

Nine Practices to Cope with a Pandemic

I've been told seven times that I had a life-threatening disease. About a year ago, when I was told I might be going blind, I identified nine practices that allow me to live the joyful, easy parts of my life while coping with the distress of living in my unreliable body. I have been in self-isolation or lockdown since March 1. It occurred to me that my nine practices might be relevant for living through a pandemic.

Practice One: Is there something I can do now to prepare for the future?

First and foremost I make a distinction between what is happening now and what might happen in the future. I zoom out to a worst case future scenario and decide if there are actions in the present I can take to mitigate or prepare for the future worst case scenario. Sometimes the assessment reveals I need more information; there is leg work to do. Sometimes, the assessment tells me that there is psychological work to do. I try to act on what I learn.

Practice Two: Is Something Happening Right Now that Needs Attention?

Worry helps us prepare for the future but if we only consider a hypothetical future and nothing that truly needs attention is happening now, then worry may be a waste of time. Staying in the present, when no action is required, provides relief.

Practice Three: Is Now a Good Time to Fully Absorb New Information?

I ask myself whether the present moment is a good time to inhabit the full reality of my situation? Sometimes the answer is, No. I'm too tired or hungry or anxious. Those are times I defer learning more until I am actually available to absorb more information.

Practice Four: What Is Sky, What Is Clouds?

If I am fully immersed in a worst case scenario, it helps to have an escape route. Buddhists talk about awareness as like the sky, with our thoughts and feelings just clouds that pass through that open space. When I am able to dis-identify with the clouds of fear or worry and perceive a me-ness that is sky, it feels good. I may be in a complex, ambiguous situation but it is a situation, not me.

Practice Five: What Really Matters?

I routinely ask myself the question, "What really matters?" I don't expect myself, nor anyone else, to live a life that continuously demonstrates alignment with what really matters. I care about whether I can discern what's really important in a day, a week, or in a big span of time, not whether there is a perfect fit between my purpose and behavior.

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Practice Six: What Are the High Cards in My Deck?

Let's say that life is a deck of cards and that every day we shuffle through the 52 cards. Now let's say the Ace is high and then, in order, there is the King, Queen, Jack, ten. Given this image, I believe that knowing the experiences that are my 10, Jack, Queen, King, Ace is important and that tolerating days when no high card shows up is also part of my practice.

There's always a way of finding the Jacks or taking Jack actions. Maybe I can't get the King or the Ace, but I can pretty much always find or create a Jack or a 10. Looking at a tree, even a leaf, can be a 10, triggering a magisterial feeling about the world.

Practice Seven: What "Sticks" Will Help?

I have walked slacklines. These days slack lines are too hard for me to balance on without two sticks, which I keep nearby. In this metaphor, if my life is a slackline, I ask myself what are my sticks? Do I need both? One? I'm living life in a challenging world, trying to get from one side to the other, with the help of sticks. And I know what my sticks are.

Practice Eight: How Useful Is this Story?

We are story-making creatures and whether we are always aware of it or not, we live our lives inside stories we create and the ones we hear other people tell. I check to see whether a story I am telling or hearing is a useful story. Depending on my answer, I may have to change the story I am telling or tune out the one I am hearing. During this pandemic, there have been a lot of unhelpful stories that have been circulating. Picking and choosing the ones that serve me well has been a daily task.

Practice Nine: Why Not Me?

Everyone is going to die and most people will get sick before they die. I have always been puzzled by the attitude of people who become ill and ask, "How can this be happening to me?" My attitude is how can it not be happening to you? Nowadays, anyone over fifty, and many other people, confront that they may die or, at the very least, become very ill.

I have faced my own death for over thirty years. What helps me is believing that the future is not known, that it is uncertain. Many people are saying that it is precisely the uncertainty of the time we are in that is so difficult, but uncertainty is the reason I have what I call "reasonable hope." For me, solace comes from the fact that I know I don't know what is going to happen, so there is always the possibility that something better than what seems to be true can happen.

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These nine practices are how I manage catastrophe. They help me cope with the terrifying screen of my life and they allow me to show up wholeheartedly to the pleasures of the other screen: to family, friends and work; movement and music; food and the natural world. They allow me to live moment by moment feeling that life is hard and good.

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