I Can’t Take It Anymore!!!!

Surviving and learning to thrive in the age of the Pandemic

By Dina Goldstein Silverman Ph.D.

The other night, on a text chain with several neighbors, one of them vented. “I can’t take it anymore”, she said. “What if there is no summer? What if we can’t go down the Shore? What is there is no summer camp for kids?” Her worries resonated with all of us on the text chain, as I am sure they do with you as you live day after Groundhog Day of anxiety and bad news. I did not want to comfort my neighbor with empty platitudes, but at the same time, I did not want her or any of our other neighbors to swirl the drain, sorrowful and worried. It is certainly easy to succumb to the mental and emotional drain of anxiety and anguish for all of us right now, and for those on the front lines, the toll of daily trauma, weighs especially heavily. However, there are several tools that we can use to stay present and resilient, surviving and even thriving during this challenging time.

1). **Chunking.** Chunking is a term that those of us in the field of psychology use to describe how the human mind processes large amounts of information. It is why it is much easier to complete and sign off on one note in EPIC than flit between multiple notes back and forth at the same time (ask me how I know this). It is also, why it is much easier to clean your house when you make a list and start with a specific tasks, e.g., “I will now unload and reload the dishwasher”, rather than “I will now clean the house top to bottom like a cross between Marie Kondo and June Cleaver”. Focus on the present moment. What do you have to do right now? Take a deep breath and attend to the task. Stay present in the task. Acknowledge when you have accomplished it and move on to the next item on the list.

2). **Take a minute to time travel.** You can travel to any place you want to go in your mind. Dr. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian-Jewish psychiatrist imprisoned at Auschwitz during the Holocaust, would imagine lecturing to a packed auditorium of his medical students and residents while toiling at Auschwitz, which helped him, survive the horrors that he faced. Nelson Mandela wrote eloquently about the journeys he took in his mind whilst a political prisoner in South Africa. If there is a particular spot in your mind that you would like to visit, take a few moments. Take a few deep breaths and close your eyes. Imagine where you might be. Visualize the colors and shapes of the location. Imagine the textures, the sounds and the smells, from the salty ocean air to the piney depth of the forest. Visualize if you are alone in this place of safety, beauty and peace, or if there are family members or friends there. Reassure yourself that you will go there again and get to visit this place not only in your mind, as you can do any time, but also in the future.

3). **Reframe.** Reframing is a therapy strategy that allows us to focus on the positives in the present than in the negatives. If you are stir-crazy at feeling stuck at home, try saying that you are safe at home instead. Focus on what is positive about where you are – it may be that you are physically comfortable and have enough to eat. It may be that you have more opportunities to break bread with your immediate family members. It may even be the ability to work whilst wearing sweatpants. If you are a worker on the front lines, focus on the camaraderie you have with your peers. Trust your training and your knowledge – you have the skills to maximize your performance and the peers who support you in your safety. Lean on one another, through black humor, banter and kindness. Check in one another when you can. A kind, caring word makes an enormous difference and reinforces the bond of the human connection.

4). **Stay in the here and now.** None of us know what the future holds, and while we have a reasonable idea of the next couple of weeks being tough, it is entirely possible, and in fact, probable, that in some time, a few more weeks, a few months, we will return to life as business as usual. It will not help to focus on the doom and gloom, because while the danger is real, we also know what we need to do to minimize our risks and take care of our families and ourselves. Remind yourself of where you are in the present, how at this current moment, you are safe and well and have what you need to get through. Use opportunities throughout the day to ground yourself – whether you are performing hand washing or taking a shower, brewing a pot of coffee or signing off on a note. Remember to breathe. Sit in a comfortable chair (the floor works, too, as do couches and car seats). Put your hands on your abdomen and take a deep breath slowly. Count to ten as you inhale. Hold your breath to a count of five. Exhale slowly, as though, you are blowing air through a straw to the count of ten. Repeat. Research has shown the enormous benefit of diaphragmatic breathing for a variety of health conditions, and you can certainly use this tool to ground yourself in this time of anxiety.

5). **Get moving.** We are all familiar with the many benefits of exercise, but it is especially important in this time of crisis and uncertainty, to remain physically active. You do not have to become a marathon runner overnight but try to get outside and take a socially distanced walk, jog or run through your neighborhood or do some calisthenics in your backyard or on your balcony or patio. Download any of the workouts, whether HIIT or yoga, on your device and do a quick workout in your basement. If you are working from home, you can do sit-ups, crunches or pop jacks off your office chair, and you can certainly get your kids involved to give them a nice break from virtual schooling. There are numerous kid-friendly workouts right now online, and some of those links are posted on our Cooper Wellness website.

6). **Practice self-care.** Even if it’s 15 minutes of reading a favorite book or a warm bath at the end of a long and exhausting day, take some time to pamper yourself and connect with yourself to restore and prepare for another grueling day ahead. Self-care does not have to be time consuming or expensive. Logging off social media and shutting off the news can be self-care, as can binge watching a beloved TV show whilst snuggled up on the sofa. Playing a board game with your family, brewing a hot cup of tea and sipping it while reading a book, going for a run or taking a long, hot shower can make an enormous restorative difference in how you feel. When you are exhausted, it can be tempting to switch on survival autopilot but budgeting a few minutes for self-care will make a huge difference in your energy and outlook.