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OKAYNESS

MINDFUL AWARENESS | SELF-COMPASSION | PERFECTION |
COPING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS | KILLING TIME |
GRATITUDE | SOLACE IN MUSIC | I'M OKAY IF EARTH IS OKAY |
AND MANY MORE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In the transition from one year to the next, many remind themselves to take stock of achievements and other accumulations over the past year while setting goals for the year to come. Some face the New Year with trepidation stemming from uncertainties and fear of the unknown or the anticipated future. Whichever way we choose to greet the New Year, it can be useful to check in at a deeply personal level to see how we're tracking on "okayness".

That might be from a transactional perspective of our interactions with others or it could be from a position of self-compassion as defined by Neff (2003) whereby okayness comes through self-kindness versus self-judgment, a sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus overidentification.

In this issue our writers tackle questions concerning how we recognize if we're not feeling okay and what coping mechanisms people draw on to feel okay. For instance, you can read about the role of gratitude and self-compassion in feeling okay about life, finding solace through music, and coping with difficult emotions through mindfulness. Our writers also invite us to accept that sometimes not feeling okay is okay, and to adjust our perceptions of time and perfection to accommodate some kinder impressions of self and achievements.

Finally, we have a reminder to re-align our inner, mental health with our external environment and to practice self-care through small steps in noticing nearby nature and establishing closer connections and new relationships with nature. What will you do over the coming months to prioritise yourself and your mental health? What's your own position on being and feeling okay? Read on to explore.

Dr Denise Dillon
Editor-in-Chief



VICE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Performance, achievement, and success—these concepts are so deeply ingrained in us in today's VUCA (i.e., volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world that they are no longer divorced from our self-identity. In the pursuit of excellence, we pride ourselves in being part of the hustle and oftentimes regard burnout as a badge of honour, possibly taking on more than we can handle at the expense of our wellbeing.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit us, it gave us a rare opportunity to reprioritise our physical and mental health over work. Singaporeans started becoming more cognizant of workplace stress and exhaustion, and mental health was brought to the forefront in many of our dialogues. Working from home begun to encroach on our personal lives, such that work-life balance became a very real concern for many Singaporeans. Collectively, we understood that it was okay not to be okay in these trying times.

Yet, with the nation now embracing a post-pandemic normal and gearing towards a full re-opening, we may find ourselves once again yearning for a state of supra-performance. Worse so, we may wish to compensate for lost time and double down on efforts to be competitive again. This could again become the norm unless we choose otherwise. Once again, we find ourselves needing to be more than okay.

In this meritocratic light, the notion of okayness seems antithetical to achievement. Being okay suggests that we are not excelling, only maintaining. More often than not, being okay even carries a negative connotation as it reminds us that we are only meeting the bare minimum; we are only getting by. As such, okayness reeks of mediocrity when viewed from the lens of achievement.

But, are we okay with being just okay? This issue of Singapore Psychologist reminds us that the concept of okayness is one of self-acceptance and self-compassion—that the state of okayness varies between individuals and does not need to be bogged down by the often-impossible standard of continuous accomplishment. More importantly, it challenges us to reframe our own meaning of success and how being okay may be more valuable than we think. Are we truly okay in our pursuit of success? If we are successful but not okay, are we ever successful?

Mok Kai Chuen
Vice President (Outreach)

To Simply Be: Mindful Awareness for Acceptable Moments

By Paul Victor Patinadan

(With contributions by Adrian Wan and Eric Leung)

In late January this year, millions across the world (I amongst them) mourned the passing of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh; spiritual leader and guide, poet, activist, and Nobel Peace Prize Nominee. "Thay" (meaning Teacher in Vietnamese), as he was affectionately called by his students, masterfully brought the Buddhist meditative practice of "mindfulness" to the global forefront in a sensitive, humanistic and secular manner through his work, writings and collaborative ventures. Being mindful is intrinsically linked to acceptance, which in Zen Buddhist practice reveals, honours and affirms the reality that this moment (inclusive of present suffering) rests on an unconditional ground of "okayness" and "enoughness". As such, there is a wholeness not requiring any elements of experience to be either obtained or expunged (Bartok & Roemer, 2017). Through the work of Thay and his academic contemporaries, the benefits that mindfulness can bestow are demystified, simplified, and readily available to all who wish to reclaim okayness and compassion in each passing moment.



