

Emergency Mental Health Kit

Well, in many ways, this summer has gone remarkably well. Those of us who wanted to be vaccinated got two doses earlier than we imagined which opened opportunities for the summer. Outdoor gatherings and visiting people who are like minded (in terms of safety) has been a very lovely reprieve from the measures we have had to take earlier in the pandemic. Yet in the background there is a threat of another wave to this pandemic, and it has many of us worried. The good news is that we know it is coming and we can prepare for it. We have built resilience through the last 18 months of psychological hardship and can prepare for another lockdown with the hope that it does not materialize. Like several of my friends, I am quietly stocking up on goods that I might need if we are shut in again for a time this fall or winter. It occurred to me that I need to make a psychological emergency supply kit as well. Here is how I hope to stock up.

Get Ready:

Three Good Things: (January 2021) This is an amazing five minute habit that you only have to carry out for about 2 weeks to see a marked improvement in your happiness/mental health and sleep. Try Seligman's Three Good Things or the What Went Well & Why exercise. For 2 weeks, every single day, at the end of each day, write down 3 things that went well for you and why it went well. That's it. For best results, think of 3 little good things that went well and why like, "I remembered my mask before I got out of the car." Write it down and write down why it went well like "I do things to keep myself and others safe." Keep a list for at least 2 weeks. Studies show that you will enjoy the effects for about six months. Start now to build up your sense of well-being before we hit a rough spot.

Stock up on Supplies: Now is a good time to make lists of things you can do in lock down that will help if you start languishing. Get a deck or two of index cards to write down things to do while sheltering at home. Make lists of books to read, projects to finish, things you want to learn, people to contact. Our neurology is set up to sort rather than remember things. Sorting soothes our anxious thoughts. Once you have a list of things you can do while staying at home, write one thing on each index card. (This might be a good project to do if another lock down is called). When you are having a bad day, you can get out the index cards and sort them by activity, or amount of time you have available, or by preference at the moment...or however you want. Set aside a card you want to work on and go for it!

Also, take a look around your house. Do you have unfinished projects that you might like to carry out? Do you have the supplies you need to work on them? Set things up so that they are as easy to start as possible when the time comes.

Planning Your Escape:

Boundaries and Routines: As your mind is wandering (mine is very good at this lately), think about the boundaries you would like to set for your safety. Are you prepared to have people visit you if they are masked and vaxxed? Do you have a list of people who you feel safe around? Now is a good time to start talking with your social contacts about what you are going to do to keep yourself safe if there is a

4th wave. How are you going to ask people who come into your house to wear masks if that is important to you? What boundaries do you want to set for your safety and how are you going to tell others about it? What are you going to do if you are uneasy or annoyed by what you see as overly cautious (or not cautious enough) behaviour from your friends and loved ones?

Also think about what routines would be helpful for you. Think about setting up a stay at home schedule for exercise, reading, calling friends. If you live with others, you may want to set times to watch tv, play a board game or have a coffee break together each day.

Practice Self Compassion: (November 2020) The idea of being self-compassionate is to treat ourselves the way we treat our friends and even strangers in a time of suffering. When we are suffering, it is good practice acknowledging the pain and give ourselves some love. It means giving ourselves with the same kindness, care and concern as we give others who are suffering. Practice talking to yourself the way you would talk to a cherished friend or a loved child.

Stock Up:

Social Relationships: (February 2021) We are enjoying more social contact right now and it is discouraging to think that we may have to cut back if there is another lock down. Now is the time to talk to your family and friends about how you will stay in touch if visits are no longer safe. Staying connected socially is more beneficial to health than diet or exercise. Set up a plan to connect regularly with friends and family by phone or Zoom and set it aside to use if there is a lock down. If you are feeling overwhelmed with loneliness, here is a trick...warm yourself up physically...take a long hot shower or bath or warm your hands as you savour a hot cup of tea or coffee. Warming up physically soothes loneliness. Then call, text or email a friend or family member for a chat.

Plan to Keep Moving! (June 2021) Movement is more than getting exercise. It is any physical activity that gets you interacting with your environment. It is easy to get settled on the couch or in a chair at home, reading, watching tv, Zoom meetings, emailing...when it's outside cold and we are limited with where we can go. We can greatly improve our wellbeing by planning small and steady changes. Moving can improve our cognitive ability, significantly improve our overall health and even create a feeling of joy. Do you have warm comfortable exercise gear? Good boots and cramp ons for icy conditions? Move outside if you can...sunlight is good for your wellbeing too.

Make Yourself a Goodie Box: Before cell phones and GPS and all, we were advised to have a winter emergency kit in our cars with candles, matches, a small blanket and a chocolate bar. I was prepared to eat that chocolate bar the minute I ran into a snowbank! Why not set aside a few treats for yourself that you will only use in a lockdown? This box will contain only things that are treats for you. Mine might contain a special book I want to read, a favourite chocolate bar, a needlepoint kit and licorice all sorts etc. Make a little package filled with special treats to break out if the doldrums hit. Since giving is good for your well-being (December 2020), maybe make one for those you care about too.