

# Testing our Resilience: Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Marc Wilchesky, PhD

Zoom Presentation for Members of the York University Staff Association, February 17, 2021

# Poll on Zoom

Question 1: Have you experienced an increased level of stress as a result of the pandemic?

Question 2: Have you experienced an increased level of anxiety, depression or loneliness as a result of the pandemic?

Question 3: Have you, or anyone from your family or circle of friends contracted COVID-19?

# Nothing About COVID-19 Has Been Easy

Many community members are having to cope with different levels of grief and loss, in some cases closer to home than earlier in the pandemic.

Some are dealing directly with the illness themselves or worrying about the well-being of friends and family

Many are juggling health, relationship, and financial challenges that have exacted a significant toll on many members of the York community

# The Toll on our Mental Health

Pandemic-weary employees are showing signs of burnout, especially those juggling their roles as workers and parents, home-schooling their children in some cases

Survey of Adult Canadians conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 1, 2020 by Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, found that roughly 1 in 4 of the 1003 respondents experienced significant levels of anxiety and loneliness, and over 1 in 5 felt depressed some or most of the time during the previous week

- Virginia Galt, Globe and Mail, Jan. 6, 2021

## The Toll on our Mental Health, cont'd

The Ontario Medical Association reported that in the latter half of the year, from August to December of 2020, major mental-health visits to physicians jumped by 8 per cent and all other mental-health visits rose by 12 per cent.

Call volume during 2020 at Toronto's Gerstein Crisis Centre – a 24-hour intervention service that has a crisis hotline, care beds and mobile health teams – increased by 70 per cent over the previous year, with people reporting isolation and increased mental-health symptoms.

- Patrick White and Molly Hayes, Globe and Mail, Jan. 27, 2021

# My Goal for This Presentation

To share some thoughts on resilience and to suggest some strategies that may enhance your mental well-being and help you get through the challenges posed by the pandemic

# We all face challenging life events



Major setbacks at home, school or employment setting



Serious illness in self or others



Death of a loved one



Catastrophic natural disasters; other traumatic events

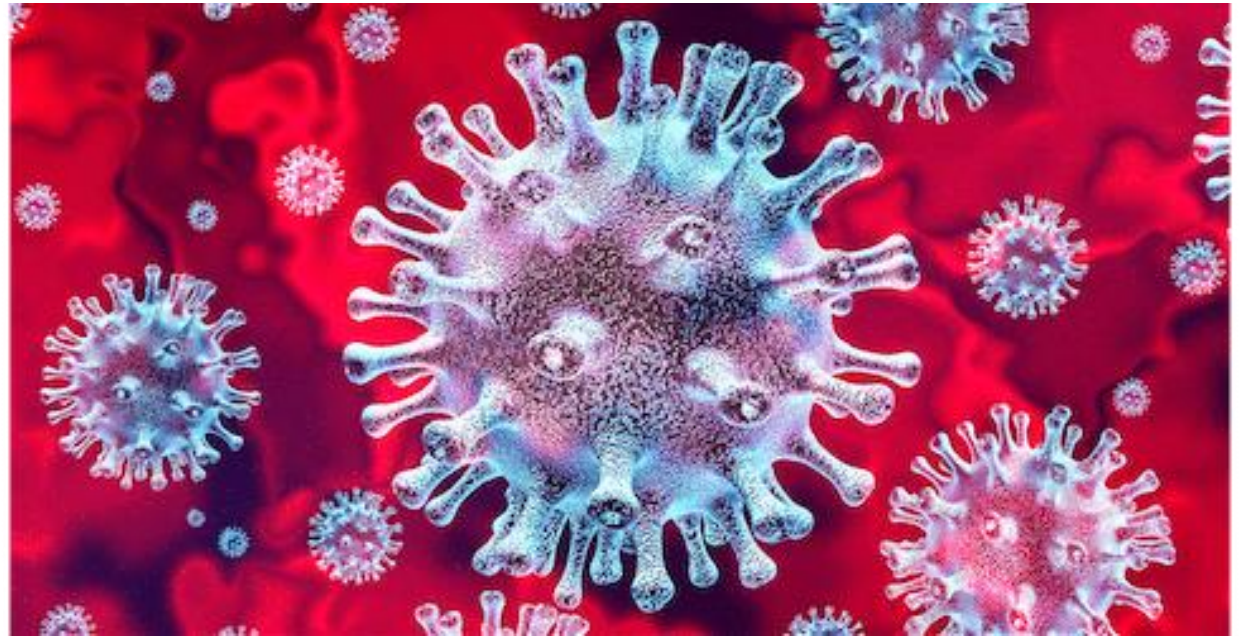
marshshallramsey.com

OUR PETS ARE  
LIKE...

