

When Uncertainty Rules Our Lives

By *Ann Muntter, L.M.S.W.*

A friend of mine recently reached out to me saying, “I don't remember ever in my life feeling as out of control as I feel now. We are doing fine, settling into a new routine and knowing we could be here for a long time. But the not knowing what will happen in the coming months is what gets to me the most.”

I find that this is what most people are experiencing right now. You hear this in the repetitive questions from news journalists to governors: Do you have any idea when our shelter-in-place mandate will be lifted? When might our lives return to some semblance of normal?

When people are going through a life change, whether an imposed change or one by choice, such as divorce, a move to another city or, in our situation today, a change from normal life to shelter-in-place, they cannot see themselves in the future. It often creates a fuzzy or dark, blank image. With stay-at-home directives, there is uncertainty, and people cannot picture when they will roam about freely (which season, month) or picture when they will be with family again (what occasions). For some, pictures they do imagine, such as a prom, graduation or athletic events, have feelings of grief associated with them. They may be missing the only opportunity to experience those events and may feel cheated out of those milestones. We also can't picture when we will travel or gather in big crowds again as there may be rolling epidemics for a while.

While we don't have control over these changes and uncertainties, we can control how we handle them. The things we hear the most right now are “stay home” and “wash your hands.” Those two things can make us feel safer. There are other things we can do to feel more in control. Eating foods which are dense in immunity-boosting nutrients, such as cinnamon, garlic, mushrooms, yogurt, turmeric, broccoli, ginger and spinach, can help us feel that we're being proactive to stay healthy. Video calls with family and friends allows us to continue nurturing our social connections. Exercising just 30 minutes a day and going outside for a walk can help us feel more regulated and enjoy nature. We can also do activities that keep our brain resting in the present for a little while, such as gardening, meditating or listening to music. All of these strategies reinforce our sense of control, which lessens our fears and prevents us from feeling overwhelmed and disabled by our present circumstances.

Practicing gratitude also helps us to stay in the moment and realize that we are okay. It helps us take stock of our present circumstances and appreciate what we have. Gratitude means thanks and appreciation, and appropriately it rhymes with attitude. A few tips on practicing gratitude:

- Practice mindfulness or being in the moment.
- Remind yourself that you are safe and okay.
- Make a list of the things that you are grateful for and read it daily.
- Try to find gratitude in your challenges—how you are coping and helping others to cope.
- Be appreciative of any new skill learned, hobby practiced or project accomplished.

A mantra helps during tough times. Maybe you have heard the message, “We are all in this together.” It is a statement of solidarity and comfort that reminds us that together we will help and encourage each other and figure out how to get through these challenging times.

Child & Family Psychological Services, P.C.