

Making Peace with a Pandemic

How do you make peace with a pandemic? What does that mean? What does that even look like? You probably have had a wealth of emotions regarding this lingering pandemic that ranged from fear to anxiety to sadness to anger to confusion to uncertainty and then looped back through all of the above. One thing to be sure is the Pandemic has hung around longer than any of us thought that it would. It is an unwelcome guest that refuses to leave. In counseling, when a client is faced with difficult negative life circumstances that they cannot change, we use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. This therapy gently challenges an individual to accept the circumstances in their life that they have no control over. By accepting circumstances that we have no ability to change instead of using all of our energy railing against them, acceptance ends up resulting in an ironic and surprising peace. While this may sound like a strange new concept with a paradoxical outcome, it is nothing new.

Most of us are familiar with the Serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference". The serenity that comes from accepting what we cannot change can be very empowering. When we feel empowered, we experience a sense of control and this sense of control ultimately brings us peace. Peace can calm our emotions of fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, confusion and uncertainty. Peace can give us the rest we need to face today and the strength we need to face tomorrow.

While making peace with the pandemic will be a continual process, it is well worth the effort. The fruit of this important life skill of accepting what we have no power to change will help us to deal with all our difficult life circumstances both now and in the future.

What does it look like when someone has not made peace with the pandemic? We have all seen the stories on the news of people over reacting to wearing masks and social distancing. What makes them behave this way? They are railing against the pandemic instead of making peace with it. This railing comes from fear. This fear leads to anger which then leads to aggression. They are like that stray animal by the side of the road you reach down to help and they bite you. Underneath that reaction is a very frightened living thing. If someone is lashing out at those around them, they have not made peace with the pandemic.

We have also heard of the other extreme. People who are so paralyzed with fear that they are not leaving their homes if they don't have to, quitting their jobs because they are afraid to go near people, and have resigned themselves to live in social isolation because they feel that is their only safe option. This also comes from fear. This fear leads to anxiety and the anxiety leads to social isolation. Social isolation is not healthy for anyone. The toll this can take on someone's emotional and mental well being can be detrimental. Even the most introverted among us need social human interaction..

We can all remember when we first ventured out into the world after shut down. It was eerie, strange, almost apocalyptic, but we did it and now it is not as scary. It is still scary to be sure, but we have made peace with it and are still being smart, wearing our masks, and social distancing. Our hands are so clean, we could perform surgery. We have made a conscious choice to overcome the fear to find our new

normal. We have made peace with our new normal. Life is not the absence of fear. Life is how we live in the midst of fear.

Fear is not a bad emotion, but rather a basic emotion that can actually serve a vital purpose. If we are walking down a dark deserted alley at 3 in the morning, we should be fearful. It is our instincts letting us know this is a dangerous situation. William Bradford Cannon first illustrated this theory of the physiological fight or flight response. When an individual is faced with danger or stress, they may react by either fighting the danger or stress or taking flight from it. There is a third element to this theory that is not as well known called “freezing”. Some, when faced with danger or stress, freeze and are paralyzed. Freezing can also be a form of flight, but the end result is still freezing. It seems with this pandemic, one of our physiological responses of flight is not really an option. We cannot run from the pandemic like a gazelle trying to outrun a lion. Since we cannot take flight, we can create a new option called adaption.

We can adapt to this new normal with a new skill of adaptation. One life skill I often teach clients is that the only one who has ultimate power over their life is themselves. We make a conscious choice to get up each day and decide who we want to be that day, how we want to act, and how we want to treat others. We are the ones in charge of our thoughts, our emotions and our actions. We could be in the midst of the most terrible circumstances and feel peace. We could have things going wrong to the right and left of us but remain calm. We can choose to adapt to the circumstances around us.

