WHERE’S YOUR HEAD AT?

AS WE INCH OUT OF THE PANDEMIC, THERE ARE A LOT OF EMOTIONS TO CONTEND WITH. HERE’S WHY THAT’S OKAY.

BY DANIELLE GROEN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NIKKI ERNST
sometimes in mid-April, Canada went on a record-setting COVID-19 spree. The country reported more than 9,500 new infections in a single day. Nearly 1,400 people were in the ICU. In Ontario, where I live, an unprecedented number of patients were shuffled between hospitals to free up resources, landing in facilities as far as a three-hour drive away from home. The province extended lockdowns; schools shut down indefinitely. It snowed a bunch. Everything felt very bleak.

But we managed to bend the curve. A spike in vaccine supply meant provinces could lower the age of eligibility for first doses—and then accelerate the timeline for second shots. Daily cases in Ontario dropped into the low hundreds. British Columbia got rid of its indoor mask mandate; Alberta dispensed with its pandemic restrictions altogether. In June, Toronto reopened restaurant dining for the first time since March 2020. Virus variants were on the rise and vaccination was, in certain demographics, levelling off. And now?

“Now we’re maxed out. I can say I personally would have been happy to get back to some level of normalcy,” says Rajah, whose young daughter politely interrupted our call to ask for a cookie with Nutella. For the past year, Rajah says, we’ve been operating on a sort of autopilot: head down, plough through. Keep it together. Let the child have a 4 p.m. cookie. But now that we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, we’re going to feel relief, but we are also going to finally have the chance to really start processing what we went through. So, it wasn’t trench warfare. Yes, unlike during the 1918 influenza pandemic, Netflix exists. But what we went through—what we continue to go through—absolutely sucked. That’s why we might be struggling to come out of it.

Human beings are creatures of habit. Generally, we much prefer to function in a state of control and predictability. “That’s what keeps us comfortable; it’s what keeps us psychologically safe,” says Taslim Alani-Verjee, a clinical psychologist and founder of the Silm Centre for Mental Health in Toronto. The pandemic, of course, upended our ability to sleep, focus, connect with people or recall even the basic contours of what was said at yesterday’s morning meeting.

The reason, Rajah says, is that the perpetual background drone of stress and uncertainty interferes with our memory systems, as well as our cognitive control systems, the mechanisms that allow us to focus and stay on or switch between tasks. We have been trying to juggle so much under such unusual circumstances, and it’s terrifically overwhelming to our working memory and our attentional capacities. “That’s what causes the brain fog and distractibility that a lot of us feel,” Rajah says. “That’s the mental exhaustion.”

Then factor in the loss. Officially, more than 26,000 Canadians have died from COVID-19, but a recent Royal Society of Canada study found that the true tally could be twice as high, due to under-reported deaths, especially in lower-income and racialized communities. Princeton researchers calculated that each death leaves behind an average of nine close relatives: parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews. Officially, more than 26,000 Canadians have died from COVID-19, but a recent Royal Society of Canada study found that the true tally could be twice as high, due to under-reported deaths, especially in lower-income and racialized communities. Princeton researchers calculated that each death leaves behind an average of nine close relatives: parents, siblings, grandchildren.

for BIPOC women, because we’re used to playing by someone else’s rules and often find ourselves perpetuating the status quo as a result. This year, I’ve really changed. It’s no longer okay to show up to spaces.” —Samantha Krishnapillai, health scientist, founder of the ON Canada Project

“WE HAD TO MAKE OUR OWN CALCULATIONS FOR WHAT FELT SENSIBLE AND SAFE.”
spouses, children and grandchildren. “Grieving is not a simple thing: It can take a year or more to get accustomed to the idea of the loss of a loved one,” says Steven Taylor, a professor at the University of British Columbia’s department of psychiatry and author of *The Psychology of Pandemic*. “The disruption of mourning rituals can make negotiating that grief harder still.”

But Taylor points out that prolonged isolation, financial insecurity and the total interruption of our social routines will produce a sense of sadness and loss as well. “You don’t need to feel guilty or self-critical, like, ‘I didn’t suffer, I didn’t experience a loss, so I have no reason for feeling so blue every day,’” he says. “You don’t have to go out and earn a mood disorder. The accumulation of these stresses has an impact.”

In fact, the accumulation of these stresses has a name, as well—adjustment disorder. Characterized by anxious or depressive symptoms that develop as a result of stressful—but not necessarily life-threatening—events, “adjustment disorder is the little brother or sister of post-traumatic stress disorder,” says Alain Brunet, a clinical psychologist at McGill University who studies the effects of traumatic stress on mental health. “Everyone knows it exists, but it’s never talked about.”

