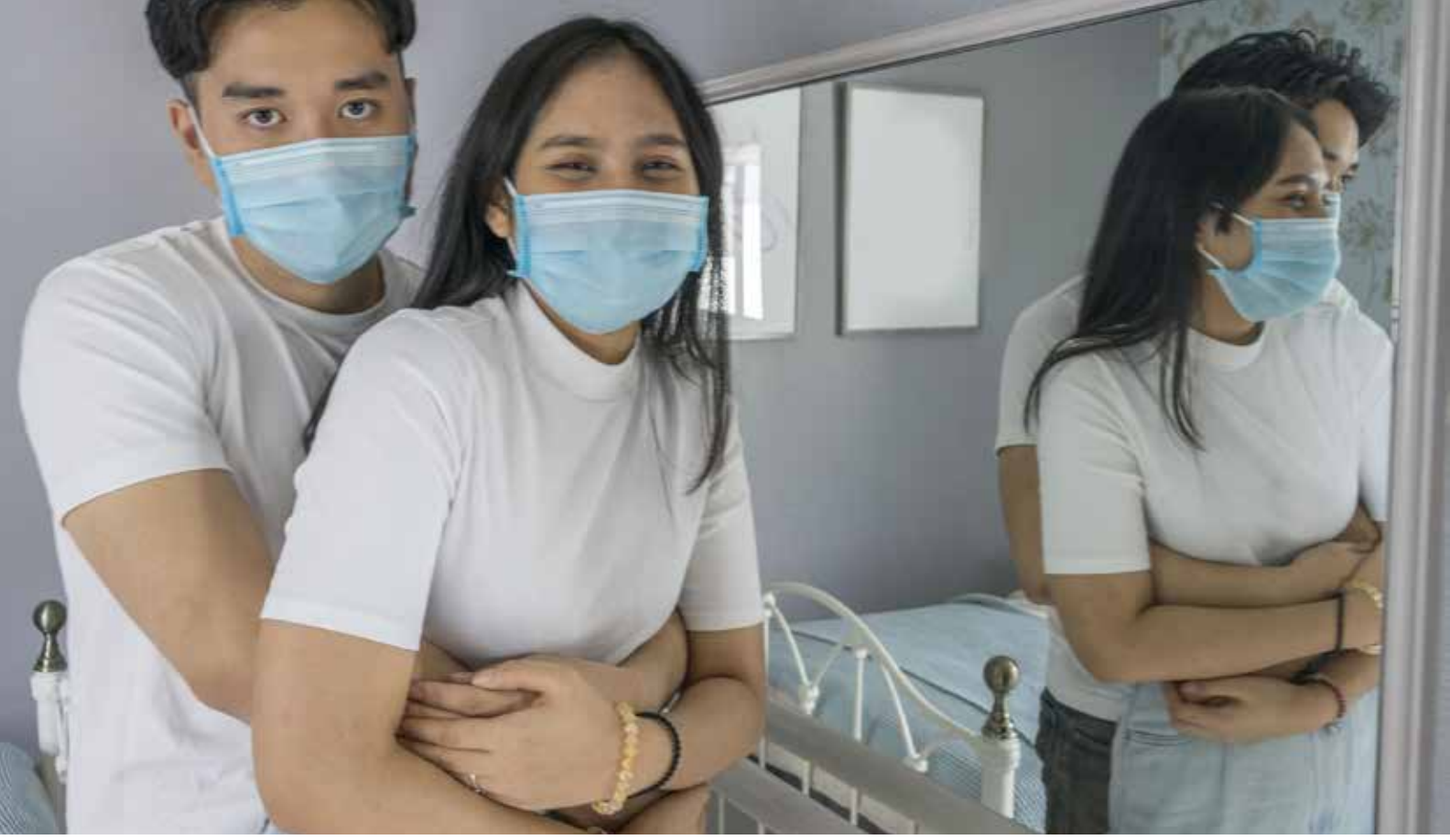


Emotional Well-Being in the Pandemic Age

Self-Care Strategies for Tough Times

by Sandra Yeyati

As the pandemic ravages our country, we are engulfed by a sea of challenging emotions, including fear, loss, anger, disappointment and grief. Compounding the suffering, past emotional traumas and pent-up desires are surfacing and crying for attention. One way to navigate these treacherous waters is by first enveloping ourselves in self-compassion. Next, we can gather the courage to face our fears and experience unpleasant feelings in order to heal them and let them go. Then, we search for and internalize positive emotional states to rewire our brains for positivity. This noble voyage promises immense rewards along the way.

