

Live Well, Be Well

Title: Cope, Thrive, & Flourish

Mental Health, Productivity, Disappointment, Checking in, Stress/Anxiety

Introduction

Meera: Welcome to Live Well, Be Well! A podcast where we speak candidly about all things wellness! My name is Meera Swaminath, and I am a graduating senior at UC San Diego. I would now like to introduce Dr. Tiffany O'Meara, a psychologist at CAPS at UCSD.

Dr. O'Meara: Hello everyone!

Meera: Thank you so much for being here today Dr, and happy mental health awareness month! On this episode of Live Well Be Well, we'll be discussing mental health on Zoom, productivity and disappointment, checking in on others, and tips on how to reduce stress and anxiety during the pandemic. We hope you get inspired, feel connected, and discover new ways to live your best life. Let's get started!

Interview

1. Meera: As a student away from campus, it can be extremely difficult to feel connected and motivated on Zoom and not isolated from my peers. As a professional who sees UCSD students regularly, what are some of the most common challenges faced by the student body with regards to mental health when doing online learning and what is some of your advice for dealing with these complex issues?

Dr. O'Meara: {Insert answer here talking about mental health & Zoom: Zoom fatigue, anxiety about participating in Zoom classrooms/attending Zoom office hours, loneliness of online life}

Challenges with online learning for mental health:

Zoom fatigue

- Going from one meeting to the next, being online constantly
- Lead to fatigue, some may get headaches, and we can feel exhausted at the end of the day
- Also, being sedentary- we are sitting for a lot of the day

- Blue light blocking glasses- any screen or device you have produces blue light- the blue light can cause headaches, it can keep you awake. The glasses help to block that blue light. Similar to wearing sunglasses, but they aren't as dark.
- Take online breaks. If you've been in back to back Zoom classes and meetings, maybe you don't want to binge a Netflix show as your break. Think about some relaxing activities that don't involve a computer screen- for example, painting, talking on the phone to a friend, listening to music, cooking or baking.
- Taking stretching breaks- Get Up Tritons, going outside for a walk- even just a short walk to give yourself some movement and a change of scenery for your eyes.

Anxiety about participating in Zoom classrooms/attending Zoom office hours

- It may feel awkward to talk in your zoom classes or office hours as there may not be video or many others participating. It can be scary for students to think of going to a professor's office hours and having it only be the two of them.
- Without video of others it's hard to read body language or others facial expressions to know the intent of what they are saying.
- In a zoom lecture there might be some more anxiety that you can be called on directly by the professor as your name appears on the screen. Whereas in an in person lecture it is likely that the professor does not know everyone's name, so it can be easier to "hide" or not participate regularly.
- In a live class, students all sit together and look toward a professor. But on a Zoom online platform, now students see themselves at the same time they are trying to listen to the professor. This can feel nerve-wracking for some students, as they may find that they are constantly aware of themselves and worrying: are others looking at me? what are they thinking about me? Is my hair okay? How am I coming across? Am I saying this right *and* how do I look as I'm saying it? All of these thoughts distract from the content of the class.
- IF you are getting distracted by seeing yourself on Zoom, if your professor allows, give yourself permission to turn off your video. This way you can focus on what the professor is saying.
- Be cautious of mind-reading- assuming that you know what someone is thinking, to remind yourself that people aren't likely thinking about you- that most people are thinking about themselves most of the time.
- Before you go into a professor or TA's office hours, prepare a couple of questions in advance. So if you do enter into the office hours, and you are the only one there, you will have some questions that you are prepared with. And remind yourself that the professor and TA are really there to help her.