Existing definitions of mindfulness focus on the cognitive and socio-emotional; with mindfulness being a non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centred awareness in which each arising thought, feeling or sensation is acknowledged and accepted "as is", fully within the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004; Black, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Segal et al., 2018). From what is observed in the attentional field, there is no automatic, habitual patterned reactivity nor overidentification; instead there is space created between perception and reaction, guiding reflective (rather than reflexive) response (Bishop et al., 2004). This space, perhaps, is where an individual is free to simply be okay.

In an attempt to consolidate the experience of mindfulness, Bishop et al. (2004) proposed a two-component model with: i) *self-regulation of attention* and maintenance upon the immediate experience allowing for increased recognition of mental events and ii) *orientation to experience* within the present moment characterized by curiosity, openness and acceptance; the ability to simply reside in okayness. Siegel (2009) further enunciates this integrative processes of mindful awareness, moving to hypothesize *internal attunement* as catalyst for a coherent flow of energy and information through not only the brain and mind, but also relationships, thus freeing one from associative memory and encouraging a resilient and vital self.



The practice of mindfulness is the fountainhead for numerous processes, not in the least primary towards the development of universal values such as empathy and compassion. Tirsch (2010) eloquently details the natural progression of mindful practice within prescientific Buddhist traditions as eventually reaching towards training in compassion and loving kindness towards the self and others. In an attempt to empirically justify this relationship, Tirsch's (2010) close scrutiny and consolidation of theoretical and neuroimaging data observed the interrelatedness of mindful awareness and compassion; an example being the thickening of the insula and prefrontal cortices of mindful meditators, areas of the brain linked to caregiving and compassionate behaviour. A cohesive, cyclical interaction can be observed where mindfulness guides acceptance and okayness, and in turn allows for the flourishing of loving-kindness and compassion.

Self-compassion, as conceptualized by Neff and Germer (2018), entails being kind and understanding towards the self at times of suffering, when thoughts and emotions are far from okay. Perceiving personal experiences as part of the larger "human experience" and holding suffering in mindful awareness completes what it might mean to be self-compassionate. Self-compassion has also been described as a feeling of empathy or kindness towards one's failure or suffering, which encourages understanding rather than self-criticism and punishment (Germer & Neff, 2013). A compassionate attitude towards oneself emerges when clarity and perspective are gained through personal experience (Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff & Germer, 2018; Neff & Seppala, in press). With mindful awareness, experience of these stories unfold within the present moment; instead of being caught up in ruminations and negative reactions, curiosity and openness pave the way for honest, compassionate introspection, without feelings that something is amiss (Cacciatore & Flint, 2011; Reisen, 2014).



Certified teachers of Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), contributors A.W. and E.L. suggest *Affectionate Breathing*; a simple, short, and accomplishable practice in any scenario by individuals who wish to cultivate mindful awareness in their everyday lives. This is a common form of mindful breathing meditation with added suggestions that bring affection to the self during the process—adding warmth to one's mindful breathing practice (Neff & Germer, 2018). The practice invites the mind to be more focused and calmer. This can be done by finding a posture where our body is comfortable and feels supported. We then notice the breath in our body through the subtle movements of breathing, the rhythm of breathing and the sensations in the body when breath is drawn, and allow the self to become part of the breath. A sample instruction for *Affectionate Breathing* (Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff & Germer, 2018) is detailed as follows:



- Find a posture in which your body is comfortable and feels supported and then gently close your eyes, partially or fully.
- Place your hand over your heart or any other soothing place to remind us that we are bringing affectionate awareness to our breathing and to ourselves.
- Begin to notice your breathing within your body; noticing how your body is nourished on the in-breath and relaxes with the out-breath.
- Notice the rhythm of your breathing, flowing in and out. Noticing your body moving with the breath, allow your whole body to be gently rocked and caressed by your breathing.
- Gently release your attention on your breath, sitting quietly in your own experience, and allow yourself to feel whatever you are feeling and be just as you are.
- Slowly and gently open your eyes.

