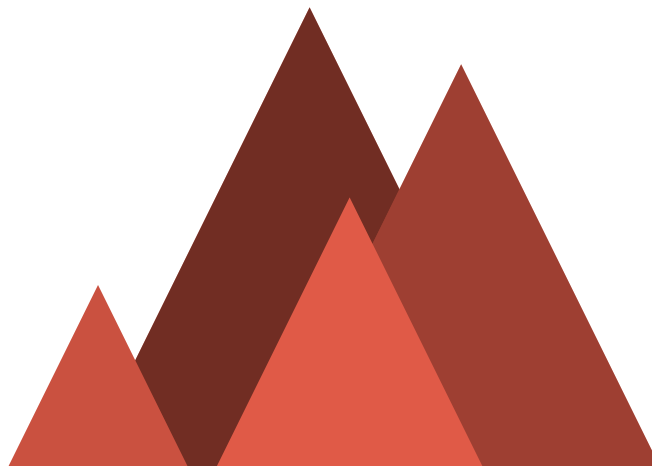


# STRATEGIES FOR UNCHARTED TIMES

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A GUIDE TO GETTING THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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# LIVING WITH CHANGE & UNCERTAINTY

People all over the world are living with a lot of uncertainty right now. Uncertainty can be hard at any time but this amount of global uncertainty is unprecedented.

People have had to adjust to significant changes to their lives, on many levels, all at once. The effects of the pandemic have been far reaching and sadly disparities are becoming increasingly obvious as the intersection between many factors (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, health, geographic location, socioeconomic status, migration status, disability) results in those already disadvantaged being further disadvantaged.

Now as the number of cases in Canada decreases (globally cases are still climbing), people are being asked to adjust yet again. To complicate things, situations vary greatly from one location to another, and governing bodies all over the world have different opinions about how to best move forward. How do people move forward among so much uncertainty and upheaval to their lives?



# GAINING A SENSE OF CONTROL

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*WHEN THERE IS A LOT OUTSIDE OF YOUR CONTROL IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO FOCUS ON WHAT IS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL.*



## THINGS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL

- Following public health recommendations
- Taking steps to decrease the likelihood that you get COVID-19 or pass it onto someone else
- Limiting media consumption
- Finding ways to stay connected
- Moving your body
- Engaging in practices that calm or comfort you
- Being kind to others and yourself
- Finding ways to help or support others
- Being grateful for what you do have
- Taking it day by day
- Engaging in activities you can still enjoy or finding new activities to enjoy
- Reaching out for support or asking for help
- Telling those you love and appreciate how you feel
- Engaging in practices that give you a sense of purpose and meaning



## THINGS OUTSIDE OF YOUR CONTROL

- Government and public health responses and recommendations
- Economic fallout
- Global, national and local impact
- Number of deaths
- How long safety measures last
- Other people's reactions and behaviours
- The health of those you love
- Personal losses (e.g., loved ones, freedoms, plans, supports, jobs)
- Having to self-isolate or quarantine

# THE VALUE OF ACCEPTANCE

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WHILE IT IS HELPFUL TO TAKE STEPS TO ACT ON WHAT IS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL, ACCEPTANCE IS OFTEN THE MOST HELPFUL RESPONSE WHEN THINGS ARE OUTSIDE OF YOUR CONTROL.



*"FOR AFTER ALL, THE BEST THING ONE CAN DO WHEN IT IS RAINING IS LET IT RAIN."*

~ HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

## LEARNING TO ACCEPT THAT WHICH IS OUTSIDE OF YOUR CONTROL

Acceptance is often misunderstood. It is helpful to understand what acceptance means in this context and why it is helpful.

### What acceptance is and is not:

- Acceptance does not mean you have to like what is happening or resign to things being this way forever,
- **Acceptance means adopting "a willingness to see things as they are" in this moment** (Jon Kabat-Zinn).
- In other words, **acceptance means choosing not to fight with the reality of the present moment.**

### PAIN + RESISTANCE = SUFFERING

Despite being futile, resisting or fighting things that are outside of your control actually causes suffering. When you resist how things are you have to deal with the difficulty of the initial circumstance, in addition to the reaction (e.g., anger/fear/anxiety/sadness) to not being able to change things.

# BALANCING ACCEPTANCE AND CHANGE

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Paradoxically, acceptance often makes change possible. In order to change your situation you have to accept the way it really is first. In order to accept the situation, you have to change the way you think about it and act toward it. For example, instead of telling yourself *it shouldn't be this way* it is more helpful to simply acknowledge that *this is how things are right now*. When you stop fighting with the reality of the situation you free up energy to problem solve and to think of creative solutions.



