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Making Mental Health Priority No. 1 in the Month of May

We have all experienced loss because of the COVID-19 pandemic; finding the “gifts of grief” is critical to the healing process

Let’s face it: we’re stressed. The current COVID-19 pandemic has plunged us into a period of unparalleled change in the way we live, work, and learn. Worries about the public health crisis are coupled with deepening concerns about unprecedented job and financial losses. Thus, it is more important now than ever to be mindful of our emotional health and prioritize self-care.

With May recognized as [Mental Health Awareness Month](#), it is another opportunity to look inward and

How Are You Doing?

A new research study from UC San Diego Health invites the campus community to participate in a survey, so that researchers can better understand the effects of stress caused by COVID-19. Go to [the survey](#) to participate.

explore best practices for your well-being. And UC San Diego's psychological and counseling staff, who now offer telephone video conferencing appointments, are here to help.

According to Crystal Green, director of UC San Diego's Faculty Staff Assistance Program (FSAP), one of the uncomfortable feelings many of us are experiencing now may be grief. "So much has been lost, but we have not yet even stopped to name it," she said. "These past weeks, what we've seen is people dealing with the classic stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance."



Crystal Green

For example, in the "bargaining" stage, loosely targeted to be around week three and four of the stay-at-home order, people might have been psychologically trying to avoid loss through a type of mental negotiation: "I could do this for a while longer only if my supervisor would lower their expectations of productivity," according to Green. "This sort of thinking helps us find a path towards managing the overwhelming nature of the crisis," she added.

However, in more recent weeks, FSAP staff have noticed their clients experiencing more sadness. This is the stage of the grief process where people may feel like they have lost hope, or their bargaining attempts to dodge the loss have failed.

Fortunately, there is a light at the end of tunnel in exploring what psychologists call the "gifts of grief," a concept of finding gratitude in loss. It can be discovering a deeper appreciation of life, better relationships with others, or finding one's personal strength. And, although we're surrounded by fear and uncertainty, this is an unprecedented opportunity to discover such "gifts," according to Reina Juarez, director of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

"Regardless of the raging pandemic around us, we can be anchored within ourselves with solid values, positive emotions, and mindsets," Juarez said. "This is critical to our mental health because we cannot predict when things will 'go back to normal.' We cannot prepare for a standard marathon, but for an ultra-marathon."

She added that now is a time to take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen and deepen our relationships with family, colleagues, peers, and friends.

Many students who are home with their families are making these same connections. Olivia Bryan, a second year Eleanor Roosevelt student double-majoring in political science and economics has focused her time and attention to her studies. However, she is also connecting with those around her in her home in Woodland, Calif.

“The pandemic has made me recognize that being productive is not the only important thing to focus on,” she said. “Spending time with family that I normally do not get to see while I am away at school is something I should be appreciative of during these trying times.”

What are some other ways in which we can heal, get energized and find hope in what may be “an ultra-marathon?” Here are some tips from Juarez and Green.



Reina Juarez

Maintain a daily routine

“It is vital that we establish and maintain a daily routine that would bring rhythm and a sense of normalcy to our lives,” Juarez said. “This is one of the challenges our students are having—developing a structure that would support good study and self-care habits.” Examples could be: getting up, making the bed, and exercising before studying, attending classes, or logging on your work computer. The rhythms vary for each individual, but finding rhythm is key. Even though most of our activities are at home, we can apply the same structure to our days as if we were going to class or the office.

Using our social networks to stay connected even though we are physically apart

“Engagement and connectivity transcends physical closeness,” Juarez said. “It is important to understand that social distancing does not mean withdrawing from society.” Connecting with others is an inherent human trait and though our face-to-face interactions are very limited, technology has allowed us to be more creative in maintaining and deepening our relationships. Zoom, Facetime, making voice calls instead of sending texts, or talking with a neighbor while at a safe distance, can help combat loneliness and even enhance our connection with others.