Through such and similar practice we can seek comfort and solace in our okayness as we work towards "living deeply", the panacea that Thay had elegantly prescribed. With practice, determination, and the active decision to be mindful, we become more comfortable and see more success touching the soul of each new day, and in turn realize it is our own we are connecting with.



My Emotions are Okay: A Self-Compassion Approach to Normalising Negative Feelings

By Ng Da Xuan

It is human to want to feel only positive feelings (such as happiness) and not feel any negative feelings (such as grief, fear, anger). But our attempt to avoid feeling psychological pain often makes it worse. Research found that individuals who tried to avoid painful thoughts and emotions ended up with more frequent and intense negative experiences (*rebound effect*; Wang, Hagger, & Chatzisarantis, 2020). Failing to control our negative feelings, most of us often ended up grappling with different forms of the "why" questions. Like "why can't I feel better?", "why am I not happy even when I am doing okay?". Experiencing negative feelings, however, is a normal part of our human experience, and there is nothing inherently wrong with negative feelings.

Compassion refers to the wish for everyone to be free from suffering with a motivation to alleviate and prevent further suffering in self and others (Gilbert, 2017, p. 31). Being self-compassionate means that we seek to embrace all aspects of our lived experience without condemning any of them, allow ourselves to be emotionally moved by our pain, and actively look for ways to comfort ourselves during difficult times. In this article, I present the self-compassionate approach to normalising negative feelings; that is, accepting our negative feelings as a normal part of our human experience while generating the motivation to heal ourselves with kindness and nurturance (Neff, 2003). According to Paul Gilbert (2010, p. 50), the founder of Compassion-Focused Therapy, the first step towards self-compassion is to understand the origins, nature, and functions of our negative feelings. In the following paragraphs, I discuss (1) the origins of negative feelings as a protective mechanism, (2) the nature of negative feelings as a guide towards personal meaning, and (3) outline the various beneficial functions of our negative feelings.