Similarly, in order to accept things as they are, you may need to change how you respond to your inner experiences. COVID-19 has had so many implications and it is natural to be affected mentally, physically, and/or emotionally. **These inner experiences also need to be accepted.** While acceptance of the current situation will spare you further suffering, it will not get rid of the pain associated with what is going on (remember PAIN + RESISTANCE = SUFFERING).

*"That which we resist persists and that which we surrender to we have a chance to move beyond."*



It is important to note that acceptance is not the same as stoicism. If you have a tendency to ignore or push your feelings away, you may need to work on creating space for them. In order to do this you will need to adopt an attitude of openness, non-judgment, acceptance, and curiosity (all of which are elements of mindfulness), as well as kindness and care (compassion).

Accepting emotions will allow you to move through them because it enables you to figure out what they are telling you and address the underlying needs.

# ADAPTING TO THE EASING OF RESTRICTIONS

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After months of being told to stay home, it can be difficult to know how to respond to the easing of restrictions. The differing advice being given by governing bodies and health officials in different areas may add to your experience of confusion and uncertainty. It may help to view responses to the easing of restrictions along a continuum. At one end is a high degree of anxiety and avoidance of newly allowed activities, whereas at the other end of the continuum is low (or no) anxiety, ignoring existing guidelines, and participation in risky behaviours.



- Avoidance of activities now permitted, not due to actual risk, but due to anxiety
  - Operating as if it is still the height of the pandemic locally
  - Decisions based on fear and anxiety
  - Decisions may be driven by a need to control and avoid anything that triggers distress or anxiety
  - While understandable, this approach is problematic because it results in people subjecting themselves to unnecessary suffering (potentially for months)
  - Avoidance also reinforces and perpetuates the anxiety itself, increasing the likelihood that the avoidant behaviour will continue
- Engaging in activities that continue to be restricted, despite continued risk
  - Operating as if life is back to normal
  - Decisions may be based on personal preferences and a desire to resume regular lives
  - Decisions may be driven by denial, "caution fatigue," anger, or an inability to face the reality of the current situation
  - While understandable, this approach is problematic because it places people at risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19
  - This approach also works to undermine the sacrifices everyone has made and the progress that has been made in flattening the curve. It could also contribute to the necessity of reinstating tighter restrictions

# FINDING THE MIDDLE PATH

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While either end of the continuum on the previous page can have a strong pull, the best course of action is to take the middle path: being guided by a healthy level of anxiety, while taking into consideration your personal level of risk, so that you can be responsive to the evolving situation and recommendations.



## Healthy Anxiety

Anxiety itself is not problematic. **In the middle of a pandemic anxiety is a healthy response.** Anxiety is meant to alert you to threats and guide your behaviour. As the possibility of contracting COVID-19 remains a very real risk, it is advisable to allow your anxiety to guide you and protect you, without letting it take over.

## Recognizing Caution Fatigue

While anxiety is meant to alert you to threats, it typically alerts you to short-term threats and initiates the stress response (i.e., fight-or-flight) which serve to keep you safe in the moment. The stress of COVID-19 has been ongoing for several months and has resulted in many experiencing what is known as chronic stress. Repeated or ongoing exposure to stressors (defined as anything perceived as threatening, challenging or uncontrollable) constitutes chronic stress and can negatively impact one's health and well-being in a number of ways. One impact of chronic stress is that it makes people more susceptible to making riskier choices. **Caution fatigue refers to the decrease in motivation to engage in physical distancing and other important precautions as the pandemic drags on.**

## Questions to Consider as you Find Your Way

- Are you, or someone you are in close contact with, higher risk for severe illness (e.g., underlying medical condition, old age)? If you are unsure, consult with a physician.
- Are you taking appropriate steps to minimize your own (and others) risk when you go out (e.g., following public health recommendations such as physical distancing, wearing a mask, frequent hand washing, keeping social circles small, staying home if unwell)
- Are you informed about what is happening in your area (e.g., ongoing outbreaks, number of active and new cases)
- Are you allowing anxiety (not real risk) to prevent you from doing things that pose minimal risk?
- Are there things you are unnecessarily avoiding doing that would benefit your mental health or well-being?
- Are there things you are doing simply because it is easier or preferable, and you are tired of having to follow guidelines or you are angry about the impact of the pandemic on your life?