Feeling tired and drained? Reinvigorate with these simple techniques

Feelings are contagious and feelings can make us tired, according Juarez. “One byproduct might be guilt,” she said. “Sometimes guilt is about ‘why am I tired when I have not done much?’ Yet we are like cars with batteries, which need to be driven or we run out of the spark.” When you and everyone you know is impacted and stressed out by the virus, it can be draining, even if you have not left the house for days. In addition, dire current events reports can wreak havoc on your sense of well-being, so limited exposure to news is recommended. And there are many other ways to reinvigorate and lift your spirits. Connecting with nature, also known as the “Japanese art of forest-bathing,” can help enliven the senses. “It can be a healing experience stepping out of our worries and communing with nature by listening to the chirping of birds, the sound of wind among the leaves, a fountain or stream, or feeling the warm sensation of the sun on the skin,” Juarez said. Also, simple pleasures like good laughter from a funny movie or listening to inspirational music can lift your spirits and make you feel re-energized. All these experiences are enhanced by “living the in moment,” allowing time to practice stillness and calm and enjoy the moment you are in, rather than worrying about the future.

Self-care for you and your family is critical in the age of COVID-19

You may have read this before, but it bears repeating: proper sleep, exercise and nutrition habits are more important now than ever. “We know stress suppresses the immune system,” Green said. School closures and isolated living pose many challenges to the UC San Diego community, who may be feeling new pressures on multiple fronts. People are working from home while trying to home school and care for their children. Some have parents or grandparents and other loved ones who may require special care during these times. Students may feel they do not have a good study space at home. These new challenges have some people feeling worn-out. To help yourself and your family stay well inside and out, campus resources include “[Get up Tritons!](#)” a service of recreation that sends reminders to get up and move through emails sent at 10 a.m., noon and 2 p.m. [Recreation](#) also offers instructional exercise videos and tips for campus community members to [eat mindfully](#) while at home. For sleep hygiene best practices, see [this list \(PDF\)](#) of recommendations from CAPS.

Explore a talent or hobby that you might have not done otherwise

Green and Juarez say that clients also share stories of meeting the coronavirus challenge by channeling their energy into new projects and interests. “This is a time to cultivate neglected or unknown aspects of ourselves; perhaps there is a writer within us who wants to come out maintaining a journal of this period of our lives,” said Juarez. “Something might emerge that has not had time to manifest before, and we can channel it for the good.” And Green is seeing a lot of good in others as well. FSAP’s online groups have swelled to more than 70 participants. “It is wonderful to see so many acts of kindness and loving community that are shared in each session.” Both FSAP and CAPS remain fully operational and welcome campus employees who need services.

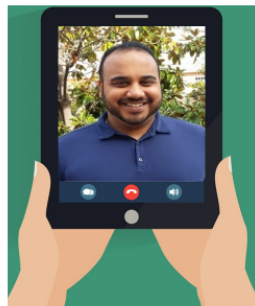
Individual and group counseling resources & Mental Health Awareness Month programs

CAPS currently provides mental health support for students via telehealth options including video and telephone appointments. The CAPS Central Office at Galbraith 190 remains open for urgent care visits. To learn more about new telehealth options, watch this [informative video](#). To contact CAPS, call 858-534-3755 or visit [their website](#) to connect with mental health resources. Students can also schedule appointments via the [mychart app](#).

CAPS Video Visits – Live January 2020!

"I saw an established psychotherapy patient today via MyStudentChart video, and the experience (clinical, technical, and procedure) was seamless. My patient felt that video provided no significant difference than in-person treatment in terms of quality of care. In fact, he was noticeably more relaxed given that he was in his own home environment, and engaged in the session more than I have previously noted."

Kevin Ramotar, Psy.D



90% of Communication is Non-verbal!

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UC San Diego Health

FSAP is open to campus staff, faculty and all postdoctoral scholars who can access telehealth services such as counseling, support groups, organizational support, and management consultations through the top-rated program at no cost. To make an appointment, call 858-534-5523 or visit the [FSAP website](#).

Throughout May, CAPS and the Tritons Flourish Initiative have partnered with departments across campus to create virtual well-being programs and events for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, as well as staff and faculty throughout the Spring quarter. These events include workshops, forums and self-guided online interactive programs. A full calendar of events can be viewed [here](#).

Additional resources for faculty and staff of UC San Diego Health/Health Sciences can be found [here](#).

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