



# Coping, Caring, and Connecting

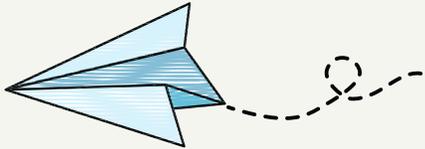
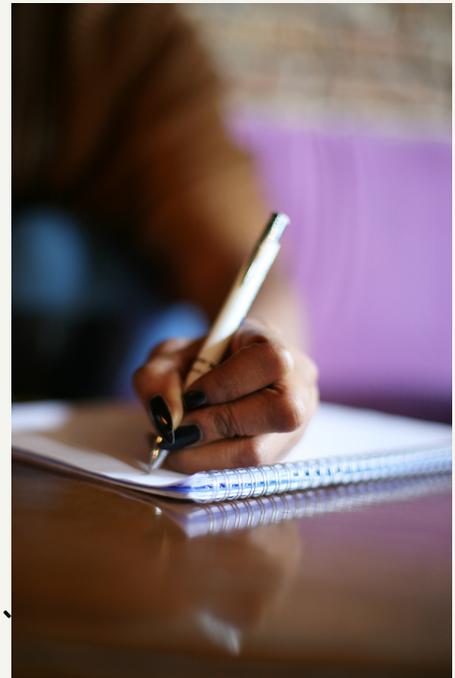


## PERSISTING THROUGH THE THIRD WAVE OF COVID-19: A LETTER FROM MY FUTURE SELF

*By Dr. Jill Shuster, C. Psych.*

We are over one year into the Covid-19 pandemic. Somehow, despite the struggles that each stage and day bring, we continue to take another step forward. I wanted to reflect on ways that I and those around me have persisted through the pandemic so far. Using what I have learned in the past year, I wrote a letter to my 'March 2020 Self', the version of myself at the beginning of the pandemic. These thoughts are based on my personal experiences, which likely differ from the reader's.

***As you read this letter, take a moment to reflect: What lessons have you learned since the beginning of the pandemic? What strengths have you drawn on to make it to today?***



Dear Parent in March 2020,

***You are beginning what may be one of the most challenging years of your life. Over the next year, you will have to adjust to uncertainty, personal losses, and new ways of living. I'm writing to remind you of your personal strength and some strategies that I've learned to guide you through the upcoming challenges.***

*Initially, you may look outward to the news or trends on social media to make sense of all the changes. In time, you will find other strategies. You will find that time spent in nature is a way to reconnect with yourself and those in your household. You will find ways to build your strength in order to face new challenges. Getting enough sleep, exercise, and practicing mindfulness will help to promote a sense of balance. Taking even small bits of time to do one thing you enjoy - reading, looking at nature, hugging your children - can brighten your day.*

*The dynamics of your relationships have changed. You will focus on how to connect with those most important to you. You go for walks with your closest friends and you connect with relatives over the phone, virtually, or even by writing. You will find new ways of celebrating special events, even though you still miss the traditional celebrations. You will experience joy in being present in the moment, rather than planning for the future. You will connect with your local community to find strength. Waving 'hi' to a neighbour can be a small yet powerful source of connection.*

*You are learning to be kinder to yourself. You will remind yourself to take things one day at a time and lean into the uncertainty of each challenge, even when it is hard. You will recognize the importance in reaching out for help when you need it, or provide help when you are able to, even when it is difficult. You remind yourself that perhaps there are aspects of pandemic life that you will miss. This has been a year unlike any other and you are using these lessons to grow and get through each day as best you can. I am so proud of you.*

*Signed with love and compassion, your future Self (May 2021)*

# BALANCING MENTAL HEALTH & PHYSICAL FITNESS WHILE AT HOME

By Paul Szego, Ph.D., C.Psych.

## Relaxing: Taking time for yourself

- Find something that you enjoy, that's just for you (puzzles, a book, drawing, day dreaming, sitting and watching the clouds, etc.).
- Find something to watch or read that you really look forward to!
- Let go of guilt! When you're taking a break, let yourself enjoy your time off.
- If you're working from home, try to get out of the house and get some fresh air, at least once a day if possible.



