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## Self-Care in an Uncertain World

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**W**e'd all like certainty in our lives. If you're like me, the desire to know what's going to happen to you would sit near the top of your wish list. But none of us can know.

One of the conditions of being alive is that you're subject to constant change and all it implies, including uncertainty, unpredictability, and a lack of control over much that happens to you.

Here are some strategies and practices to help you find a measure of peace and contentment in the midst of life's uncertainty.

**Use Three-Breath Practice to bring your attention to your present-moment experience, instead of dwelling on a future you can't possibly know.** When you become aware that you're lost in worrisome thoughts about the future, *pause*, and switch your attention to the physical sensation of three in-breaths and three out-breaths in a row. Take your time.

Three-Breath Practice offers relief from distressing thoughts and emotions because it shifts your attention to what's going on in your immediate experience.

It also helps you find things to enjoy that are available to you right now. Repeat as necessary!

**When thoughts about the future give rise to anxiety or other painful emotions,**

**turn to self-compassion to ease your suffering.** The way you treat yourself is one of the few things you control in life. There's no reason to be anything but kind to yourself, in both your speech and your actions. Compassionate action includes taking care of your needs and looking for ways to enjoy yourself despite your limitations.

To engage in compassionate self-talk, think of words that speak directly to how hard it is to long for certainty in an uncertain world. Then recite them to yourself in a soothing voice, words such as "It's scary not to know what the future holds for me" or "My ongoing worry about the future is so emotionally draining."

When you give voice to your feelings in this way, you're letting yourself know that you care about your suffering. This alone will ease your emotional pain.

**Keep a Don't-Know Mind about the future.** You don't know what the future holds for you, long-term. You don't even know for sure what tomorrow will bring.

The Korean Zen master Seung Sahn's instruction to keep a Don't-Know Mind is an invitation to lay down the burden of constantly striving to know the unknowable.

It's remarkably liberating to be able to say, "I don't know." Those words free you to let your life unfold as it may without the futile effort on your part to control everything.

Keeping a Don't-Know Mind is also an invaluable way to stop yourself from believing distressing assumptions, such as "The future holds only pain and heartbreak for me." You can't know this. Better days may be just around the corner. Keep your heart and mind open to all possibilities.

**Cultivate equanimity to alleviate any fear or other painful emotions that are present when you think about the future.** Equanimity is characterized by an even-tempered contentment that arises when you feel okay about your life even though you don't know what the future has in store.

A student once asked the spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti what his secret to peace and contentment was. He leaned over and whispered to the student: “I don’t mind what happens.”

To cultivate equanimity in this way, start by gently acknowledging any worry or fear you’re experiencing at the moment. Then try to imagine what it would be like to not mind what was going to happen next in your life.

This can be a challenge, so if it was too hard to imagine, wait a bit and try again.

### **ALLEVIATING THE PAIN OF LONELINESS**

A dramatic change in lifestyle—such as being isolated during a pandemic—can lead to painful feelings of loneliness. Previously, you may have been in the company of others every day; suddenly, you’re by yourself most of the time.

I find it helpful to distinguish between being alone and *feeling lonely*.

Being alone, in itself, is a neutral state, neither positive nor negative. The philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich said this about being alone: “Language . . . has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.”

May what follows help you take the first steps toward turning the pain of loneliness into the glory of solitude.

**Take comfort in knowing you are not alone in your loneliness.** Millions of people understand how you feel. Roy Orbison expressed it this way: “Only the lonely know the way I feel tonight.”

Bringing to mind others who are lonely and evoking compassion for them and for yourself over your shared circumstances can make you feel deeply connected to them.

This can ease your own loneliness.

**Think of words that capture the pain of loneliness and repeat them to yourself in a gentle and soothing manner.** Here's an example attributed to the Talmud: "The highest form of wisdom is kindness." Find those kind words—ones that resonate with you personally—and bring them to mind with a gentle and soothing voice. Your words might be similar to these: "It's dispiriting to feel so lonely" or "I'm incredibly sad that friends and family aren't here."

Expressing compassion for yourself in this way lets you know that you care about your suffering. This makes loneliness easier to bear and also makes it easier to patiently wait for it to pass out of your mind.

**If you find yourself focusing on loneliness, examine whether it's for a constructive purpose or whether it's only making you feel worse.** When you're feeling lonely, there's a tendency to focus on it exclusively. This is beneficial if your intention is to shed light on what gives rise to loneliness. For instance, if you know that it's triggered by certain interactions or activities on your part, you can try to avoid them.

However, if your focus is on how bad loneliness feels, this can increase its intensity. If this is what you're doing, a pleasing distraction can help by shifting your attention from loneliness to what the world around you has to offer right at this moment. You could put on some music or go outside for a while. Come up with what you think would be enjoyable to do and then *do it*, even if you have to apply what I call "gentle force" to get yourself going. This is self-compassion in action.

**Recognize that feelings of loneliness are as changeable as the weather.** You may feel as if you'll always be lonely, but emotions are in constant flux, arising and passing, just like weather patterns. In the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "No feeling is final."

Without trying to force any sadness to go away, be patient with your loneliness. It's likely

that by tomorrow, it will have eased a bit—and perhaps the next day, a bit more.



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