

Mindfulness and Self-Compassion for Good Mental Hygiene during COVID-19

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“When we can no longer change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” ~Viktor Frankl



The whole world, including Australia, is experiencing a tragic pandemic COVID-19 where physical hygiene is as important as mental hygiene. We live in truly unprecedented challenging times, where events are evolving rapidly and are impossible to predict. For many of us, this year of COVID-19 will be very difficult. Social restrictions, self-isolation and quarantine can be a very daunting prospect filled with dread. Mindfulness, self-compassion, gratitude and helping others are good mental hygiene practices, to see us get through this, with more ease, resilience and wisdom.

Our resourcefulness is being tested every day. The world around us is changing fast and our lives are being turned upside down. Most social activities and outings, that we took for granted are being taken away. Our mental wellbeing is being impacted as we are facing a serious threat to our physical health as well as our lifestyle and finances. More than ever we need to care for our mind to ease our anxiety.

We all share the fear of the unknown. We have lived in this fantasy that our life was under control. It is easy to let panic overwhelm us. With calm and clarity, we can turn our attention, instead of what we can control. During struggles, we need to take care of ourselves and others with compassion and respect. To protect ourselves and others, we practice physical distancing, isolation and good hygiene such as washing our hands often.

If we also practice mental hygiene, the challenges ahead are more likely to strengthen us. We are responsible for our thoughts and actions. Our hearts are breaking, when we hear the increased number of COVID-19 cases and numerous associated deaths in our countries and the rest of the world. There may also be sorrows ahead as we fear our loved one being impacted. We are dealing with this each on our own, but also together, being aware of our interconnection. Everyone is struggling with fears, loss and difficulties, so it is important to find a way to steady our mind, so we can connect compassionately with ourselves and others. The practice of mental hygiene will help us to deal with whatever is arising with courage and wisdom.

The need for physical and mental hygiene

When we think of good hygiene, we think of physical hygiene such as washing our hands and brushing our teeth. To take care of our mind is as important as taking care of our body. Physical hygiene keeps our body healthy while good mental hygiene will keep our mind agile, steady and strong.

The state of our mind is contagious. Remaining calm and smiling will benefit our self as well as others. Like preparing for a marathon, we need to last the distance, since this situation may be with us for 6 months to 12 months or even longer. The practice of good mental hygiene will cushion the blow while increasing our stamina and capacity for problem-solving.

What does mental hygiene mean during COVID-19?

The practice of mindfulness, self-compassion and gratitude as well as the mindset to help others will promote good mental hygiene. We need to cultivate mental tools to deal with difficult emotions that arise, when we suddenly see our lives being turned upside down in ways that we could have

never imagined, even a few weeks ago. The pandemic is terrifying and more than ever, there is a need to practice mindfulness and self-compassion to help us, to develop equanimity and not buy into the panic that prevails in the community.

Sharon Salzberg, a well-known mindfulness teacher, said recently “I am so grateful that I have tools to manage my mind!” The pandemic time is full of opportunities to become stronger in our practice of mindfulness and self-compassion. When we maintain (more or less) a mindset that is present and calm, we will support our physical health by strengthening our immunity system (body’s ability to fight infection), while cultivating the ability to steady the mind, to think clearly, to meet our struggles.

Everyone is dealing with difficult conflicting emotions such as fear, disappointment, anxiety about the future, loss, grief, anger and loneliness. On the one hand, we are enjoying slowing down and staying at home, but we are also grieving for the loss of freedom and income. With isolation, there is increased feelings of disconnection. Key is to be aware of the ongoings of our mind and to meet each difficult emotion with self-compassion. The way out is through: to be with what is as it is, with kindness and care.

In times of fear, we can be at our best with courage. Mindfulness and self-compassion give us the resources to be with our struggles, being the best self we can be. Being the person, that we need and that others need to survive, to thrive during hardships. Together, we will get through this, physically distant but socially connected. Controlling what we can, meeting our fears, helping others, and being grateful will help us to get through this.

Mindfulness during COVID-19

The Practice of Mindfulness helps us to develop a certain kind of awareness to ease emotions, so we are less reactive, enabling us to respond skilfully and wisely. If you have already learned mindfulness, you will find, like me, that in difficult times when our emotions are running wild, we have ample opportunities to practice.

The goal in the practice of mindfulness is throughout the day to pause often, to observe our thoughts, feelings as well as our surroundings from the perspective of a non-judgmental third party, becoming the witness who is kind and compassionate.

With mindfulness and self-compassion, we can learn to transcend our fears by focusing on our strengths and on what we can do to improve our situation or the condition of others. During a crisis, our brain’s default mode tends to be in the fight-flight mode. We will grieve our loss, dwell on what is wrong, resent what we don’t like, blame ourselves, get annoyed at others, feel frustrated about changes, angry at unmet needs, and of course, we will focus on future threats. Focussing on the difficulties and exaggerating the negative impact, will only cause more grief and hinder our ability to think clearly.

With mindfulness, we become aware that our thoughts are feeding our fears, we pause, we breathe, and we reset our thinking. We choose to be accurate in our thinking, to see what is, as it is, recognising that assumptions and judgements are not facts. We learn to direct our mind intentionally, to respond rather than to react, in ways that are helpful and constructive. We become aware of the thoughts and emotions to learn skills to manage our mind, to be able to see the opportunities and rest in the simple joy of being. Acknowledging that we can cope with the worst-case scenario is freeing while motivating us to be productive.