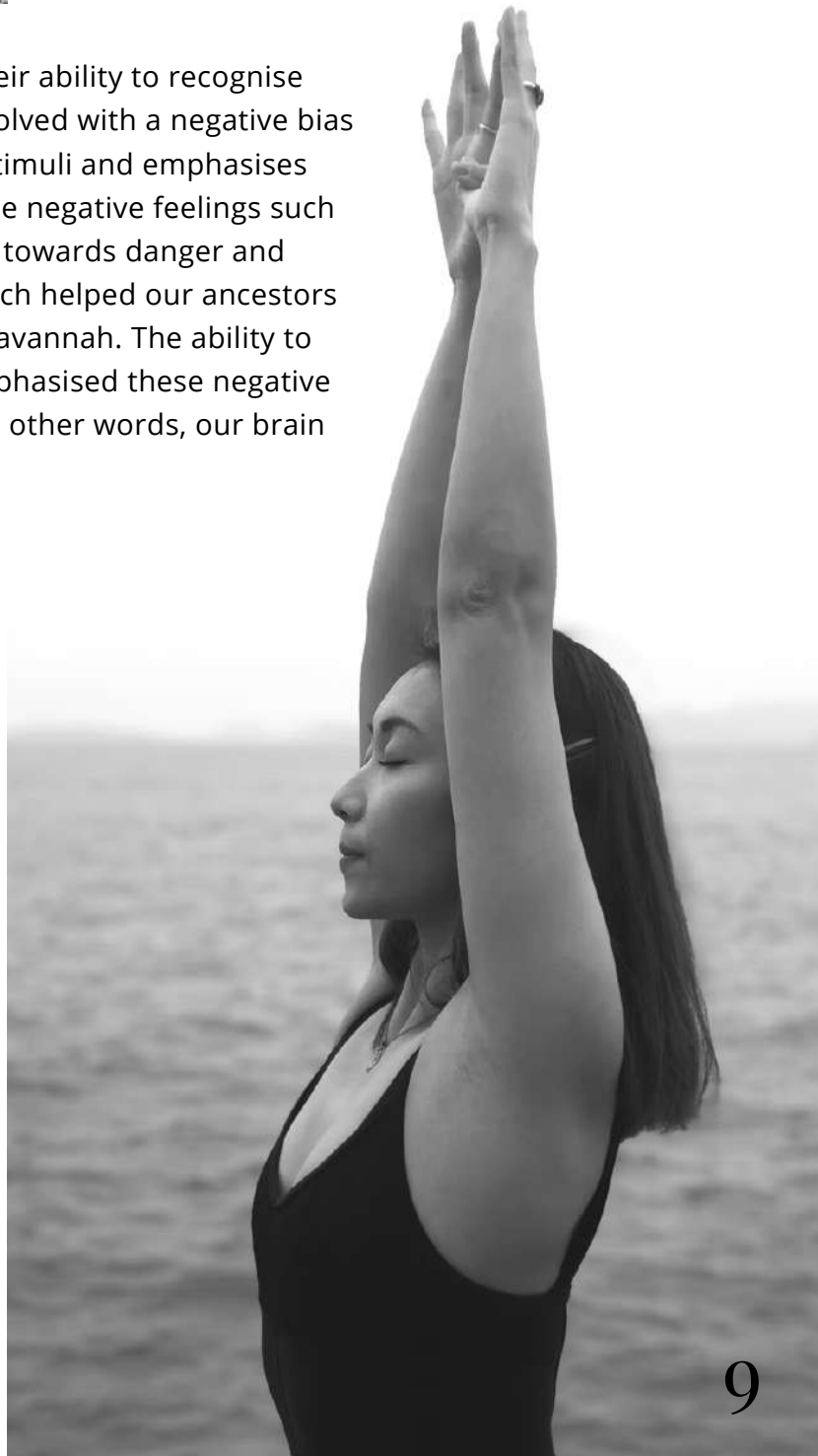


Negative Feelings: A Protective Mechanism

While negative feelings such as anxiety, anger, disgust, and sadness are unpleasant, they are part of our normal emotional repertoire. Only one of the four basic human emotions is positive (i.e., happiness), meaning that 75% percent of our emotional experience is made up of negative feelings (Gu et al., 2019). Statistically speaking, we are more likely to feel negative feelings than positive feelings at any given moment in time. The reason for the prevalence of negative feelings may have evolutionary roots.

Our ancestors' survival depended heavily on their ability to recognise threats quickly. For that purpose, our brains evolved with a negative bias whereby our attention prioritises threatening stimuli and emphasises negative feelings (Baumeister et al., 2001). These negative feelings such as fear, worry, and anxiety, direct our attention towards danger and motivate our fight or flight responses, all of which helped our ancestors adapt and survive the harsh conditions of the savannah. The ability to form negative feelings and a brain that overemphasised these negative feelings provided an evolutionary advantage. In other words, our brain evolved for survival, not happiness.

Our evolved brain provided the biological basis for the prevalence of negative feelings. It follows that negative feelings are merely a normative response towards social and environmental threats. For example, it is normal to feel depressed in a toxic, abusive, and loveless relationship. In addition, the culture of modern societies (i.e., with a shift towards individualistic goals such as power and materialistic gains and away from collectivistic goals such as cooperation and community) promotes competition and conflict which may have resulted in the over-stimulation of negative feelings. As revealed by Twenge and colleagues (2010), high school and college students experience more mental health difficulties today than those in the 1930–40s, possibly due to the shift in cultural values and social climate.



