with whom you might not otherwise speak. Encourage your children to also reach out to others and buddy up with someone their age who may be having a harder time. Whether young or young at heart, the goal is to enable each person to feel heard, valued and taken care of, in a kind and consistent way.

Most people are feeling fatigued and fed up and would welcome the pick-me-up and

grounding that a phone call provides. Keeping in touch on a regular basis helps let others know that they're not alone.

2. Show appreciation to others. Whether it's someone you know or the person cleaning your street, driving a bus or packing your groceries, not to mention doctors, nurses and those who work in the healthcare sector. Say thank you, show your gratitude and remember: your kind words and a compliment go a long way.

3. Give people the benefit of the doubt. You don't know what worries are on the minds of the person who cut you off in traffic, was seemingly impatient, or seems to have different priorities from yours.

4. Cross the bridge into the world of the stranger and try to imagine what his world may be like. While you may choose neither to protest nor to pray, try not to pass judgment. Be respectful and honor the person you want to be.

5. Recognize that we are all in this together. We each may feel or show a sense of dis-ease in differing ways. Talk to your children and help them put a name on their feelings so that they can better understand them. Let them know that their feelings are normal. These are abnormal times, and your goal is to help them or get help for them. They are missing their friends, consistent schooling and routines, and feel the sense of uncertainty and stress that we adults can verbalize.

6. Stay connected. Physically distancing does not mean emotional or social distancing. We are all innately programmed for social interaction, and now, more than ever, it feels so good to see people "live," even if for now we can't touch or hug them and have to stay 2 meters apart and safely outside. This is true for our children as well as for seniors. We all are craving connectedness and a sense of normalcy. Be part of a greater community. You might just be surprised how good it feels.

7. Volunteer. Offer help in small ways. If you are getting groceries, ask what you can bring back for someone else. Help with errands, make or drop off food, work on a craft project or read a story to a child, share a funny joke or a past memory.

8. Exercise, eat healthfully, work on sleep hygiene and other self-care strategies to lower your stress. In these challenging times, trying to maintain a routine is beneficial and helps you feel in control. Buddy up with a friend and encourage each other.

AS THE numbers go down, it will not be as easy as we may think to return to any semblance of normalcy. Having learned that we are not in control of our world to the degree we thought we were has been a life-changing lesson.

We have learned to feel just as anxious at the thought of catching COVID-19 from our family and friends as from complete strangers. Perhaps, as this pandemic subsides, our task will be to work in every way possible to make the strangers in this world our friends, as we attempt to feel safe again. ■

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