

Managing change in a changing world Part 1: Moving with the change

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Introduction

We find ourselves in extraordinary times. We're facing what we have never faced before, a global pandemic. Within weeks, the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, spread worldwide. Nobody knows how long it will last or how long it will be until we can resume our usual lives. With so many unknowns, it's hard to imagine what's on the other side. For now, all we have is today, and for today, we can, and should, do all we can, individually and collectively, to carry us through these times in the best ways possible — for ourselves, our families, and our communities. We are, after all, in this together.

The key word that comes to mind with the pandemic is “change.” Our world has changed, and it is clear it will never — cannot possibly — go back to normal. To go back to “normal” would be like going back in time. Impossible. So when the pandemic is over — recognizing that it will likely occur in waves — we'll find ourselves in a “new normal.” Change, of course, is pervasive. As Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher said, “*Change is the only constant in life.*” When a simple saying such as this remains alive for centuries, it's a good idea to pause and acknowledge its truth. Even as we do so, we realize that the order of magnitude of this change cannot but have lasting impacts, and in ways we can't yet possibly imagine.

Who ever imagined telemedicine to become the *modus operandi* for the delivery of veterinary services? The concept of screening clients has taken on a whole new meaning. Who ever imagined the extent to which we would alter operations, providing urgent care only? Who would have imagined outdoor appointments and curbside services as the norm? Infection management protocols never seen before. Limits on filling orders, shortages of medical supplies, and delays with deliveries of inventory. The call to fulfil civic duty by donating personal protective equipment and loaning ventilators and anesthetic gas machines. The very face of companion animal practice has

changed, and virtually overnight. It would seem we are at war in a time of peace.

Change doesn't come easy at the best of times. Change typically *takes* time, but in this case, there was no time — not even to prepare for it. So what do circumstances such as these call for? And especially *unprecedented* circumstances? Resilience. The ability to flex with the times, to move with the change.

Moving with the change

To move with the change, paradoxically, the first thing we need to do is *stop* moving. Not what you expected to hear, right?! Listen on.

We need to pause. We need to take the time to pull out from the chaos, the changes, and the upheaval of our lives so we can, from a balanced mindset, *choose* how to carry ourselves forward. Without choice, without setting a direction, we are just like leaves on a stream, randomly being carried along by the current. It's no longer life as usual. We need a new game plan. But we can't create one without pulling out, without distancing ourselves to reflect on the circumstances, take perspective, and regain balance. So amid these changes, as unsettling as they are, take the opportunity to pause — to slow down, check in with yourself, and get grounded. There are many ways to do this.

Take time in solitude

Take time in solitude to pause and let the thoughts that may be whirling in your mind settle. Fears can get us racing in so many directions that we can feel overwhelmed and out of control. But when you stop and really look at the situation, you can see it for what it is. You can gain perspective. Maybe it's a catnap on the couch; a hot bath with candlelight and soft music; meditation or prayer; hiking through the woods, walking the dog, or sitting on the porch after the kids have been put to bed. Maybe it's engaging in activities that you enjoy, like gardening, carpentry, or knitting, when your mind can wander. Maybe you reflect best when you're in the rhythm of jogging. Whatever it is, take the time to pause within and put things in perspective. What is the worst that could happen? How could things be worse right now? Where are the silver linings? What do you have to be thankful for?

Craft your life narrative

Writing about stressful events can help you come to terms with them. The act of writing accesses your left brain (which is analytical and rational), and while your left brain is busy, your right brain is free to create, intuit, and feel. In this way, writing removes mental blocks, allowing you to use *all* your brainpower

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to better understand yourself, others, and the world around you (1). Journaling your thoughts and feelings will help you understand them more clearly and gain new insights on the challenges you're facing. And as you craft your own life narrative, you gain a sense of control.

Practice yoga

Yoga offers a variety of physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits (2). It combines physical movement, meditation, light exercise, and controlled breathing — all of which calm the mind and relieve stress. Even a single yoga session can be of benefit, so give it a try. Enroll in an online program or use an app to help you begin. And if you blend it into your lifestyle, the benefit will be that much more. If yoga doesn't interest you, try something else. Yoga is only one form of mind/body exercise, "exercise with an inwardly directed focus." Do some simple stretches, turn up the music to lose yourself in dance, or go for a meditative walk.

Just breathe

There are many kinds of breathing exercises that calm the mind. They're a great way to ground yourself so you can think clearly and maintain perspective. Try the "one-moment meditation" (3). It really *does* just take a moment, although starting off with a minute can help you get used to it. Relax your body, quiet your mind, and take even breaths. You can use it anytime to create an instant shift.

Accept your feelings

It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during this time. It is important to accept them rather than try to push them away (4). You may be sad with the loss of your usual ways of living, worried about a lack of resources, or concerned about the kids getting cabin fever. If you avoid these emotions, they will only get stronger and last longer. Instead, notice these emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations, look into them with curiosity, describe them without judgment, and then let them go. Envision them as seeds blowing off a dandelion in a gentle breeze.

Accept what you cannot control

There are circumstances that are not in your power to control. Focusing on what you have no control over will leave you frustrated and exhausted. Instead, let them go. Doing so will help you move on and focus your energy constructively. Remember, you may not be able to change the circumstances, but you can change how you respond to them.

The power to choose

When we pause, taking the time to slow down, reflect, take perspective, and regain balance, we can *accept* the changes for what they are, quiet the fears, and get grounded. And from a place of calm, of collectedness, we can choose our response. It is what it is — we are in a pandemic. We can't change that. But we *can* choose how to carry ourselves "in" and "through" this. As Viktor Frankl said, "*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response*" (5).

There will always be change. Instead of focusing on the disruptions, accept that change is a natural part of life and that it can also bring opportunities and positive outcomes. The next article will focus on choosing our response, on making the choices that will support us through these times in the best ways possible — for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

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