To avoid negative feelings in the current social climate (especially with the current pandemic) may not be realistic. Instead, negative feelings should be recognised for their protective functions. These feelings should also not be condemned but rather engaged with compassionately. A compassionate approach will be to treat our negative feelings as if they were a messenger or advisor, bringing critical information about the environment to our attention with the intention to protect us (Harris, 2019). Instead of arguing with ("I should be happy, not sad") or blaming ("I hate feeling sad") these feelings, the compassionate approach will be to accept these feelings and attend to them with gentleness and curiosity (e.g., saying "Thank you, sadness, for protecting me").



Negative Feelings: A Guide Towards Personal Meaning

Our experience of emotion is multi-faceted and more complex than a simple dichotomy of positive feelings and negative feelings (Scherer, 2005). According to Professor Klaus Scherer, a specialist in the psychology of emotion, our emotional experience is derived from the interpretation of our physiological state as well as the situational meaning attributed to that physiological state. For example, an increased heart rate in the context of a wedding proposal is experienced as excitement, while an increased heart rate in the context of public speaking is experienced as anxiety. In a way, our emotional experience (e.g., excited or anxious) reflects how we appraise our lived experience and attribute personal meaning towards our physiological arousal and external circumstances.

Our emotions have also been termed as relevance detectors (Scherer, 2005), providing hints to what is meaningful and relevant for our wellbeing. For instance, the emotion of grief tells us that forming close bonds and having intimate relationships are meaningful to us, while boredom tells us that we seek challenges and are not fully utilising our strengths, and anger towards someone violating our personal space tells us that privacy is important to us.





These emotions tend to last longer if we fail to respond and re-connect with the things that are meaningful to us. For example, feelings like sadness will likely continue as long as we remain disconnected from important personal values like belongingness, security, friendship or hope.

As described, our emotional experience is more than just valence of feelings (i.e., positive or negative) and physiological arousal. Our emotional experience also tells us whether we are living according to our values, whether our emotional and psychological needs are sufficiently fulfilled, and whether our environment and behaviours are serving our wellbeing (Tang et al., 2017). Instead of pushing our negative feelings away, the more compassionate approach may be to look at our emotional experience with warmth and support, identify the values and meaning behind our pain, and find the motivation to quickly act and reconnect with our values.

Negative Feelings: A Functional Tool

Most therapeutic approaches (e.g., Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Mindful Self-Compassion, Compassion Focused therapy) view negative feelings as adaptive and functional. In fact, the inability to verbalise emotions often indicates a maladaptive condition such as alexithymia. Through therapy, the therapist often attempts to elicit an emotional response from the client to increase their emotional awareness and promote the client's insight into their personal values (Frederickson, 2013). The aim is to help clients learn how to accept and work with their negative feelings instead of avoiding or suppressing them.

Our emotions serve three primary functions: to communicate, motivate, and illuminate (Harris, 2019, pp. 271-274). Firstly, our negative feelings communicate critical information about our social and physical environment. For example, fear communicates the presence of threat, anger communicates the violation of personal boundaries or presence of injustice, and sadness communicates the loss of something important.



Secondly, our negative feelings prompt us to act. For example, fear motivates us to run away or hide, anger motivates us to resist and fight, and sadness motivates us to withdraw and recuperate. Lastly, our negative feelings highlight what is important to us. For example, fear illuminates the importance of safety and security, anger illuminates the importance of protecting our territory, and sadness illuminates the importance of rest. Therefore, it is only practical to see negative feelings as they are, functional tools that communicate, motivate, and illuminate what is important in order to generate the motivation to heal ourselves with kindness and nurturance.