# NAVIGATING YOUR EMOTIONS

## NORMAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

What kind of emotions are you feeling in response to the current pandemic? Perhaps you are feeling fearful, angry, resentful, anxious, worried, lonely, or sad. Maybe you are feeling guilty, lucky or grateful. Or then again, you might be feeling completely overwhelmed, numb and shut down. All of **these reactions are normal human responses to abnormal circumstances**. There is no correct way to feel about what is happening as everyone is being impacted in different ways, and everyone has different histories and backgrounds. Try to remind yourself that whatever you are feeling makes sense and remove any added suffering that comes from judging yourself for how you are feeling in response to this pandemic.

## THE VALUE OF EMOTIONS

Unpleasant emotions get a bad rap. They are actually very important, (i.e., essential) to your survival. Emotions are a meaning making and survival system. Emotions communicate your values and what is important to you, they direct you to your needs, motivate you to act, and communicate to others. For example, fear prompts you to take action to protect yourself, sadness tells you that you have lost something you value and points to needing comfort, anger often signals that someone has wronged you (or someone else) or crossed a boundary and motivates you to seek justice or assert a boundary. Recognizing the important role that emotions play is a helpful step in learning how to respond effectively to your emotional responses.

## WORKING WITH EMOTIONS

The following pages describe practices that may help you to work with emotions more effectively. **If you have a history of trauma or find yourself really dysregulated**, please read the pages on the window of tolerance (pp. 12 - 13) and make sure you are within your window of tolerance **before** trying the PLANT or Rain of Self-Compassion exercises.

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# PLANT

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JUST AS PLANTS NEED TENDER LOVE AND CARE, SO DO EMOTIONS. THIS ACRONYM OUTLINES THE STEPS NECESSARY TO DEVELOP AND NURTURE A HEALTHY RESPONSE TO YOUR EMOTIONS.

## **PHYSICAL SENSATIONS**

Begin to notice what is happening inside your body. Become aware of any physical sensations that are present (e.g., is there tension in your jaw or shoulders, a knot in your stomach?). Emotions are embodied experiences (i.e., they happen in your body) and tuning into your physical experience will help you to become aware of what emotions you may be feeling.

## **LABEL THE EMOTION(S)**

If the physical sensation(s) you are feeling are associated with an emotion, try to identify which emotion(s) you are feeling. Labeling emotions will help you to make sense of your experience. Labeling emotions also lowers activation in the emotion centres of the brain, increasing the likelihood that you can respond effectively.

## **ALLOW THE EMOTION TO BE PRESENT**

Resist the inclination to push away unpleasant emotions, and allow whatever emotion is present to be there, knowing that it is already present. Remind yourself that which we resist persists.

## **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

Ask yourself what this feeling part of you needs. Remember an important role of emotions is to communicate underlying needs. For example, sadness may indicate a need for comfort, anger may signal a need to assert a boundary, and fear may indicate a need for safety.

## **TEND TO YOUR UNDERLYING NEEDS AND YOURSELF**

See if you can find ways to meet the needs underlying your emotions. Sometimes this may be straightforward (e.g., reaching out to a friend if you need connection) and other times it will be less clear. For example, if you are feeling anxious, you may need to find ways to ground yourself, manage your anxious thoughts, or limit the amount of time you spend discussing/reading about the pandemic. If you are unsure what you need or how to meet the need, simply experiment. Check-in with yourself afterward and determine if what you have done was helpful or if you need to try something else. Whatever you try, remember to tend to yourself throughout this process with care and kindness.

# RAIN OF SELF-COMPASSION

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ADAPTED FROM TARA BRACH



**Recognize** – Stop and recognize what thoughts, physical sensations and emotions are present inside you right now, as well as any movements your body wants to make.

**Allow** – Allow these experiences to be present, knowing that they are already there. While it is natural to want to resist and get rid of unpleasant experiences, trying to change your experience in the moment is futile. You can't just push unwanted thoughts, emotions or sensations away. In fact, trying to do so typically results in feeling worse. While it may seem counter-intuitive, allowing these experiences to be present actually makes it easier for them to leave on their own. Allowing an experience doesn't mean you have to like it, that you stop working on improving things, or that you are resigning to things always being this way. Allowing simply means acknowledging and making space for what is already present in this moment.