WHY ARE  
YOU  
HOME?



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-ND](#)



Our BIG CHALLENGE Right Now  
– Dealing with COVID-19



# What is Resilience?



“Being able to weather the storms of life”



“Staying buoyant in life’s rough waters”



Being able to adapt well, moderate the impact of adversity and bounce back from severe distress or even life-altering situations

# Why is Resilience so Important?



People who are resilient tend to be able to harness their inner strengths and external resources to rebound more quickly and more fully from setbacks

# Resilient Individuals are More Likely to:



Meet the demands of their work and personal lives successfully



Take action to deal with challenges, problems, and setbacks



Seek support and assistance when they need it



Know when to stop, rest, and replenish inner resources

# Resilience: Ordinary or Extraordinary

There are many examples in history of “extraordinary” individuals who have been “models of resilience”.

But research has shown that “ordinary” people commonly demonstrate resilience as well.

# Can We Become More Resilient?

The good news is that resilience does not appear to be something that people either have or do not have – it involves thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, emotion regulation, behaviours and external resources that can be developed

You may be more resilient at different times in your life than others. Most importantly, resilience can be learned, practiced, developed, and strengthened

# Building Resilience is a Process

We can build resilience over time by working to develop and strengthen various internal assets and external resources that will help us cope more effectively with hardship and traumatic experiences, including coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 has proven to be very resilient, making it even more important for us to be resilient too!

# Internal Assets that Contribute to Resilience

- Engage in self-care - behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes that support your emotional well-being and physical health – try to sleep well, eat well and exercise well. Self-care is NOT SELFISH!
- A sense of optimism about the future – limit media intake, focus on positive facts from reliable sources, avoid communicating with “worriers”
- Self-Compassion – being as kind to yourself as you would be to a good friend in similar circumstances. Forgive yourself for not being “perfect” during these difficult times

# Internal Assets that Contribute to Resilience, cont'd

- A clear sense of personal values, purpose and acknowledgement of personal responsibility for achieving a positive outcome – create a “Mission Statement” for this challenging period
- “Mindfulness” – being present in the moment rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future
- A sense of gratitude for the good things in your life – gratitude is consistently associated with greater happiness. It’s not easy during times of great uncertainty and change, but sometimes the best way to truly appreciate something is to be without it for a while. Keep a “Gratitude Journal” and write down at least 3 things for which you are grateful



# External Resources that Contribute to Resilience

- Try to maintain positive, mutually respectful relationships with peers, family members, mentors, or employers who will be there for you when challenging situations like this pandemic occur
- Social Connection – Cultivating social connections and avoiding social isolation is one of the best ways to build resilience – use technology to maintain social relationships while following “physical distancing” guidelines
- Seek advice and support from your social support network – there is no shame in asking for help

# Pause for Important Reminder

Resilience is NOT a Do-It-Yourself endeavour

“Striving for personal transformation will not make us better when our families, workplaces, communities, health-care providers and governments fail to provide us with sufficient care and support. The science shows us that all the internal resources we can muster are seldom of much use without a nurturing environment.”\*

- Michael Ungar, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family, and Community Resilience

\*Ungar, Michael (2019). Put down the self-help books: Resilience is not a DIY endeavour. Toronto: *The Globe and Mail*, May 25, 2019

# Resilience in the Face of Di/Stress



di/Stress Can Lead To:



Self-defeating processes, such as worries, uncomfortable physical symptoms and emotional discomfort



Difficulty concentrating, forgetting, excessive self-criticism, pre-occupation with thoughts/tasks



Moodiness, anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, pessimism, helplessness, withdrawal, feeling angry, or overwhelmed and immobilized

# Suggestions to Help Promote Resilience During the Pandemic

- “Re-boot” your mood with 3-4 minutes silent focus on deep breathing a few times a day
- Thought-stopping : “never finish the worry, always interrupt it”  
STOP > RELAX > POSITIVE SELF-TALK
- Try to maintain perspective and avoid being a “Quicksinker”. Check your “rating scale”