## Working: Getting things done

- Make a list of things you need to do, just so you can feel good when you check them off!
- If you're feeling overwhelmed by a particular task, focus on getting it done first so you're not dreading it for the rest of the day!
- Try not to have too many windows, applications, or distractions open at once when working on a computer.
- Try standing while working (with your arms bent at the elbows, and the monitor just below your eyes, at arms' distance away from you).
- Small, immediate rewards (external reinforcers) work well for kids and adults to help get the job done!

## Moving: Keeping your heart rate up

- Do isometrics (holding a tough pose) when you're sitting or standing.
- Exercise as a weekly or daily family activity (e.g. Go Noodle workouts on YouTube or a walk/bike ride).
- Stairs are great for a healthy heart - take them whenever you can!
- Use an exercise band around your thighs when standing/sitting for a quick stretch and strengthen.
- Set up exercises stations around the house and make a point of using them whenever you're in that space (e.g. do 3 jumping jacks every time you walk into the kitchen) - get the kids involved too!



## Eating: Keeping fuelled & hydrated

- Keep a large glass of water next to you.
- Snack *when you're hungry*, but eat healthy snacks (nuts, protein, cheese).
- Keep snacks *in the next room*, not next to you!
- Have a healthy and hearty lunch, and work it off throughout the afternoon.
- Make sure that dinner fills you up, then stop eating for the rest of the evening to let your body fully digest.
- Stress & Hunger: Most people either over eat or under-eat when stressed out.
- Try to figure out your pattern, and listen to your stomach, not your stress!

## Coping: Dealing with challenges

- Try accomplishing small tasks to increase your sense of control and calm (e.g. fold one load of laundry, pay one bill)
- Catch yourself having negative thoughts, and name them to tame them (e.g. "I'm just worrying", "this thought will pass").
- Distract yourself to change your focus.
- When there's a problem, spend your energy on finding a solution - if there's no solution, focus your energy on what you can control.
- Remember: lots of times, anxiety isn't real, it just *feels* real. Challenge your thinking when you can!



## Sleeping: Resting and restoring

- Try to keep a consistent sleep schedule, at least for Sunday-Thursday night.
- No screens in bed (Yes, really)!
- No alcohol 3 hours before sleep (it can affect the quality of sleep).
- Open the blinds as soon as you get out of bed - it's a great way to help your body wake up!
- Drink a full glass of water *before* that first cup of coffee.



# IT'S OK TO NOT BE OK: TIME FOR TRAGIC OPTIMISM

by Bryony Hupka, C. Psych.



We have all heard the messaging: focus on the positive, be grateful for what we have, keep things in perspective. While these practices can be beneficial, we can all agree that, in general, this messaging has become unrealistic for pandemic times. **Unrelenting optimism – also called toxic positivity – can make us feel like negative emotions are failures or weaknesses.** Research shows that not acknowledging hardships can adversely impact health, and that suppressing negative emotions can actually make us feel worse.

**The ongoing realities of the Covid-19 pandemic have made finding the bright side so difficult.** In the past year, when we have been stressed by the many roles we are asked to take on and at the same time isolated from others, we can feel increasingly powerless and angry. And we still need to do the mundane, everyday tasks – we do the laundry, we pay our bills, we make meals (so many meals!), we give out snacks (even more snacks!) – while we consider what the future might mean for ourselves, our families and our children.