**Investigate** – With a curious and kind attention investigate what is happening inside you. While it can be tempting to make this a cognitive practice, try to let it be a somatic practice. Rather than searching for answers, gently ask the question and wait patiently and see what arises. Some questions you can ask yourself are:

- What most wants my attention right now?
- Where do I feel this most in my body?
- What emotions are present?
- What am I believing that is causing me pain?
- When I believe this thought, what happens in my body and what emotions come up?
- How does this part want me to be with it?
- What does this part of me need?
- What would this part of me say if it could communicate?

**Nurture with Self-Compassion** – As you connect with the part of you that is hurting, you may notice a natural response of care and compassion. Try and respond from this place. If this tender-hearted response doesn't happen naturally, you may think how you would respond to someone else in your position, or imagine a compassionate other responding to you. How can you communicate this care and compassion to yourself? Perhaps you offer yourself a physical gesture of care, such as placing a hand on your face or heart. Perhaps you offer yourself a loving message or words of encouragement. If visualization works better for you, you may imagine yourself being seen, accepted, held and loved, or filled with light and warmth. There is no right or wrong. Experiment with different ways of communicating care and compassion to yourself. Make sure you spend some time allowing yourself to receive these gestures of care.

# WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

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The window of tolerance (WOT) is a useful concept for understanding your ability to respond to whatever is happening in your life. When you are inside your WOT, you have the capacity to stay present and handle whatever is happening in the moment. Moving outside of your WOT is part of a built-in survival mechanism that happens automatically when your nervous system becomes overwhelmed in response to a particular threat.

## HYPERAROUSAL ZONE

- Dysregulated state where the nervous system is over-activated and the cerebral cortex is offline, preventing effective information processing
- May be experienced as feelings of intense fear, anxiety or anger, feeling overwhelmed, or feeling out of control
- Fight or flight response

## WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

- Regulated state where the cerebral cortex is online, enabling effective information processing
- Ability to manage emotions, reflect, think rationally, make decisions, and respond to stressors effectively
- May experience feelings of stress or other unpleasant emotions but they feel manageable

## HYPOAROUSAL ZONE

- Dysregulated state where the nervous system is under-activated and the cerebral cortex is offline, preventing effective information processing
- May be experienced as numbness, zoning out, spacing out, shutting down, or feeling depressed
- Freeze or submit/collapse response

**\*\*If you find yourself outside of your WOT more often than usual right now, be assured that this makes sense given the current circumstances. This is especially true if you have a history of trauma.**

# MOVING BACK INTO THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

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The following practices may help you move back into your window of tolerance. If you have a history of unresolved trauma, or find yourself going out of your window of tolerance frequently, you may benefit from seeking the help of a psychologist or other mental health professional.

## STRATEGIES TO DECREASE ACTIVATION

### Physical grounding

- Sit with your feet flat on the floor. Feel where your feet come into contact with the floor, and the points of contact with the chair beneath you. Pause and notice the support of the chair. Notice that you are fully supported in this moment.
- Stand tall with your feet hip width apart. Balance your weight on the four corners of your feet and feel the contact with the floor beneath you. Feel the weight of gravity pulling you into the ground.

### Breathing practices

- Abdominal breathing - begin to deepen your breath by drawing your breath all the way down into your abdomen. Imagine that there is a balloon in your belly and that you are filling the balloon with air on each inhale, and deflating the balloon on each exhale.
- Lengthen your exhale - gradually begin to slow down your exhale, so that it becomes longer. Keep lengthening your exhale, allowing it to become longer than your inhale.

### Attend to neutral stimuli in your environment

- 54321 - sit in a comfortable position and begin to attend to your environment. Notice 5 things you can see in this moment, followed by 5 things you can hear, and 5 things you can feel (kinesthetically). Repeat, this time finding 4 new things for each category, followed by 3, 2, & 1.
- Look around you and see how many objects you can find of a certain colour.

## STRATEGIES TO INCREASE ACTIVATION

- Change position (e.g., stand up, sit up)
- Adjust your posture (e.g. lengthen your spine, pull your shoulders down, open your chest)
- Move your body (e.g., go for a walk, throw a ball, rock back and forth, climb the stairs).

***\*\*If any of these practices produce anxiety, release the practice and try another.\*\****

# WORKING WITH THOUGHTS

EVERYONE HAS AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS, WHICH CAN HAVE THE POWER TO NEGATIVELY IMPACT HOW YOU FEEL AND BEHAVE. WHILE YOU CANNOT JUST TURN THESE THOUGHTS OFF, THE FOLLOWING PRACTICES MAY HELP YOU BE LESS IMPACTED BY THEM.