Loneliness of online life

- Many students may find that because of the circumstances, they are feeling more isolated and lonely.
- One suggestion is to not only make an effort to get in touch with friends and family, but make efforts to have deeper conversations and really check in with how others are doing, and continue to get to know each other.
- On social media, not just liking someone's post, but to send them a message and ask how they're doing, or start a conversation.
- It can help to schedule in time to meet with friends on a regular basis- to schedule Zoom chats, to queue up a movie and watch it together and share your reactions.
- There are a lot of virtual programs hosted by the colleges and various departments (including CAPS) that are designed to help students build connections and community. Some students are telling me that it's actually less intimidating to try out these meetings online, rather than to show up in person. They are less worried about how they are physically coming across because it's just their face. They are getting the chance to meet and connect with other students and staff.

2. Meera: Yes, absolutely! That is certainly helpful advice. I think that students like myself are constantly stressed and anxious during this time, and a lot of this can be a result of changing environments. What can students do to manage stress and anxiety that comes from having to live in a difficult situation, experiencing financial loss, or are worried that a loved one could get sick?

Dr. O'Meara: {Insert answer about stress and anxiety management due to tough situations ie family dynamics, financial loss, getting sick/loved one's getting sick}

Managing stress and anxiety:

- You're right- there are a lot of stressors right now- you mentioned financial loss, worry for a loved one getting sick, changes in living situations, family dynamics. All of these things contribute to this being a very difficult time for many of us.
- We created a handout for how to cope with anxiety and stress during this time. You can find this on our website:
https://wellness.ucsd.edu/CAPS/Documents/handouts/handout_copingcovid_2020.pdf
- **Establish Routines-** Some of the basic building blocks that help to manage stress are sleep, nutrition, and movement. When experiencing increased levels of stress or anxiety, it's important to keep up healthy routines. Create a daily schedule that includes healthy *sleep* patterns (not under or over sleeping, a routine of going to bed and waking up at the same time daily), *eating* regular and healthy meals and snacks, and *moving* at least once a day.

- **Deep Breathing/Mindful Meditation-** Some of my students have started practicing deep breathing and mindful meditation. When you start to notice anxious sensations in your body, or you notice that you are worrying, this is something that can be super helpful in reducing anxiety. CAPS has iFlourish online resources and UCSD Center for Mindfulness also has free deep breathing and meditation exercises.
- Besides thinking of things you can do to manage stress, how we *think* about these stressful situations can impact our reality and affect our mood.
- **Focus on What Can You Control:** It can be emotionally stressful when things in our *external* environment feel out of our control. Instead, shift your focus to what you can have more control over: your *internal* environment (e.g., thoughts, feelings, healthy living habits). You may find that you feel better and you will have a lower need for external control.
- **Reframing Unhelpful Thoughts:** During difficult times it can be especially easy to fall into unhelpful thinking patterns such as “I’m stuck at home”, which can lead to negative emotions that can be difficult to manage. Instead shift some of those unhelpful thoughts to “I get to be safe in my home and spend time with my family/roommate/pet.” If we shift our thoughts to be more helpful this will help us make it through these difficult times, as well as recover and grow.
- **Taking Things One Day and One Step at a Time:** When experiencing a crisis, it can be helpful to focus on the present moment and take things one day, or even one small step at a time. Practice turning your attention on what is in front of you in that given moment, and try to have peace with that. For example, when taking a shower enjoy the feel of water on your back, and let go of other thoughts.
- **Social Support-** Earlier I mentioned the importance of maintaining social connection. A sense of belonging is a basic human need as we tend to feel safe and can deal with intense emotions such as loneliness and sadness, when we feel positive social support. Social distancing isn’t social isolation. Now is the time to be creative with how we connect with one another, as this can help all of us flourish together.

3. Meera: Definitely, and I hope that we can all support each other as much as possible during these difficult times. On a lighter note, many of my peers also say that they do not feel that productive during quarantine, myself included. But I think it is important to remember that being productive looks different for everyone and that it is okay to not be productive sometimes. If students are looking to get more motivated, what are some ways they can do so?