**It is time for a more realistic framing - this is where tragic optimism comes in!** The term tragic optimism was coined by Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst Victor Frankl, who defined optimism in the face of the “tragic triad” – pain, guilt and death. During the pandemic, we have experienced one, two or all of these things at different times. Tragic optimism is “saying yes in spite of everything” (Frankl, 2006). *Frankl proposed that there is space for both good and bad and that we can grow from both.*

“...Life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable.” **Victor Frankl**

**How can we apply this to our lives right now? By shifting our focus...** Tragic optimism suggests that, in the midst of trauma, we should move away from the search for happiness or well-being and instead focus on finding meaning. *Leave behind the ‘grin and bear it’ attitude - instead think about a daily effort to:*



- Feel comfortable with loneliness and anxiety
- Enjoy time to yourself when you can get it
- Value the connections we have in whatever way we can have them safely
- Discover something about ourselves that will last past this pandemic
- Take a few moments to reflect on why you are doing what you are doing - try to say no to it, if it does not feel purposeful

**This is not pressure to do anything new – it appreciates where you are already.** It is vital to respect feelings of uncertainty, as Frankl did, and to encourage feelings of hopefulness and looking toward the future – *so that meaning and growth can occur despite traumatic circumstances.*

CHECK OUT THESE UP-TO-DATE RESOURCES & EVENTS!

# Community Corner

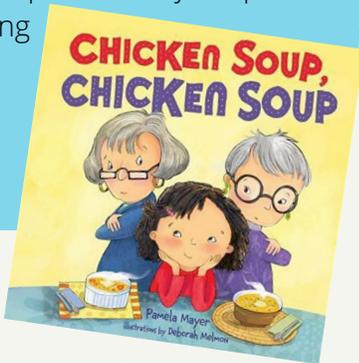
211 & OPA



If you are a **frontline worker**, call 211 for free, psychological counselling support

During *Children's Mental Health Week*, the Mental Health & Well-Being team developed interactive, virtual resource kits to support mental well-being for our TDSB communities. Use the **Caregiver & Student Kit** at home, by yourself or with your whole family, anytime you need it!

TDSB is celebrating *Asian & Jewish Heritage month* with the children's book "Chicken Soup, Chicken Soup"! **Click here** for more details on virtual resources, read-alongs & for a chance to submit your own special family recipe for an upcoming TDSB cook-book!



## DID YOU KNOW?

TDSB Psychological Services has a **new website** with FAQ's, parent resources & more!



## CONNECT WITH US DIRECTLY

Join our Virtual Drop-ins  
Wednesdays  
7 p.m. - 8 p.m.

Click on the images for virtual drop-in info!

Tuesdays,  
10 a.m. - 11 a.m.  
Thursdays,  
7 p.m. - 8 p.m.

**For complex needs students**  
**Discuss your concerns with Professional Support Services**

**For all caregivers**

# ASK THE PSYCHOLOGIST

by the Hearts & Minds Committee

*My 16-year-old teenager is failing a course for the first time ever, struggling with virtual learning, and recently told me they started smoking pot. What can I do to help?*

Teenagers are developmentally prepared to explore, push boundaries, and become more independent. Covid-19 has made these experiences more difficult, leading to greater internalized stress for some teens, and coping methods that are not always healthy or helpful.

Research suggests that short-term effects of marijuana may affect memory, reaction time and learning habits. **By staying calm and having open-ended conversations with your teen, you can be a powerful influence in your child's decision making.** Click [here](#) for more information on cannabis use and how to discuss it with your teen.

*A few strategies to help you and your teen cope during this time:*

- **Connect with your teen.** A strong, open relationship with a caregiver is one of the most important factors in healthy child development. Find a positive or neutral [time to connect](#) - while going for a walk, cleaning up after dinner, or when playing a video game together.
- **Identify and validate their feelings.** It may be helpful to [label and acknowledge](#) how your teen is feeling. Understand their feelings may help to explain their actions in a non-judgemental way.
- **Spot your teen's strengths** (not just their struggles) and [praise them](#) specifically, immediately, & boldly! Discuss healthy ways they can feel happy, independent and in control.
- **Partner with your teen and their teachers!** Work together to determine some [virtual supports](#) that may be helpful at school - reach out to the Guidance Dept, the school ACL or Admin if you need support.
- **Take care of yourself.** As a parent of a struggling teen, you may need [support](#) too. Another resource [here](#).