The Cocoon of Self-Compassion

Some of us chase self-esteem like seeking the Holy Grail, yet it eludes us when we need it most. Faced with such occurrences as a failing grade or cruel insult, our self-worth withers. We can't understand why we lost it or how to get it back. When we attach our self-worth to achievements or comparisons with other people, self-esteem becomes unstable and unreliable.

Enter self-compassion, the life-changing perspective of showing kindness to ourselves in any and all situations—a supportive best friend that lives within us and can be accessed any time, every day. A pioneer and expert in this topic, Kristin Neff believes that self-compassion has three components: a decision to be kind to ourselves, a mindful awareness when we are in pain so that we can seek some relief and a sense of common humanity or connectedness.

We already know how to be compassionate, says Neff, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and co-author of *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook*. "It's linked to the parasympathetic nervous system, which is a natural part of our organism. We're tapping into this way of feeling safe, which is through care, bonding and connectedness."

Encouraging our friends when they're feeling down or hugging our moms in the morning is hardwired into us. When we decide to be kind to ourselves, it's easy to think of what we would say: "I'm sorry you failed that test. You'll do better next time. How can I help you?" To lend perspective, add a statement about our common humanity, counsels Neff. "This is hard for everybody. You're not alone."

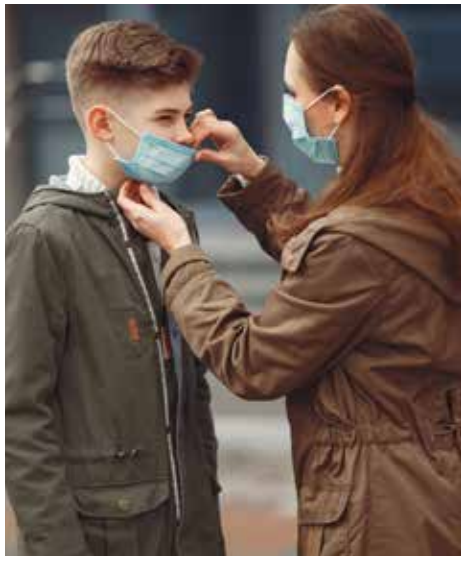
We must be aware of our pain before we can comfort it, and many of us try to suppress or resist pain, choosing to numb it with distractions like alcohol addiction or compulsive shopping. Others may get lost in the storyline of what's happening and succumb to suffering with no apparent way to obtain relief. Self-pity or self-criticism may creep in.

Mindful awareness is the antidote to these emotional extremes, because it helps us become aware that we are experiencing pain and to stay with that pain long enough to make a conscious decision to take care of ourselves. "One easy thing is physical touch," says Neff. "The first few years of life you have no words, so the body is programmed to respond to touch as a signal of care. Put your hand on your heart or your stomach, or hold your hand. This changes your physiology, activates your parasympathetic nervous system, helps you calm down and helps you feel physically supported. Sometimes, that's an entryway for people."

Finding Confidence Through Unpleasant Feelings

Nobody likes to feel sad or embarrassed. We'd rather have an ice cream cone or turn on the TV. But for Dr. Joan Rosenberg, a prominent psychologist and speaker, uncomfortable feelings present an invaluable opportunity for people to transform into confident individuals that relate to the world around them with authenticity and resilience.

In her book *90 Seconds to a Life You Love,* Rosenberg offers a formula—one choice, eight feelings, 90 seconds—to experience and move through eight of the most common unpleasant feelings: sadness, shame, helplessness, anger, embarrassment, disappointment, frustration and vulnerability.



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"The choice is to stay aware of and in touch with as much of your moment-to-moment experience as possible and not get lost in avoidance," she explains, adding that there are more than 30 behaviors, thoughts and emotions that we employ as distractions, including substance abuse, social media, pornography, exercise, obsessive thoughts about body image, humor and denial.

"Be aware of what you're aware of," she advises. "If we know that we don't like feelings, and we know we've been engaged in using ways to distract ourselves, then our challenge is to be more awake and aware of those times we do it, and as soon as we start to do the thing and become aware, that's when we make the decision to stop and ask, 'What's really going on?'"

