

# Our safe place



THE DOCTOR IS IN  
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**Y**ears ago, in a training session I attended, we were asked to find our safe place, a place in our mind where we could go to restore calm and well-being. At the time the concept seemed quite novel, and as I played with various places in my mind – near the water, on a quiet rock watching cattle graze, I continually came back to a scene of playing marbles as a child at school during recess.

It seemed a little odd to me that pushing a marble with the side of my finger, and watching as it hopefully rolled toward the hole in the ground in the corner of the yard of our elementary school, captured a soothing memory for me, but somehow it did. Was it the smell of the fresh dirt after it rained, the beauty of each perfectly round marble, both large and small, or the soft flannel purple and gold Crown Royal whisky bag in which I carried my treasures, that evoked the sense of well-being? I don't know. Life was so simple then.

Call me a bit naïve. I was brought up in a small Canadian seaport town with only two traffic lights and a population of 9,000 people. My father's weekly newspaper put out an "extra" which my brother handed out on the street corner following the only murder in recent memory at the time. Life seemed idyllic and relatively carefree, and I was filled with innocence. We did lock our back door, but only at night.

Looking back over the past few years, I sadly acknowledge that our world has changed dramatically and forever. This change has impacted both us as adults and our precious children who have had to deal with grief and loss, both small and large, on a multitude of levels. Anxiety and fear have forced us to live with greater uncertainty, and the questions of whether we will ever return to normalcy, or when and what will our future look like, loom large.

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People have experienced tremendous frustration and anger over how to live their daily lives with constant testing, new and inconsistent rules, and total physical and emotional exhaustion in carrying these burdens along with their other life stresses. While certainly many of these issues were present on a smaller scale pre-COVID, during this period I have predominantly focused my columns on the concepts of self-care and compassion, gratitude, relationships, resilience, friendship, community, kindness to others and so much more, as antidotes to doom and gloom.

WE HAVE become a society that no longer knows how to be alone and feel okay within ourselves. Our cell phones have taken over as our form of companionship and entertainment whenever we feel stressed, bored, anxious or uncomfortable.

The children of today often carry a heavy burden with far too many decisions to make, little downtime, an unrealistic urgency to grow up and become independent, and other pressures exacerbated by a



CREATE MOMENTS of silence and your own moments of joy. (Pete Nowicki/Unsplash)

pandemic. Enjoying quality playtime, creating projects, or exploring the neighborhood in a friendly game of tag, to be called home only when dinner is ready, seem to be only memories of yesteryear.

Today, screen time has in large part taken over, even for toddlers, which for all its positives is an additional source of parental and child stress, resulting in arguments, sleep concerns and tremendous frustration. It is easy to feel at a loss when attempting to reign in the situation and restore some sense of calm to this hurting world.

One of the gifts that we can give ourselves, and in turn to our children, is to help create a safe space that enables each of us to feel calmer and more resilient. Given that we cannot be both calm and anxious at the same time, the goal is to help you develop a sense of calm, reduce your anxiety, and pass on these tools to your family. Here are some suggestions:

- Create moments of silence. Develop an awareness of the various sounds and the surrounding noise level in what you perceive to be a quiet room, and work to reduce them so that you can appreciate the internal calm that comes with true quiet.

- Find your own quiet and personal safe place. Now expand it by using your senses to heighten the sights, sounds, and smells, so that you can actually feel like you are experiencing it.

- As a parent, share your own reflections on your safe place while helping your children to notice what sorts of places give them comfort. Help them take the time to slow down and go there.

- Teach your child not only how to listen, but how to make time for, and appreciate, the beauty of the quiet. Explore technology-free periods of time throughout the day, such as mealtime, study time and bedtime. Ask them for their feedback, explore how they can improve things for themselves and engage in a discussion about peer pressure and bullying related to technology.

- Tune into your breathing. Lower your shoulders. Breathe in slowly through your nose and very slowly

exhale out through your mouth pursing your lips. Allow your breath to settle.

- Do a "body scan." Start at your head and slowly notice each part of your body moving downward toward your feet. Feel the tension leaving your body. Repeat this, and when you catch your mind wandering (as it will), just go back to the part of your body you had just noticed.

- Create your own moments of joy. Sing, dance, laugh and try and live in this moment between the tough times. Notice what you are grateful for and visualize your safe place whenever you feel even the smallest amount of tension, gradually working to maintain calm if your stress level increases.

- Actively take charge over the small things (one at a time) that you can be in control of, in what may feel like chaos in your world. By doing "something" you will feel less "done too," less helpless and hopeless and far more empowered.

- Allow yourself to go to your safe place whenever you are having difficulty sleeping, are in pain, are feeling anxious or would simply benefit from being "in the moment."

YEARS AGO, with little time amid a stressful day in the office, I poured my hot pasta into the colander and slowly breathed in the steam from the pot. Closing my eyes, I imagined I was laying on the warm sand with the sun shining down. My safe place for two minutes carried me throughout the day, and it still makes me smile when I think of how simple, yet effective, it was.

This is what we want to teach our children as we empower them to feel more carefree and resilient, and as they attempt to heal their little piece of the world, one step at a time. ■

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