

Things have certainly have changed since last March and I know many people of all ages who are worried about how we are going to manage our lives and mental health through this upcoming winter with cold temperatures, dark days and a second and maybe a third wave of this pandemic. Working with both young people and their caregivers over the years, I have gleaned some good strategies for coping in times of great stress and I thought it would be helpful to me, and maybe to you too, if I were to pass on some of the things I have learned from people who have managed through difficult times. If you like these small write-ups about good mental health strategies, I will write on one topic a month until we are all inoculated and back to our more active social schedules.

I don't know about you, but I find the months of November and March the most difficult months of the year. In November, we see the days get darker and colder; it becomes more difficult to socialize and get outside in the best of times. And now with the pandemic, times are more difficult. The pandemic has created many challenges in getting together with family and friends and for enjoying traditions like Thanksgiving, Remembrance Day and Christmas. It can be perplexing because there is suffering and loss with these new circumstances yet many of us are still doing okay. We have a roof over our heads and food on the table...some of us (perhaps many of us) may even be eating better, healthier diets than in pre-pandemic days. There can be a roller coaster of emotions from thoughts such as "I am really coping well with this" to "This is really hard" to "What have I got to complain about, I have it so much better than so many others".

Here is the truth. Each of us is coping with a world-wide crisis. Our lives have greatly changed without our consent. Each of us is suffering and grieving to some degree because of this situation. This is a time to be very gentle and kind with ourselves and not necessarily a time for pushing ourselves too hard. A few years ago, I had the honour of attending an in-depth workshop with a positive psychologist, Kristen Neff, who is the seminal researcher on the concept of Self Compassion. 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 to acknowledge the pain and give ourselves some love. It means

treating ourselves with the same kindness, care and concern as we give others who are suffering. Neff gives some examples. When we are with a friend who is suffering, we say things like:

- “I am sorry you are in such pain”
- “How can I help?”
- “You are a good person.”
- “What do you want to do about it?”

We listen deeply and sit with their grief.

And how do we treat ourselves when we are suffering? We say things to *ourselves* like:

- “I should have tried harder”
- “I should have been ready for this.”
- “Why was I so stupid?”
- “I deserved this.”
- “Why should I feel so bad, I have it good compared to others?”

If you, like most of us, talk to yourself in a way that you would never talk to a suffering friend, you will really enjoy listening to Kristin’s talk about helping yourself cope during this pandemic. Please click on this link to hear Kristin Neff tell you what she knows about how to be compassionate to yourself.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoqSvlakeSQ>

If you prefer to read, I am sure Bill Minors of Books Galore will track down this book for you! Self Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself, by Kristin Neff. Her book retails for \$21 and for PROBUS members he will give a discounted price of \$17. Thanks Bill!

Before we end, Christmas is not all that far away. It just so happens that giving is great for your mental health! This year is going to be different of course but I have a challenge for us. For the month of December, days 1-

24, along with eating a chocolate every day ☺ - see if you can give away a free gift every day. Here are a couple of suggestions: a smile, a compliment, a greeting... can you think of 2 dozen different gifts? I will let you know what I have come up with for the month in the December Newsletter. We have a few weeks to get ready and I will present some psychological research/evidence in next month's newsletter to support the idea that giving is good for your mental health.

Now, go get yourself a cup of tea and some cookies and click on the video link above. Give yourself an hour to learn how to be kind to yourself.