## **Recognize thoughts for what they are - passing mental events.**

Step back from your thoughts and notice that you are the one having your thoughts, they are not you. This can help you feel less identified with your thoughts. See if you can watch your thoughts as an observer, allowing yourself to notice that they come and (inevitably) go like clouds in the sky.



## **Check out if your thoughts are true.**

Are you 100% certain they are true? If you can't be 100% sure, remind yourself these thoughts are real (i.e., they are real concerns) but they are not true.



## **Sometimes it can also be helpful to investigate and challenge your thoughts.**

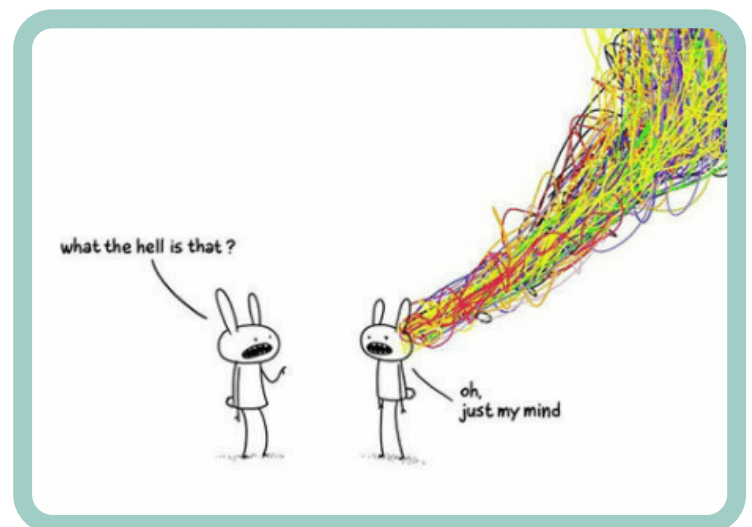
For example, you may ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this thought helpful?
- Is this thought harmful?
- What thought would be more helpful or less harmful?
- If this thought isn't true, what thought would be more true?



## **Explore the impact of believing your thoughts.**

For example, what does it feel like to believe (insert thought here)? How does your body feel when you believe this thought? What emotions are associated with believing this thought? Offer kindness and care to the part of you that is negatively impacted when you believe these thoughts.





# SELF-COMPASSION

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ADAPTED FROM KRISTIN NEFF

SELF-COMPASSION IS AN INVALUABLE RESOURCE, ESPECIALLY DURING DIFFICULT TIMES. SELF-COMPASSION IS COMPRISED OF 3 ELEMENTS:



## **MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness refers to the practice of holding your experience with non-judgment and openness. Rather than avoiding your experience, or becoming consumed by it, mindfulness involves holding what is present in awareness with a curious and kind attention. In the same way that you cannot have compassion for someone else without acknowledging and opening to their suffering, you cannot have compassion for yourself if you do not acknowledge and open to your own suffering.



## **COMMON HUMANITY**

Common humanity refers to the recognition that all human beings experience pain and feelings of inadequacy – this is part of the shared human experience. Everyone experiences hardship, makes mistakes, and experiences losses. Recognizing this truth will help prevent you from falling into the belief that there is something wrong with you or that you are somehow the only one struggling or failing. Common humanity also refers to the fact that people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are impacted by many factors outside of their control, such as culture, family, genetics, and environmental conditions. This awareness helps protect against the tendency to be judgmental of your challenges and shortcomings, instead allowing for understanding and kindness.



## **KINDNESS**

The cornerstone of self-compassion is treating yourself with kindness, even when you are struggling, have made mistakes, or things aren't going your way. Turning toward your experience with mindfulness and recognizing your common humanity, set the stage for being able to respond to yourself with warmth, understanding and kindness, rather than beating yourself up. Similarly, treating yourself kindly increases the likelihood you can turn toward your experience with mindfulness and see your experience within the broader perspective of the shared human experience.

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# PUTTING SELF-COMPASSION INTO PRACTICE

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## MINDFULNESS

Open to your experience with mindfulness. This involves adopting a non-judgmental and open stance that holds thoughts, feelings, and sensations in a balanced manner: neither avoiding/suppressing them, nor identifying with/being consumed by them. Scan your body and notice any thoughts, feelings or sensations that may be present. See if you can hold these experience with a curious and kind attention.