Discoveries in neuroscience suggest that most of us come to know what we're feeling emotionally through bodily sensations. We might feel heat in the neck and face when embarrassed or a sinking feeling in the chest when disappointed. As sensations get triggered in the body, a rush of biochemicals in the bloodstream activate and then flush them out of the bloodstream in roughly 90 seconds.

"Most people have the impression that feelings linger a whole lot longer and that they're going to be overwhelmed by it and never come out of it if they start. But when they understand that what they're trying to avoid are uncomfortable bodily sensations that help you know what you're feeling emotionally, and that these are short-lived, most people will start to lean into them, and once they do, their life changes," Rosenberg says.

To move through bodily sensations, which may come in multiple waves, take deep, slow breaths. Try not to tighten up or clench the jaw and swallow. Notice the location and nature of the bodily sensations to help identify which of the eight unpleasant feelings it might be, and be curious as to what might have triggered it. All of this will take a few moments. With practice, identification will become faster, easier and more accurate.

"If I have more time, then I can think about whether this is connected to anything else. Is it just one thing that triggered it, or is it like something else that's happened

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Making Courage a Habit

In her book *The Courage Habit*, life coach Kate Swoboda presents a four-part method for people to face their fears, release the past and live their most courageous life.

Access the body. Practice any body-centric activity like mindful meditation, exercise or dancing every single day to release stress and anxiety, become centered and more present and clear the mind.

Listen without attachment. When your self-critic offers a warning or criticism, hear the words, understanding that this is fear trying to protect you and deciding that it's misguided and not true.

Reframe limiting stories or beliefs. Amend your internalized self-critic's messages to be more respectful and supportive. If it says, "You're stupid to try that," revise it to, "I'm smart because I'm willing to try."

Create community. Reach out to like-minded individuals that are supportive of the changes you are trying to make.

Building Up Our Happiness Quotient

These exercises are recommended by psychologist Rick Hanson:

Slow down, breathe and see the big picture. This simple practice brings us into the present moment, reduces the stress activation in the body, disengages us from verbal chatter and negative reactivity, and buys us time to see more clearly. Take three breaths, making the exhalation longer than the inhalation.

Five-Minute Challenge

Take in the good. It could be a flower blooming, birds singing or a nice exchange with another person. Slow down, take a few breaths and let it sink in for a minute or two.

Focus on something to cultivate. Perhaps it's patience or gratitude. Look for opportunities to have an experience of this quality and internalize it for another minute.

Marinate in pleasant feelings. Cultivate a sense of calm, contentment or warmheartedness for a couple of minutes.

before?" Rosenberg says. This level of awareness leads to a calming effect, clearer thinking, improved decision making and, perhaps most importantly, an ability to speak authentically.

"If we don't handle the eight feelings, we don't feel capable in the world," she says. The ability to speak adds to that empowerment. "From asking someone to stop a behavior so that you feel safer to telling someone you love them, asking your boss for a raise or letting people know about yourself and your work to garner opportunities and desired experiences—it cuts across every aspect of our lives and is absolutely crucial to our sense of well-being."

Rewiring the Brain for Positivity

Discoveries in neuroplasticity have revealed that the brain changes throughout life well into adulthood. It's designed to learn not just ideas and information, but skills, attitudes, feelings and moods. Rick Hanson, a clinical psychologist and author of several books, including *Hardwiring Happiness and Resilient*, contends that we can develop greater happiness, just like we can develop greater depression.

"There's a lot of research that shows that through deliberate little practices spread out through the day or sometimes more formal practices like psychotherapy or meditation, we can actually produce physical changes in the brain that are now measurable with things like MRIs," he remarks.

Hardwiring happiness is easy, pleasurable and doesn't take a lot of time. "If you take care of the minutes, the years will take care of themselves," says Hanson. "Little steps gradually move us forward a breath at a time, a minute at a time, a synapse at a time. Bit by bit, we grow the good inside while gradually releasing the bad."

"Our power to positively influence who we are in small, genuine ways every day is really important to compensate for the brain's negativity bias, which makes it like Velcro for bad experiences, but Teflon for good ones," he says. "We evolved a negativity bias over the 600-million-year evolution of the nervous system. Learning from negative experiences and mistakes was a critical survival skill, so we have a brain that is designed to scan for bad news, overreact to it and fast-track it into memory. It's not our fault, but it is our responsibility to deal with it by first, feeling the negative without reinforcing it and second, focusing on the positive and taking it in. Gradually, you can give yourself a brain that's like Velcro for the good and Teflon for the bad."

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