While early research suggests that roughly a third of patients who have had a severe case of COVID-19 and a quarter of all health-care workers develop PTSD, Brunet suspects many more of us—“perhaps tenfold more”—are dealing with adjustment disorder. And all this euphoric talk of a Hot Vax Summer or rebooted Roaring Twenties can exacerbate these symptoms. Transitions are hard under the best of circumstances, and dining indoors or hitting up a concert may not seem like the best of circumstances, particularly after a year-plus of being told to avoid crowded spaces and aerosol spread. Rahaj acknowledges that struggling with mel- ancholy as COVID-19 recedes in Canada might feel a little funny—but it’s definitely to be expected. “That’s why it’s important to be just as kind to yourself when transitioning out of the pandemic as you were when you transitioned in,” she says.

**Let’s just get this bit out of the way now:** Everyone I spoke with to get this information assured me our pandemic brains will bounce back. “You don’t have to go out and earn a mood disorder.” The next time you’re in the shower, you can turn it into a drinking game and think of all the people you can’t see and you’ve been missing. “There’s a feeling that this is going to be okay.”

Our memory will improve, our cognition will improve,” Rajah promises. “I’m a big believer in the resilience and plasticity of the human brain.” Though it can feel like this virus has been with us for roughly six centuries, it’s somehow only been 18 months.

“I usually talk people through the sort of joylessness and stagnation that can come over and languish with the rest of us instead. —DG

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**Field Guide: Emotional Rescue**

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**WHAT GOT ME THROUGH**

“The pandemic affirmed for me that relationships with close friends and family are paramount and that making time for oneself is very important for maintenance of sanity” — Dr. Ameeta Singh, Clinical Professor, Division of Infectious Diseases, University of Alberta

> “My partner and I slipped away to a little hobby farm in Port Dover for February. We felt so lucky getting to hang with chickens and miniature horses and go for beautiful walks in the forest.” — Kimiko Takeda, author of *Kimiko Takes Cancer*

> “I think we will heal faster as a result.” — David Kessler, who co-wrote a book with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (yup, of five-stages-of-grief fame) and had all sorts of useful things to say about acknowledging our racing thoughts, managing our anxiety and exhibiting compassion. But what so many of us fixed on then and still remember now is the relief of putting a name to a roiling emotion. Ah. Right. I’m confined to my house and I can’t see my loved ones and I have no idea when the world will be normal again. Of course what I’m feeling is grief.

**HOW TO NAME WHAT WE’RE FEELING**

 Barely a week into lockdown, a short article muscled its way into a national conversation dominated by spike proteins and DIY hand sanitizer. Published in the *Harvard Business Review*, the article had an insistently headline that blurred across Twitter feeds and Facebook walls. It said, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief.” The author proceeded to speak with David Kessler, who co-wrote a book alongside Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (yup, of five-stages-of-grief fame) and had all sorts of useful things to say about acknowledging our racing thoughts, managing our anxiety and exhibiting compassion. But what so many of us fixed on then and still remember now is the relief of putting a name to a roiling emotion. Ah. Right. I’m confined to my house and I can’t see my loved ones and I have no idea when the world will be normal again. Of course what I’m feeling is grief.

About a year—or, who knows, six centuries—later, a *New York Times* story went stratospheric. It sought to attach a name to the sort of joylessness and stagnation that had characterized the first months of 2021. The writer, a psychologist, rummaged through his emotional dictionary and came back with “languishing”—and the world broke a collective neck with the force of its nodding. For weeks, you could not throw a stick for a $20 “Don’t mind me…I’m languishing” tote bag, which is a real thing that exists! without hitting a think piece about how perfectly that word captures the emptiness we all felt.

“When you name it, you feel it and it moves through you. Emotions need motion,” Kessler said in the piece. But there’s also something valuable about a word gaining so much traction that it quickly transforms into cultural shorthand. When we see that other people identify just as much with the feeling of languishing, we know we’re not alone. “Having a common language helps us feel understood and heard, which is important for any sort of recovery,” says Natasha Rajah, a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University. “It goes a long way toward healing.” It’s possible, as we begin to transition out of this pandemic, that a new phrase will seize our imagination: post-traumatic growth. It’s a term that’s been kicking around for roughly 25 years, and it suggests that people who manage to make it through adversity can see positive changes on the other side. (It’s also not the same as resilience, which is more about bouncing back than experiencing growth.) Small, early studies out of the U.K., Portugal and Canada have found that COVID-19 has prompted post-traumatic growth.