## COMMON HUMANITY

Stop and remind yourself that other people all over the planet are being impacted by the current pandemic. Many people are struggling to come to terms with its impact. **You are not alone.**

It's also important to remember that while we are all invariably being impacted by COVID-19, we are not all being impacted in the same way. Due to differing circumstances (e.g., personal histories, supports, access to resources, geographical location, age, race/ethnicity, living situations, etc.) one person's situation and reaction may be very different from another person's situation and reaction. If you find yourself struggling and/or engaging in behaviours that you are ashamed of, and you are feeling critical and judgmental of yourself about how you are managing the pandemic, stop and recognize the many factors at play and offer yourself some understanding. Blaming yourself is not helpful and will not help you make the changes you desire. It will only make you feel worse.



## KINDNESS

Ask yourself how you can respond to your own suffering with kindness. You might ask what the suffering part of you needs most right now (e.g., what does the scared part of you need?). If you have difficulty with this part of the practice, you might think of a being who embodies compassion (e.g., a loved one, famous figure, deity, or even a pet or animal) and imagine how they might respond to you in this moment. Imagine yourself receiving their kindness.



# LOVING KINDNESS MEDITATION

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THIS PRACTICE HELPS TO DEVELOP YOUR CAPACITY FOR SELF-COMPASSION AND COMPASSION FOR OTHERS.



Take a moment to feel the signs of life in your body. Feel your breath, your beating heart. Notice how you value your own life, how you contract in the face of pain, and strive to avoid suffering. Now, think of someone you love. Picture this person and feel how your heart naturally opens. Now think of your loved one's struggles, pains, and sorrows in life. Notice the caring you feel for this person. Feel your natural inclination to want to comfort your loved one and meet this person's suffering with compassion. This is the natural response of the heart. As you think of your loved one, inwardly recite the phrases:



May you be well.  
May you be free from pain and sorrow.  
May you be peaceful and at ease.  
May you be filled with loving kindness.  
May you be happy.

Now turn your compassion toward yourself. Notice the struggles, pains, and sorrows you have endured. Recite the same phrases:



May I be well.  
May I be free from pain and sorrow.  
May I be peaceful and at ease.  
May I be filled with loving kindness.  
May I be happy.

Now begin to extend compassion to others in your life, including your friends and loved ones. Hold each of these people in your heart, reflecting on their difficulties. Now allow your compassion to extend further. First to the suffering of your neighbours, and then to members of your community. Now open your heart to all who suffer. Finally extend compassion to all beings. Sense your connection with every living being. Your common humanity. Inwardly recite the same phrases.



May all beings be well, as I wish to be well.  
May all beings be free from pain and sorrow, as I wish to be free from pain and sorrow.  
May all beings be peaceful and at ease, as I wish to be peaceful and at ease.  
May all beings be filled with loving kindness, as I wish to be filled with loving kindness.  
May all beings be happy, as I wish to be happy.

# GLADDENING THE MIND

## PRACTICES TO UPLIFT YOUR SPIRIT

WHILE IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAKE SPACE FOR, AND ATTEND TO, DIFFICULT FEELINGS, IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE IN PRACTICES THAT LIFT YOUR SPIRITS. ENGAGING IN THE FOLLOWING PRACTICES MAY HELP YOU TO RECONNECT WITH JOY AND FIND MEANING DURING THIS CHALLENGING TIME.



### GRATITUDE

Daily gratitude practices have been shown to improve mood. Here are 2 possible ways to bring more gratitude into your life:

- Gratitude Journal - keep a daily record of 3 things you are grateful for each day. Remember the things you are grateful for do not need to be big, but could be as simple as a sunny day or receiving a smile from a neighbour.
- Gratitude Buddy - find a buddy and agree to send each other an email or text stating 3 things for which you are grateful each day.



### SAVOURING

Savouring is the practice of intentionally slowing down and really enjoying something. To engage in savouring find something that naturally brings you pleasure (e.g., a cup of tea, a sunset,

a beautiful song) and deliberately slow things down, taking the time to really notice and attend to your experience by focusing on your 5 senses while engaging in whatever you are doing. Aim to do this once a day for at least 20-30 seconds each time.



### COMPASSION IN ACTION

Personal struggle often leads to increased self-centredness as your attention becomes focused on your experience and alleviating your suffering. While finding ways to help others will not take away your difficulty or pain, it can help reconnect you to your shared humanity and increase your sense of meaning and purpose. Aim to engage in 1 act of kindness or service each day (e.g., checking in on a friend or family member, making a donation, offering to help a neighbour with groceries, wishing the grocery teller a good evening, engaging in the 7 o'clock salute to healthcare workers). Remember the action doesn't need to be big to be worthwhile.