# Suggestions to Help Promote Resilience During the Pandemic, cont'd

- Focus on what you can control
- Accept and adjust to the things that you cannot change
- Try to shift your perspective – Reframe the problem by turning the crisis into a challenge or opportunity

# Suggestions to Help Promote Resilience During the Pandemic, cont'd

- Make use of positive distractions – read novels, watch comedies, listen to music, exercise, take walks if that is possible to do safely
- Focus on acts of kindness. Remember we are all in this together. Kindness can be more contagious than COVID
- Reach out and do something good for others – it will help them and help you at the same time. Volunteer, check in with your family or neighbours, donate to a worthy cause (consider the **York University COVID-19 Student Relief Fund**)

# “Helper’s High”

Psychologists have shown that helping others can produce "feel-good" neurotransmitters such as oxytocin

Some research on “helper therapy” has shown that therapeutic benefits for the “helper” are gleaned from assisting others.

# Laughter Can be the Best Medicine

Gelotology = the study of laughter and its effects on the body, from a psychological and physiological perspective.

Laughing is electrochemical – it releases endorphins in the brain that can minimize discomfort and help bring about feelings of general well-being.



Everything seems to take more thought and effort these days....



**K, I'm ready  
to go poop now!!!**

# Music Can Help

<https://youtu.be/1f7OwFqTnco>

News Item from CTV's "Your Morning":

Music Teacher writes song to help get through the stress of the pandemic

# First Principle of Cognitive Therapy



It is not the event that causes emotional distress; rather, it is our thoughts and beliefs about the event.

We can't always control when, or if bad things happen, but we can control how we choose to react to those bad things.

Nobody controls your thinking but you.

# Three “P’s” that Inhibit Coping and Recovery

- Personalization – what happened to you is all your fault
- Pervasiveness – all aspects of your life will be affected
- Permanence – negative impact of the event will last forever

\* See Martin Seligman (1991). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York, Pocket Books

# It Won't Last Forever

We need to fight the sense that the current pandemic and social isolation will never end

# Victor Frankl and Freedom to Choose

Everything can be taken from a person, but one thing. The last of human freedoms, “...to choose one’s attitude in any set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”

-Victor Frankl, “Man’s Search for Meaning”. Boston: Beacon, 1963

# Breakout Rooms

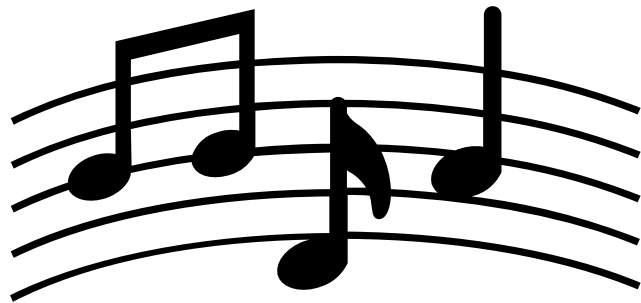


In your small group, please discuss:

- the things you do now that support your resilience
- the things you will consider changing that could enhance your resilience
- any questions or comments about the presentation

# We Rise Again

Performed by a choir of women physicians in Toronto



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wuiqee-AC-o&trk=public-post share-video-embed share-article title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wuiqee-AC-o&trk=public-post%20share-video-embed%20share-article%20title)



# Resilience and Mental Health Resources

Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant – personal stories and building resilience

<https://optionb.org/>

York University's Employee and Family Assistance Program

<https://www.workhealthlife.com/>

On Jan. 26, 2021, Provost and Vice-President Academic Lisa Philipps and Vice-President Equity, People, and Culture Sheila Cote-Meek shared a message outlining the supports and accommodations available to York faculty and staff. If you haven't read it, I urge you to do so.

<https://yubettertogether.info.yorku.ca/2021/01/community-update-26-supporting-the-york-community-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

# Resilience and Mental Health Resources, cont'd

ConnexOntario – 24/7 telephone availability for support and referral to mental health services

<https://www.connexontario.ca/>

Student Counselling & Development COVID-19 Resources

<https://counselling.students.yorku.ca/scd-covid-19-resources>

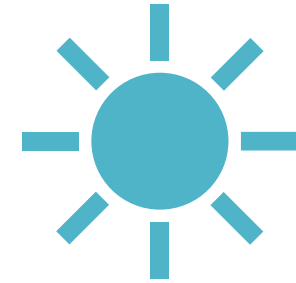
# Questions?



Thank you for  
participating



Stay safe, stay well.



This too shall pass....