

DAL MAGAZINE



Illustrations by Bryanna Chapeskie

Coping with Uncertainty

Need help keeping calm and carrying on? Try these strategies.

FALL 2020 ISSUE BY **STEFANIE WILSON**

IT FELT LIKE it only took moments for everything to change. One minute we had plans, the next they were cancelled—with no idea when they'd be rescheduled. The COVID-19 pandemic upended routine and created a global uncertainty like nothing we've seen in generations. "This is a novel, unpredictable and ambiguous stressor," says Dal's Dr. Simon Sherry, director of clinical training in Psychology and Neuroscience. "In the current times, uncertainty abounds." Fortunately, there are some reliable strategies we can use to cope with the uncertainty that surrounds us.

LOG OFF

Dal psychiatrist Dr. Adriana Wilson suggests that we start by regulating how often we engage with potential danger signals like news and social media. "Our brains are primed to pay attention to and encode potential threats more strongly than positive experiences," she explains. "When we are constantly surrounded by danger signals, our fight-flight-freeze system is chronically activated and we don't function optimally." Dr. Wilson recommends limiting information checking to give your body and brain time to recover.

“In a search for certainty, people turn to their phone to check and research and they get locked in a feedback loop that creates more anxiety,” says Dr. Sherry. His suggestion? “Conduct a behavioural experiment,” he says. “If I believe that I need to check my phone several times a day to be on top of the latest information, what would happen, as an experiment, if I didn’t check my phone and just let it sit? I think I would learn it was okay.”



FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

“Since the pandemic started, I have been writing down three things daily that are in my control,” shares Dr. Wilson. That’s because focusing on what is in our control allows us to return to a state of safety where we are most able to problem-solve, be creative, connect with one another and rest and recover from the stressors of our day.

Dr. Sherry says the pandemic helped to clarify values. “For me the clarification was around the importance of family, health and freedom. You realize what’s really important when there’s an involuntary narrowing of your life.” One of the results has been impressive displays of caring and altruism as people took control by making decisions that had the greater public good in mind.

MAKE A CONNECTION

We are a social species, so we need connection to thrive. “We’ve had to be quite flexible about finding new ways to connect, whether visiting loved ones through a window, from six feet apart, via text or by telephone,” says Dr. Wilson. “That’s okay—how we connect matters less than ensuring we connect, regularly.”

Dr. Sherry agrees, “One of the ways to cope can be to look outward for those people who need your help: getting an elderly neighbour groceries or reaching out to someone who might be suffering.”

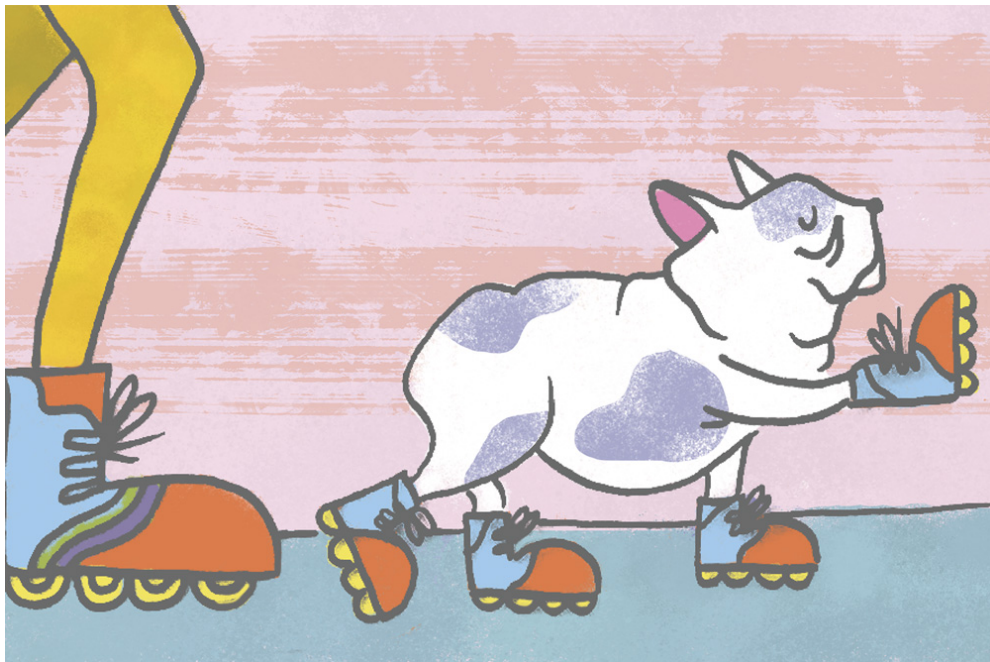
HAVE A SCHEDULE

Structure and predictability bring comfort and feelings of safety. Structure is also important to ensure we keep moving forward. As Dr. Sherry explains, “Uncertainty can become paralyzing, to the point it stops purposeful, active decision-making and constructive coping. At some point, you have to behave in a brave way and move forward even in the face of uncertainty.”

And Dr. Wilson reminds us to include the things we know are good for us, like connection time, exercise, mindfulness or music.

CREATE A PLAYLIST

Speaking of music, sound is one of the most direct pathways to regulating our state. Dr. Wilson recommends having a playlist of music that helps us feel calm, one that evokes feelings of nostalgia to provide comfort and, for when we feel stuck, one that makes us want to move or sing.



GET MOVING

It's on every wellness list for a reason: our bodies need to move to be healthy. Exercise, whether it is going for a daily walk, dancing in your kitchen, going for a bike ride or a swim, is one of the most powerful determinants of our mental and physical health. During times of uncertainty, exercise has the added benefit of offering an outlet for some of the baseline activation of our fight- flight system.

One of Dr. Wilson's favorite exercise activities for anyone who is feeling agitated is ball slams. "Any soccer-sized ball will do, or a weighted ball if you prefer a bit more challenge. You pick it up over your head with both arms and slam it on the ground as hard as you can. Repeat until you feel the energy has passed."

PRACTICE GRATITUDE

One of the many benefits of gratitude is directing our focus away from threat and onto appreciation. Dr. Wilson recommends noting three things you are grateful for daily. "No repeats: it forces us to be more specific," she explains. "It can be the difference between saying we are grateful for our kids, versus being grateful we were able to read them stories and tuck them in. The specificity typically elicits a stronger outcome."

We can also be grateful for this chance to learn about us and our communities. As Dr. Sherry points out, "while pandemics clarify values, pandemics also expose cracks. While pandemics highlight strengths, pandemics also reveal vulnerabilities. And so, pandemics are difficult teachers but very instructive."