

## **Ways to Cope with Uncertainty**

### **May 21, 2021**

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We have been coping with high levels of uncertainty for over a year, and our usual ways of coping may not be working as well as they used to.\* For example, perhaps you used to look forward to walking around your neighbourhood, but lately you aren't getting as much joy from it as you did before.

As time passes, more and more people are looking for new ways to cope with what is hopefully the last few weeks of lockdown. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) offers a fresh perspective. They contacted mental health advocates who have lived experience of mental illness and "asked them how they are coping themselves, and if they had any hard-earned wisdom from their previous struggles to pass on."\*

"People who have lived through trauma have a familiarity with how to negotiate a world that feels quite scary at times," says Dr. Juveria Zaheer, Clinician Scientist and Education Administrator at CAMH.\* "They have some expertise in how to get through hard days."\*

Read on to see these advocates' advice and tips on how you can apply it to your life! Please note that this content does not take the place of medical advice.

### **1) Pay Attention to your Physical Health**

Before the pandemic, Angie Elliot had spent a year in recovery from Severe Panic Disorder caused by Generalized Anxiety Disorder.\* She shares that, during the pandemic: "Some of the ghosts are back. I deal with them by going back to the tools I learned during my time in crisis when all the social workers and doctors were helping me. Have I eaten something healthy? Have I exercised? Am I getting a good night's sleep?\*"\*

If the days seem to be blurring together, write down what you are doing each day to help you keep track of your habits. Below is a sample of what tracking your habits could look like in the form of a chart. As you can see, you don't need to write complete sentences. Instead, you could ask yourself yes or no questions that you can answer with a check mark, such as "Did I exercise or stretch today?" Another option is asking yourself questions that you can answer with a number, like how many minutes you spent exercising or stretching.

Some examples of questions could be: Did I wake up feeling rested? On a scale of 1 to 10, how good was last night's sleep? Did I exercise or stretch today? On a scale of 1 to 10, how good did I feel after? Did I eat something healthy today? Did I drink water today? How many

glasses of water did I have? How many cups of coffee did I have? How many alcoholic drinks did I have?

Example:

| Week: May 23 - 29 |     |     |      |     |       |     |     |
|-------------------|-----|-----|------|-----|-------|-----|-----|
|                   | Sun | Mon | Tues | Wed | Thurs | Fri | Sat |
| (Question)        |     |     |      |     |       |     |     |
| (Question)        |     |     |      |     |       |     |     |
| (Question)        |     |     |      |     |       |     |     |
| (Question)        |     |     |      |     |       |     |     |

The habits that you decide to track will be personal to your situation. However, if you feel stuck and want some more inspiration, a web search for “printable wellness checklists” will show you examples of what works for other people, such as this [list of 22 self-care checklists](#).

There are also some templates based on specific topics, including [this one](#) from Sleepwell that helps you track your sleep. Click [here](#) to learn more about how to use this template.

## 2) “It is what it is”: Radical Acceptance in Action

Angie also mentions, “I am a huge proponent of ‘what is’ thinking. ‘What if’ thinking can send my thoughts down the rabbit hole.” This statement is a perfect example of another coping strategy— radical acceptance.

I recently learned about this concept at a workshop facilitated by Matthew D. Selekmán, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), and the Director at [Partners for Collaborative Solutions](#). He defines radical acceptance to be “accepting the reality of the pandemic situation” and “that it is what it is and you have no control over it nor can you change it.”

How often have we heard “it is what it is” this year? Personally, I know that I have both heard it and said it after conversations where the other person and I are venting about our frustration with the pandemic and restrictions. Venting and grieving the opportunities that COVID-19 has taken from us is healthy, but if we think about them constantly, our own thinking can restrict us even more, leading us “down the rabbit hole” as Angie described.

According to Selekmán, “Once we let go of our stewing and fretting of what we can’t do and embrace what we do have control over, we will experience liberation and discover that the sky will be the limit in terms of the possibilities of what we can do.” I know it’s easier said than done, but if you’re looking for a new coping skill, I highly encourage trying out radical acceptance where you focus more on “what is” rather than “what if”.