I am impressed by those who have chosen to adapt to the pandemic instead of fighting against it or being paralyzed by it. I hear of people doing it everyday. On the radio, I heard a principal of a school put out a parody of the song, “You can’t touch this” by M.C. Hammer. He uses the melody in an amusing way to let returning students know what they can and can’t touch. He has adapted to the pandemic and he is role modeling for his students to do the same. Several celebrities have hosted Virtual proms and graduations as the class of 2020 adapts to missing these major life events in person. Sporting events have cardboard cut outs in the audience to resemble fans as they adapt to finding their new normal as professional athletes. Saturday Night Live finished its season as Saturday Night “Virtual”, as a 45 year old live show adapts to the pandemic. Numerous retailers put social distancing and mask wearing policies into effect so they could reopen as they adapt to the new normal in the shopping experience. Restaurants have contactless deliveries as they adapt to the new normal. Apparently so many people are having pizza delivered that we have a pepperoni shortage! Grocery stores clean the carts for their patrons, put up Plexiglas to minimize droplet transmission and tape signs on the floor for social distancing as they adapt to the new normal of grocery shopping. Churches have drive in services as they adapt to the new normal in worship. Political Conventions are held virtually as they adapt to the new normal of an election year. Music award shows are virtual as they adapt to the new normal in entertainment. Zoom stock must be soaring as employers utilize this medium to continue adapting to the new workplace landscape. In fact, I heard Zoom recently crashed because so many people were using it. Parades of cars drive by to honor a vet who turned 100 and a boy recovering from cancer as people adapt to a new way of showing support for their fellow man. In all these cases, people have adapted and made peace with the pandemic. Life goes on and so do we.

While many of us have learned to adapt to a new normal during this pandemic, the fall of 2020 has brought the need for even more adaptation especially for parents as they attempt to navigate another new normal. Change is never easy nor is it very welcome. Yet it constantly comes back to challenge us again and again. It is important to remember that change can be a good thing making us stronger and more resilient. I read once that a pearl is formed by a grain of sand getting inside of a marine oyster. The oyster secretes a substance to get rid of the irritant and in the process of trying to remove the irritant, the marine oyster ends up forming something quite strong and beautiful that we have come to know as a pearl. Change can make us stronger. Change can show us how to adapt to the circumstances around us.

As parents attempt to find a new normal this fall, kids are finding their new normal too. What I have learned in working with children is that they are highly adaptable and resilient. Kids seem to learn how to make peace with things earlier and easier than we do. They are fearless at times, impressive at times and awe inspiring at other times. Kids truly can take lemons and make lemonade. We could learn a lot from them. Many of my school counselors returned to in person open schools last week after much discussion and preparation from myself, their schools, and the superintendent of schools. What they reported to me was the absolute joy kids had in returning to school and seeing their friends again in person! They didn't care that they had to wear masks and social distance because they got to see their friends. They are adapting to their new normal. What the counselors reported regarding parents was a lot of uncertainty and questions as parents are seeking the knowledge they need to feel comfortable with their new normal of sending their kids back to school. You have probably all heard the expression, "Knowledge is power". In this regard, it truly is. The more parents gather information and knowledge about their children returning to in person instruction, the less uncertain they will feel. The less uncertain they feel, the more power they will feel. This power will give them a sense of control and the sense of control will give them a sense of peace. Parents will once again find another new normal for themselves and their families.

There is a wealth of knowledge out there to equip parents for finding another new normal as kids return back to school. Here are some great websites addressing the return to in person instruction:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/parent-checklist>

National Association of School Psychologists:

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid19>

American Academy of Pediatrics:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Covid19/Pages>

School Nutrition Association:

<https://schoolnutrition.org/covid19/backtoschool-resources>

American Occupational Therapy Association:

<https://www.aota.org/Practice/Health-Wellness/Covid19/backtoschool.aspx>

As a department that helps individuals with all kinds of issues they face in life, we are here to help individuals deal with the pandemic and find that peace that is so important for our mental health. If life feels uncertain right now, we can help. We have all had to chart our own course as we attempt to make peace with this continual and enduring pandemic. We have all been walking on the same road, in the same shoes, with the same fears, questions and anxieties.

You've heard it before, but I will say it again, we are all in this together. We can find strength from one another. We can make peace with this pandemic.