



The Power of Connection

by KENDA RIGGS

Life can throw unexpected curveballs at different times in our lives. This year, however, in addition to regular stressors that people have been experiencing on an individual basis, there has been a global curveball that has resulted in significant changes for us all. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted everyone in different ways and how you are coping with this will depend on a number of factors, including your temperament, your physical and emotional health, your life experience, your current personal living situation, your financial situation, and your career security. But one of the biggest factors that will influence how you adapt to this situation is related to the supports that you have around you which includes your family, friends, colleagues and loved ones, and how you stay connected with yourself.

When this pandemic started, we heard about the importance of the term ‘social distancing’ to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Now, ‘social distancing’ has been replaced by the term ‘physical distancing’. I prefer the term ‘physical distancing’ and would submit that, during a global pandemic, we need to be more *socially* connected than ever while maintaining *physical* distancing from one another to ensure we keep working towards our optimal health and well-being. Caring and compassion towards each other should be more contagious than this virus.

Grief and Loss

For many teachers, this pandemic has meant having to adjust to abrupt changes in a short period of time with much uncertainty, and teachers have expressed feeling grief and loss in relation to the changes that have occurred. These changes include: not being able to be physically connected to close family members to share in positive or difficult times at present; not being able to be physically connected to bring closure to the year with the children and youth in your classrooms and schools; and, not being able to be in physical proximity to your colleagues, friends, and school community. Some teachers have been personally affected by the virus, and some have experienced personal grief and loss in their lives. Some may be going through life transitions like planning for retirement during a pandemic. All teachers have been experiencing grief for others around the globe when tragedy

has struck communities in addition to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Now more than ever, it is essential to remember that everybody is experiencing similar emotions in different ways. While remembering that a community is a group of people that we can lean on when times are good and when faced with challenges, as a teaching community, now is the time for everybody to remember to lean on and support each other. This is the power of connection.

Stress and Resilience

Stress is defined as “the body’s response to a real or perceived threat...a reaction to a situation” (CMHA, 2020). Everybody experiences stress, and as difficult as stress can be, it is important to remember that stress can have a positive impact in our lives. Stress can often increase productivity, help you meet a deadline, motivate you to make a change, and can help protect you against a harmful situation by activating the primal survival part of your brain (fight-flight-freeze response). When stress is predictable, you can have a perceived sense of control over it which may lead to increased resilience. When stress is perceived as unpredictable, it can lead to feelings of vulnerability. Some of you may have adapted more quickly to changes arising from the pandemic, while others may be having a difficult time. Many teachers are experiencing added stress from managing childcare responsibilities while trying to work from home and stay connected with their students. It is important to remember that it is normal to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during this crisis.

So, let’s focus on the healthy management of stress, which can lead to increased resilience particularly in times of crisis. One of the most important factors in managing stress is to bring awareness into what your own thoughts and feelings are about a situation with a focus on the present moment. This is what you can have control over, your thoughts, which ultimately impact how you feel. Increasing self-awareness with a more deliberate focus on your own thoughts and feelings can help you to become attuned to your own body reactions. Research tells us that taking care of yourself and being mindful of your thoughts and feelings is one of the most important components of stress management and self-regulation practice, as it rewires and strengthens

“The most powerful buffer in times of stress and distress is our social connectedness; so let’s all remember to stay physically distant but emotionally close.”

—Dr. Bruce Perry

the neural circuitry in the brain to help manage your own stress responses. Even when those thoughts and feelings may be uncomfortable, it is important to allow yourself to just be with that uncomfortableness because we know that the more present we can be with our thoughts and emotions, the more resilient we will become in stressful situations.

At this time, I invite you to reflect upon how you have been increasing your own resilience to stress during this global pandemic when some aspects of your life may feel outside of your control.

What if I Become Overwhelmed With My Thoughts and Emotions?

Dr. Russ Harris, a clinical psychologist and author of *The Happiness Trap*, explains that, although you cannot control the future or the past, you can control what you *do* in the present. If you start to feel out of control and have feelings of being overwhelmed or panic, as many people do, especially in times of crisis, it is important to regain a sense of control and to connect with yourself. Dr. Harris discusses the importance of connecting with your body when anxiety happens. Some ways you can connect with your body are by pushing your feet into the floor, deeply shrugging your shoulders, or focusing on deep breathing. Breathe slowly in through the nose and out through the mouth. Be aware of the current moment by engaging in a self-therapeutic grounding exercise of ‘taking five’ – notice five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Continue to breathe. Be present in the here and now; focus on what you can do right now to have control. Be kind to yourself. We know that predicting and planning for stress, being connected with yourself, and being prepared to cope with the waves of anxiety that can come and go by using self-therapeutic grounding techniques will promote resilience in coping with the situation we are all experiencing due to COVID-19. You are not alone.

Three Ways to Practice Health and Wellness

Small changes can yield significant results. During these unprecedented circumstances, focussing on these three areas can improve wellness and promote resilience:

1) Try to introduce and maintain structure and routine in your day. This means waking up and going to bed around the same time that you did when you were going to work every day. If you stay up late one night, you should still get up at the same time the next morning as if you were going to work. Schedule meals around the same time as normal and make plans for virtual interactions with your colleagues throughout

the day when possible. Incorporate small increments of physical and mental activities into your schedule multiple times per day as opposed to just once per day as this will keep your brain more regulated throughout the day to manage stress. Stay connected to yourself.

2) Choose a set time to monitor news and updates on COVID-19, but do not be “tuned in” all the time. Everybody needs a break and watching and hearing about the pandemic constantly on a local, national, and international level can activate the stress response system in our brains without our conscious awareness that this is happening. When we watch or listen to the news, we cannot predict or control the information to which we will be exposed. When we don’t have predictability, our sense of control of the situation is diminished and we can feel more vulnerable. To increase your resilience, exercise control over the time and amount of media to which you expose yourself.

3) Most importantly, stay engaged and connected socially while maintaining physical distancing through various means, such as phone calls, texting, email, Facetime, Skype, Zoom, and so forth. Reach out to others to say hello, laugh, or share a story to help combat feelings of loneliness that can slowly emerge. Social connectedness promotes health and wellbeing and can help you to stay positive. Research shows that people who feel more socially connected have lower rates of anxiety and depression. It is of utmost importance to stay physically distant but emotionally close during this challenging time period.

Never forget that we are all going through this experience together. You belong to a community of educators, and individually and collectively, there is strength and resilience to be found and shared. Reach out to each other, your current and former colleagues, and stay connected. The power of connection can go a long way.

I invite you to visit the Employee Assistance Program page on the NLTA website (www.nlta.nl.ca/employee-assistance-program/) for information and resources, including a five minute Mindfulness Guided Imagery Practice at www.nlta.nl.ca/guided-imagery to continue to build your own stress resilience at this time. Please reach out via email or phone if you require support, would like to connect, or just talk. We are here for you.

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(References for this article available at www.nlta.nl.ca/references-mayjune-2020)