### 3) Plan for your Safety Before a Mental Health Crisis

Shawn Pendenque uses his lived experience with bipolar schizoaffective disorder and homelessness to help others as a Peer Support Worker at LOFT Community Services.\* He advises: “This is a time to stay close with your friends. Don’t internalize what is happening around you. You have to have a safety plan for yourself. Who is going to be there for you? Who can you talk to?”\*

When you are feeling relatively stable and clear-headed, make a safety plan for what you will do when you are triggered by something. Selekman recommends a strategy called “If X, then Y” Intentions. He gives this example: “When I am triggered by X, I will immediately do my Ys: listen to one of my favorite tunes, do the sound meditation/a mindful walk/six deep breathes slowly, text my best friend, count all of the objects in the room, or visualize a joyful or successful moment in my life as a movie.” He recommends having multiple things to do, or Ys, in case your mood does not improve after just one coping mechanism on the list.

As Shawn shared, calling someone you trust can be very comforting. Most cell phones have the option to select some of your contacts to be “favourites”. This feature brings certain phone numbers to the top of your contacts list so that you don’t have to scroll through your entire contact list when you are looking for someone specific. If you feel like you don’t want to burden your friends or family, consider asking them if you can call or text them if you are having a difficult time, and let them tell you for themselves.

Also, you can add a mental health helpline to your phone as a contact. If you want to be discreet, you could change the name of the mental health helpline contact to be the name of a person. Speaking of mental health helplines, it’s good to know which services you can call. If you find appropriate services in your area and save them into your phone, you will be more likely to call them when you need support.

If you are experiencing a mental health or addictions related crisis, the Canadian Mental Health Association recommends that you:

- Contact your doctor\*
- Go to the nearest hospital\*
- Find resources at [ConnexOntario](#)\*
- Call 911 or Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000\*
- Call a crisis line\*

There are a number of crisis lines across Ontario. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to search for resources in your area. Click [here](#) for the Canada Suicide Prevention Service.

If you feel overwhelmed by the number of resources, call [ConnexOntario](#) and they can help you navigate the system and provide information about counselling services and support services in your community.

#### **4) Have a Routine, and Keep it Simple**

Shawn told CAMH, “I have had to put extra thought into my capacity to feel grounded since this started. I’ve had to double check myself and block out a lot of what I see around me with everyone being all freaked out and frightened and nervous. I can’t take in all that energy because when I had my psychotic break, I was thinking then that the world was coming to an end (laughs). I just stop myself and go along with the program and stick with my routine. Get up, take a shower, brush my teeth, go to work, see my clients, go home and make dinner with my partner. I just go with that script in my head and keep it simple.”\*

Creating routines is a way to create certainty. We may not know what will happen next week or next month, but we can know what we will do when we wake up and when we go to bed. At the beginning of the pandemic, I saw some people make very ambitious and productive schedules so that they would lose ten pounds, master a new skill, and be able to speak multiple languages by the time that lockdown was over. It goes without saying that many of these routines were not sustainable, but that does not mean that routines are ineffective overall. As Shawn pointed out, simple routines can have a big impact on your mental health.

The first mental health advocate mentioned in this article, Angie, also advised: “I discourage anyone from feeling pressured to use this time to learn a new skill or venture too far out of their comfort zone. I wouldn’t give a beginner’s guide to coding to a soldier under fire. It’s all about survival right now.”\*

#### **Final Thoughts**

Not every piece of advice will work for everyone, but the only way to find what works for you is to keep an open mind about trying new ways to cope and going through the process of trial and error. To name just one example, even if you don’t think that you’re the kind of person who could stick to a routine, give it a try and don’t put too much pressure on yourself. One of these coping skills could help to add some certainty during these uncertain times.

This article only mentioned two mental health advocates that were included on the CAMH website. If you are interested in reading more stories advice from mental health advocates like them, click [here](#).

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at [www.ontario.ca/coronavirus](http://www.ontario.ca/coronavirus). Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675