

It's not about the dot



THE DOCTOR IS IN
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Many of my longtime readers will remember when I first began my column "The Doctor is In."

This column originated in October 2000, at the start of the Second Intifada. I woke up early one morning and asked my husband if he had seen anything about helping children cope with what was going on. His reply was "no," and as I have done many times when I get obsessed with an idea, I immediately got out of bed, took pen in hand and began writing.

Someone had to be there for our kids, I thought, even as we adults were doing all we could to hold ourselves together.

That one piece became the start of this column, and since then I have written several hundred articles on various psychological issues encountered across the life span.

My goal, now as it was then, is to make psychology accessible to the general public, and so once again I want to welcome you to send questions or raise your concerns, and I will do my best to address them.

Fast-forward exactly 20 years. While we still anxiously notice wires hanging out of a garbage can or give a once-over to someone suspicious, wary of terrorism, now we are plagued (pun intended) with a different anxiety and uncertainty that have impacted us in ways that we could never have imagined. Who would have thought that everyone would be considered suspicious under an imagined invisible cloud of corona doom; that air travel would be halted; that we'd be spending so much time sequestered in our homes; that "Zoom" (with a capital Z) would become a verb; that schools and synagogues would become breeding grounds; and that we would experience losses in so many ways?

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The only thing we are at all certain of is all the uncertainty in every sphere of our lives, and this has caused a great deal of anxiety. With it come symptoms – you know them all by now, and I remind you that they are normal, though uncomfortable, given the highly abnormal situation.

When we talk of someone who has experienced a traumatic event, we talk about the trauma having a beginning, a middle and an end. We are long past the beginning yet still in the middle of our COVID pandemic. It is to be hoped that soon, after a lockdown, and with each and every one of us taking serious responsibility to do just three things – wear our mask whenever we are in public, wash our hands and physically distance – we will move toward the end of it.

Like all good runners, we are exhausted – so very tired at this point in our very long marathon – and need some help and lots of strength to push on to the finish line.

HAVING JUST celebrated the New Year, normally a time of reflection and renewal, our task now is to work on ourselves, perhaps even more than ever before, to create a way, yes, yet again, of beginning anew as best as each of us can during this very difficult time.

This means fully acknowledging all of the challenges that we have been through in the last half year and more, and the accompanying feelings. We have each endured so much, and if you sit with pen and paper and jot down the challenges, or



'LIKE ALL good runners, we are exhausted.' (Rob Swatski/Flickr)

say them out loud, you'll see just how much you've been through.

While hard hit, each and every one of us, if we were to fall down on the ground, would stand up, dust ourselves off and continue on our journey. This is our task now.

Some of us will be absolutely fine, we may limp along, we may need help from others, we may even offer support and a hand to those hurting a bit more than we are, but we can be strong and resilient.

We have been through so much, time and again, and now, just as before, we will find a way to use our current situation as an opportunity to do things differently, allowing us to learn, and ultimately grow. Finding meaning in all that has happened will strengthen us and allow us to get through this together.

RECENTLY, I dropped an entire container of (very expensive!) blueberries on my kitchen floor, and as they went in all different directions, with moments before I needed to head into the office, I found myself grumbling for one quick second, and then stopping to notice just how far they had traveled, the contrast of their color with my floor and the pattern they made, and broke into a smile.

Somehow, making and taking the time to slow down and notice and appreciate the small stuff – that I was fortunate enough to have berries, that I could bend and pick each one up, and everything else – gave me an ap-

preciation of an opportunity that in the past I would have missed. I didn't "have to" pick them up, I "got to" pick them up, I thought.

That slight change in thinking is transformative. That subtle way of taking a step back and reframing things into the positive, while viewing our very "crazy" world as "all over the place" and filled with uncertainty, is what can give us the strength to go on and to do so with a smile.

And yes, finding a way to do it with others and for others as a community does enable us to find more meaning in our lives, putting one foot in front of the other when the going gets tough.

If you look at a piece of white paper with a small black dot in the middle, when asked what is there, do you see a black dot or all the white around it? The dot is small when compared to the amount of white space around it, but most would say they see the black dot and not the white space.

Corona is our black dot. We have so much in the rest of our life – the white space – to be thankful for. Our task is to embrace this white space. We do this by living in this moment and noticing all that we have and that we really are okay. We look at how we have grown, accomplished, and coped well, individually, as a family, and as a community during these challenging times.

While we did not have a choice about being in a world hit by a pandemic, each of us has a choice about how we choose to deal with it, and how we creatively choose to embrace this challenge. Each of us can see this time as an opportunity to grow within ourselves by putting more purpose and meaning into our lives.

We do this through giving to others, in small ways such as offering a hand to the stranger, literally and figuratively, after they fall; in sending a Shabbat Shalom message; making a phone call; picking up groceries; and in ways that I'd love to hear you tell me you have done for others or others have done for you.

We also do it by showing care and compassion to ourselves. We acknowledge that times are not so easy at the moment, but that the sun will rise again.

Meanwhile, we continue to wash our hands, wear our masks over both our nose and mouth, and stay physically distanced but socially connected. By looking after ourselves, we care for our world together.

Wishing all of us a continued good new year. May it be wonderful. ■

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