Self-compassion during COVID-19

The Practice of self-compassion is the other wing of mindfulness. Through mindfulness, we become aware of our difficult experience, as it is, without undue judgements assumptions or resistance. In the practice of self-compassion, we attend to ourselves as a friend, asking what do I need? We recognize our struggles and desire to alleviate our pain. We are aware of our connection with each other, our common humanity, that we are all suffering in one way or another. We validate our feelings and explore ways to attend to them with care by exploring soothing practices. We give ourselves the same kindness and support that we would give a loved one in difficult times. We find the friend within that we have been looking for. We adopt a kind and compassionate inner language using loving-kindness phrases for ourself and others such as May I be safe. May I have peace. May I be as healthy as I can be. May my struggle ease. May I be happy. We can experience a great deal of pain also as we worry about our loved one, so we can settle our mind by wishing others well such as May you be safe, May you have peace. May you be as healthy as can be, May your struggle ease, May you be happy. Repeating the phrases, again and again, can ease our sense of struggle, promote goodwill, helping us to maintain a positive vision of our lives, and others.

Mindfulness and self-compassion have been over the years a game changer for me. Here is a list of some of the practices that I have found helpful.

- being present in my body,
- feeling feet on the ground,
- soothing touch,
- awareness of breath,
- observing thoughts,
- defusing,
- letting go of assumptions,
- labelling emotions,
- making space for what is as it is,
- attending to my needs,
- talking to myself as a friend,
- loving-kindness meditation

The practice of gratitude during COVID-19

Grateful people are usually happy people. Gratitude is the art of appreciating what we have versus criticising what we don't have to make the most of our present situation. Gratitude leads to joy and contentment which are key to happiness. The regular practice of gratitude encourages us to take time to notice the small pleasures to increase the sense of wellbeing. When we take the time every day to appreciate, to notice the good in our lives, science shows that our lives improve because we have:

- better physical as well as mental health
- better relationships
- stronger immunity system s
- better sleep,
- less chronic pain,
- increased happiness and less anxiety and depression
- more feelings of connection with others
- more empathy and compassion,
- better intelligence and are smarter at problem-solving

- increased sense of optimism, satisfaction and well being.

We can be grateful for the small things as well as the big things in our lives. Saying “thank you” for instance is a heart-warming practice. Many people like to keep a gratitude journal writing regularly on the good moments, on what went well, what they did well, what other people did well. It is important to also include what we appreciate in ourselves and others. Other people have a jar in their house where they slip little notes of beautiful moments in their lives and decide to read them at birthdays or to begin the new year.

To keep our gratitude fresh, we look for new things to be grateful for every day. It is a way we can re-wire our brain who naturally, tends to dwell on the negative. It gradually changes the way we perceive a situation by looking for what is good. In your practice of gratitude, it is important to be specific and to detail the situation that you have enjoyed. For instance, you could say again and again “I am grateful for my family” or you could say more specifically “I enjoyed playing and dancing with my children Sunday evening”.

Rick Hanson describe how it is important to take in the good, so we can change the chemistry of our brain to promote savouring and enjoyment. You can make it a game with your children where each person at mealtime will think of 3 things to be grateful for.

I find that feeling gratitude is greater when I focus on people rather than events or physical objects. To enhance the practice further is to actually go out of your way to say “thank you” to those people by either writing a card or sending an email. The joy is magnified when it is shared. Every thought, words and action of gratitude counts. Saying thank you to others is good for relationships at home as well as in the workplace. The research shows that once you receive words of appreciation you are in a more positive mindset, feeling more cooperative, satisfied, confident and motivated.

The practice of gratitude creates a positive loop in our mind, rewiring our brain to increase our capacity for happiness. When we focus on thinking, saying and writing about the good in our lives, and appreciate those who are supporting us, we become better at spotting it and expressing it which increase our capacity for gratitude and joy. We can rewire our brain so that gratitude enters our default mode. Becoming a grateful person means that we cultivate a sense of abundance: appreciating others and recognising the simple pleasures in life. We can express our gratitude in so many ways. Turning our attention to the good in our lives train us to see more of the good to boost our happiness.

Helping others during COVID-19

Another powerful way to promote mental hygiene is to have a mindset of helping others. The research has found that helping others improves mental and physical health, by promoting positive feelings as well as maintaining a sense of connection and common purpose. Giving to others in simple ways helps those in need as well as improves our state of mind. We belong together. We are all in this together. The Dalai Lama said that the people who are helping others are wise-selfish because the one who gains the most is the helper!

Being at our best with courage and compassion during COVID-19

We can't control the event, but we can control how we respond. This pandemic COVID19 is a difficult time for each of us. We are going through a roller coaster of emotions together and yet separately. In the face of uncertainty, we can be scared or angry, while other times we can be at our best with courage and compassion. The practice of mindfulness, self-compassion, gratitude and helping others, can assist us to restore a sense of control. We can ruminate on the problems unduly, or we can reset our mind to turn our attention to solutions with courage.

When we are mindful, we can become aware when we are unduly worrying, so we pause, we breathe, we allow ourselves to be as we are, we re-consider what we can control and take helpful actions. We accept, we care, rather than resist, the circumstances that we cannot change, so we can begin to see new possibilities with resilience. Mindfulness and self-compassion promote good mental hygiene by giving us the resources to transform our fears, giving us clarity to control what we can, to help others while being grateful for our wisdom and each other.

Stay safe, stay sane!

We are offering Free Online Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Practice Sessions to help us all to ease stress and find balance during COVID-19

For Upcoming Free Practice Sessions visit

<https://www.mindfulpath.com.au/courses/free-online-mindful-self-compassion-practice-session>

If you liked more information or are interested to join us email marie@bloomfield.com.au

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