Dr. O’Meara: {Insert answer about tips for productivity/self motivation}

- You’re absolutely right. This may be a quarter where we are not going to be our most productive. I have a couple of suggestions regarding this:
- **Self-Compassion:** Self-compassion is when we extend kindness to ourselves even when we experience failures, low productivity and feelings of inadequacy. We tend to be harder on ourselves than others when we go through difficult times. It is important that

we exercise self-compassion as this helps to reduce our own suffering and make it easier to overcome hardships.

- **Radical Acceptance:** Some problems can't be solved and it can be difficult to accept things that are painful or unfair. It's okay to experience feelings of disappointment, sadness, and loss that are a natural part of life. Radical acceptance is about accepting life as it is, rather than how we wish it to be. That also goes with accepting ourselves and our capacity for productivity this quarter.
- **Increasing Motivation-** As far as increasing motivation, as I mentioned before, I've found that for some students it can help to create routines.
- For many students, they have changed environments and are back home where they are used to relaxing- sleeping, playing video games, watching TV. And now they are in those same environments and having to engage in new behaviors.
- It can help to create some structure to your day- to have both a wake-up and a bedtime routine. Think about what you would like to include in your day- time for studying, time for self-care, time for socializing. And then think about when you have your greatest energy- when you are most cognitively alert- and plan for your studying during that time. Be sure to reduce distractions during that time, and then also reward yourself with a break afterwards.

4. Meera: I think I will put {insert advice} into good use! Generally I am a pretty positive person, but recently it has been much harder to stay pumped. As a graduating senior, I feel pretty disappointed that a lot of spring quarter events that I was looking forward to, including SunGod and Commencement, are canceled. I know I am not alone in that, but what can we do to combat feeling dejected?

Dr. O'Meara: {Insert answer about advice for loss of a lot of activities/experiences students were looking forward to in Spring}

- A lot of students are feeling that way. First of all, it's completely natural to feel disappointment, anger, and sadness. These things are a loss, and it's okay to take some time to grieve.
- It can help to receive support from your peers- from others who know what you're going through, and to talk with each other about how hard this is, and how disappointed you feel.
- Some students are making an effort to try to see some positive in this. They are recognizing how much they took these gatherings for granted in the past, and this is really helping them to cultivate a sense of gratitude- so that when they get to experience these things again, they will appreciate them. And they are looking to see what they have in their life right now that they can find some gratitude for- so not just focusing on what they've lost, but trying to focus on what they still have.
- You can also shift your mindset to think about what opportunities you might want to get involved in once the quarantine is over.

5. Meera: I am trying my best to look forward to opportunities to get involved in my community once quarantine is over! I think it's also important to remember that our friends and family might be struggling to cope with the pandemic in different ways, and we want to do our best to support them. What are the most appropriate ways to check in on people in our community and what can we do to support others around us?

Dr. O'Meara: {Insert answer about how to check in on the mental health of peers/family/neighbors, those we don't live with or near}

- You can text loved ones: "Just want you to know I'm thinking about you and I hope you are doing well." OR checking in: "How have you been doing lately?"
- You can also plan for times to check in with people- for example, maybe every Sunday we have a Zoom check-in.
- Think about who is most vulnerable in your family and could use your support. For example, do you have an elderly family member who may need assistance in picking up some groceries, or do you have a friend who is living alone on campus right now. Perhaps making an effort to check in with them and ask if there's anything you can do to help.
- Keep in mind what you feel that you can handle right now. You don't want the check-ins to make you feel more overwhelmed. It's okay if you need to just focus on yourself right now.
- With all of these suggestions today- maybe pick one or two that you want to try. Don't get overwhelmed with feeling that you have to make all of these changes.

Meera: That makes sense, I'll be sure to give my grandma a phone call today! Thank you for all your helpful tips and advice Dr. O'Meara!

Closing

So this concludes our episode of Live Well Be Well! If you like what you heard and would like to learn more about topics related to health and wellness, there's much more to come! Be sure to check out our website and follow us on Instagram and Facebook. Stay tuned for our next episode of Live Well, Be Well.

Until next time, be kind, be true, be you. And remember, to be well is to live well.