

News Column for Week of October 12, 2020

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How is your surge capacity?

I overheard a conversation in our office the other day that included, “I just want normal, whatever that is anymore.” No one has escaped the insecurities that has taken place since Covid became a pandemic.

There are days I just feel ‘off’. I don’t feel bad physically, but I really can’t put a finger on it. Sometimes it’s a lack of focus, or I forget things easily, because a routine has changed. I read an article recently that seemed to hit the nail on the head for me. Maybe you can relate. I’ll share some thoughts from “Our Brains Struggle to Process This Much Stress” from Elemental by Tara Haelle.

When we find ourselves in an emergency, we experience an adrenaline rush that presents a fight or flight type of reaction. We can think more clearly and react more quickly – often reacting before we have a chance to think about it. The incident is usually over quickly and our hormones return to normal.

Unlike the boost of energy of an adrenaline rush, in the early weeks of the pandemic we were using ‘surge capacity’ to function. Surge capacity is a collection of adaptive systems—mental and physical—that humans draw on for short-term survival in acutely stressful situations, such as natural disasters. However, pandemics can stretch on indefinitely.

In the case of natural disasters, we can see the end results of the physical damage that has been done. With a pandemic the harm is ongoing and invisible. Many systems that we work with everyday are not working normally right now. We might think we should be used to this by now, yet, we’ve never experienced a pandemic before.

Our surge capacity may be running on empty. We have ups and downs and often feel depleted or burned out – all from dealing with chronic stress. Those who are problem solvers and are used to getting things done may feel a harder hit, because none of that is possible right now.

Understanding ambiguous loss – any loss that’s unclear and lacks a resolution – may be helpful. It’s not a death, but in the case of the pandemic, there has been a loss of a way of life.

How do we adjust to a ‘new normal’ when there is indefinite uncertainty? Here are some tips shared by Pauline Boss, PhD, a family therapist and professor emeritus of social sciences at the University of Minnesota.

--Accept that life is different now. This does not mean we are giving up. It means quit fighting reality so we can place our mental energy into things that are constructive.

--Expect less from yourself. With the losses we have experienced, take some time to reflect to find out what rhythms of life you need right now.

--Recognize the different aspects of grief. The familiar stages of grief apply to this pandemic –anger, denial, depression, and acceptance—all concepts in facing loss. Acceptance might mean choosing to have a good time in spite of the pandemic.

--Look for activities that fulfill you. Self-care has always been included as a good coping skill. Unfortunately, the pandemic may have taken away some of those activities, such as meeting with friends for coffee or your regular bunko night. One thing we have control over is our daily lives. 'Do it Yourself' projects like gardening, painting, and house projects, for example, could feed that fulfillment need.

--Focus on maintaining and strengthening important relationships. Social support systems and remaining connected to people are most important when facing adversity. This includes helping others even when we are feeling used up ourselves. It's a win-win strategy in helping overcome our sense of helplessness and loss of control as we are doing something to help someone else.

--Begin slowly building your resilience account. Like a bank account, we may have overdrawn our resilience account over the past few months. We need to gradually build up our life practices to have something to fall back on when life gets out of sorts. Starting small with focuses on nutrition, sleep, exercise, meditation, self-compassion, gratitude, connection, and saying 'no' are basic needs and great areas to begin a foundation.

Do a little bit every day and you will start building momentum in re-building your surge capacity. Make sure to give yourself some slack when a link in your new routine chain breaks, and be ready to start again.

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