

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2019-2020 News & Notes



May 2020 News and Notes

Caring for Others Begins with Caring for Ourselves

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Just as on an airplane, where we are instructed to put on our own emergency masks before assisting others, so in these difficult times of uncertainty and disruption, taking care of our own emotional health is essential if we are to be a support to others. Chances are you are taking extra steps to aid friends and family members, finding ways to assist in your community, and being watchful of the well-being of others. Now is also a time to look after your own well-being.

Acknowledge and express your feelings, especially difficult and dark emotions. Although you may feel the temptation to ignore or suppress them, whether by focusing on the needs of others, using distractions such as shopping or gaming, or using alcohol and drugs, suppressing feelings will not resolve them or make them disappear. In fact, repressed emotions often emerge as anger, depression, and hopelessness.

Instead, by expressing emotions, you can begin to process and work through them. “Talking has powerful psychological benefits that might not be obvious,” writes Eric Ravenscraft in “Why Talking About Our Problems Helps So Much”¹. Among the examples he mentions are venting to a friend, discussions with your partner, and talking with a licensed therapist. “What all these forms have in common is that they are conversations specifically designed to examine and express the emotions you are having.”

Externalizing negative thoughts can make them more manageable. Many people find that writing out their feelings in a journal or a letter can be a relief, and that having simply committed them to paper makes it easier to set them aside. Others may find release through drawing and painting, and other creative art forms.

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Ravenscraft also advises, “Talk about the good as well as the bad. . . . Be sure to share your good experiences and feelings when they come up. Talking about these experiences can reinforce them in your brain and make it easier to break out of negative thought patterns later.”

Seek out the support and comfort of others. Fortunately, we live in an era when technology enables us to keep in touch with others near and far by many means. Even those less confident with electronic media are finding reassurance and peace of mind in the ability to see and talk with family and friends through Zoom, Skype, and Facetime. There are many opportunities to participate in online group activities, such as virtual yoga classes, poetry readings, museum tours, and countless others.

Practice self-compassion. So many people these days comment how tired they feel by the end of the day, how they have been unable to accomplish as much as they used to, how everything seems to take more effort. The emotional stress so many of us feel may take its toll without our awareness. This is the time to be gentle with ourselves, accept that these are extraordinary times, and reduce expectations of ourselves and others.

Engage in activities that nourish you. Whether it’s gardening, quilting or baking, take time out to do what you enjoy. Mystery novels, old movies, scrapbooking. Perhaps it’s simply a cup of tea in the backyard, admiring the new growth and birdsong that belong to the spring season. Whatever it is, realize that caring for yourself, for your own emotional as well as physical health, is another way to care for those around you.

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/smarter-living/talking-out-problems.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>