“People become more altruistic, more spiritual; they are closer with friends and family, and can better contend with stress,” says Steven Taylor, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of British Columbia. “So it’s not all bleak: Some people are coming out of this unprecedented experience with new appreciations.” Of course, you may not quite be at the point where you’re ready to notice COVID’s silver linings. Until then, come over and languish with the rest of us instead.—DG

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**YOU DON’T HAVE TO GO OUT AND EARN A MOOD DISORDER.**
The pandemic has changed a lot of things, including what happens when we feel left out.

Fear of missing out, or FOMO, was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013, though the phrase was created in 2000 by, no surprise, a marketing strategist. FOMO is a form of social anxiety that feels like a nagging, all-consuming sense that you’re missing out on something—plans, in jokes, an even better experience than the one you’re currently having. While it ruled the social dynamics of pre-pandemic life (a University of British Columbia study found that 48 percent of those surveyed believed their friends had more friends than they did), it seemed like over the past 18 months, FOMO took a back seat.

Which makes sense: During the pandemic, we were told that the best thing we could do for ourselves and our communities was stay home and “miss out” on normal life. During lockdown, people even started embracing JOMO, or the joy of missing out.

But the more I ruminated on that gathering, the deeper I delved into an imperceptible mental maze. I wondered why I even felt FOMO, especially after a whole year of declining any invitations for face-to-face plans. Then I reasoned over whether I even wanted an invite in the first place—I hadn’t talked to these people since March 2020. Finally, I did something I had never done before: I counted the people in the photo. If there were 10 people at the party, for example, I computed that their boundaries, says Ouimet. “And, over time, the more we do things a little bit outside of our comfort zone, the more comfortable we’re going to feel doing them.”

While I’m ready to be back to making plans on a whim as opposed to fighting FOMO while also avoiding the social stress of initiating a hang, I hope I can bring along some of the JOMO I leaned into during lockdown. I don’t want to stress over being Friend #1 anymore.

First, there’s more to think about whenever you’re making plans. All these extra considerations—vaccination status, government restrictions, individual comfort level—can make planning overwhelming.

If we had been born into this, and it had gone on for a decade, it wouldn’t be as hard to manage because we’d have so much experience doing it,” says Allison Ouimet, an associate professor of clinical psychology at the University of Ottawa. “But this is all new. We haven’t figured out how to get through it yet.”

Then there’s the fact that we just haven’t done the whole socializing thing in a while. According to Ouimet, it’ll take some time to build up those socialization muscles to where they were pre-pandemic. “We’ve all been living an introver’s life for the past year and a half, so when we go back out to seeing lots of people, it saps our energy,” she says. We aren’t used to all the additional stimuli: other real human beings, the environment we’re in, trying to think about when to cut in to the conversation. It’s overwhelming when you haven’t had to pay attention to that much stuff in a while.

Plus, everyone’s got different beliefs, emotions and reactions to reopening, and we don’t quite have the tools to navigate those differences just yet. “It’ll feel really awkward and weird and hard at first, but I think it’s going to get easy quickly,” says Ouimet.

To transition back into socializing, Ouimet suggests starting with naming your fears. Once you’ve pinched down why you’re feeling anxious, take a small step outside your comfort zone. Maybe you’re not ready for a restaurant patio, but you could have some friends over in your backyard, for example. These small, incremental steps will ease you back into socializing at pre-pandemic levels while still accepting your own boundaries, says Ouimet. “And, over time, the more we do things a little bit outside of our comfort zone, the more comfortable we’re going to feel doing them.”

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BY REBECCA GAO

“I discovered K-dramas during the pandemic and it was both absolutely unexpected and fun! It all started with the series Crash Landing on You and from there I basically fell into a rabbit hole…” —Karene Isabelle Baptiste, photographer, founder of the Black Woman in Healthcare project

“What got me through a year of declining invitations” HOW ONLINE THERAPY CAN HELP

Over the last 18 months, many therapists and counsellors have, by necessity, become pretty dam adept at providing support over email, video conferencing, online chat or the phone. Prior to COVID-19, telehealth therapy was mainly used as an alternative for those who can’t leave their homes, who don’t have access to childcare or transportation, or who live in rural areas with limited access to treatment. Then, practically overnight, it became the go-to method of delivery for mental health services.

Online therapy services can make the process of finding someone to speak with easier, eliminating the need to go to a physical location for an appointment. The sessions can be less costly, too. And some studies have found that video therapy is as effective as in-person treatment, and the retention rates are higher. (It closely mimics an in-person appointment, unlike text-based therapy services.)

There are a few things you can do to set yourself up for a solid session. Find a space that’s private, quiet and free from diversions. You can easily become distracted by emails, texts or the mindless desire to multitask—try to shut that all down before you begin. Consider using earbuds or headphones to help maintain privacy and improve sound. And remember, finding the right therapist can take time—don’t hesitate to move on if it’s not working out.

“I wondered why I even felt FOMO after a year of declining invitations”