Conclusion

We do not choose to feel emotions like sadness, anger, or anxiety. These emotions are the result of a brain that is designed to protect us. The self-compassionate approach towards negative feelings entails: (1) seeing negative feelings as protective mechanisms, (2) treating negative feelings as a guide towards personal meaning, and (3) using negative feelings as a tool towards self-healing. To chart a path towards self-compassion, we begin by listening to what our negative feelings are telling us, acknowledge the pain behind these feelings, and remind ourselves that we are not the only ones struggling with these negative emotions. Our negative emotions are normal, and we are okay.





I'm Not Okay, and That's Okay— Exploring Self-Forgiveness

By Carrie Lee

For most of us, at some time or another, we have likely done something to hurt ourselves or someone else. Afterwards, we're often ridden with guilt, shame, and self-resentment: Why would I do something like that? That choking feeling creeping up on you, you begin to ponder every other alternative of what you should or shouldn't have done. Trapped in your headspace, you let the guilt chip away at you.

If you find yourself in this predicament, I am here to tell you that *it's okay*.

Many people indulge in ideas of self-love and acceptance. Yet, self-forgiveness often seems to be left out of this conversation. It begins to beg the question as to why this is so—particularly when making mistakes is simply part of human nature. Yet as simple as it is, individuals continue to ponder over their mistakes, leaving themselves to bear the brunt of psychological distress. So, what exactly is self-forgiveness? And more importantly, how can we begin our journey towards it?

Transgressions & Negativity

To best understand how self-forgiveness benefits us, it is first crucial to understand the mechanisms at play when someone commits a mistake. Of particular focus is the feeling of guilt. According to Wohl and McLaughlin (2014), feelings of guilt tend to arise when one understands that they have behaved in a way that is inconsistent with their principles. This could simply be shouting at someone in the heat of the moment or procrastinating at work. No matter the magnitude, these acts can cultivate feelings of guilt, which can manifest as self-deprecating emotions (Wohl & Thompson, 2011). If left unaddressed, such emotions can result in prolonged rumination about the transgression, which is associated with increased risk of depression among other psychological and physiological problems (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014). Understandably, holding oneself to constant criticism can be detrimental to one's overall well-being.



The Power of Forgiving Yourself

With the understanding of how unaddressed guilt can take a significant toll on individuals, increasing recognition has been given towards self-forgiveness. Best defined as a positive attitudinal shift towards the self, self-forgiveness focuses on acknowledging and taking accountability for one's actions and replacing negative thoughts with positive acceptance (Wohl & Thompson, 2011; Toussaint, Webb & Hirsch, 2017). Coined as an emotion-focused coping strategy, self-forgiveness effectively deals with feelings of guilt, shame, self-loathing, and self-esteem (Toussaint, Webb & Hirsch, 2017). Accordingly, acts of self-forgiveness ought to serve as a useful strategy in helping individuals cope amid transgressions.

The benefits of self-forgiveness don't stop there either. In fact, studies have found that individuals who practise self-forgiveness often show reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and neuroticism (Ross et al., 2014). Furthermore, self-forgiveness can also reduce maladaptive behaviour such as punishing ourselves for our wrongdoings, and improve psychosocial resources for coping (i.e., perceived social support, improved interpersonal relationships), both of which manifest into improved overall wellbeing (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014; Toussaint et al., 2017). Wohl and his team (2018) attribute this to the fact that when one practises self-forgiveness, it affords the individual self-understanding for their actions and dissipates the negative emotions, thus improving their quality of life. Evidently, the benefits of self-forgiveness are far reaching.



Words of Caution

After considering how self-forgiveness can greatly benefit us, the question remains: Can I really forgive myself for everything? Unfortunately, no. In fact, forgiving ourselves all the time may even harm us more. Particularly, Wohl and McLaughlin (2014) pointed out that forgiving yourself for ongoing, negative behaviours (i.e., smoking) just spurs you on to reoffend even further. Take it this way—each time you smoke a cigarette, you tell yourself you shouldn't be doing this anymore and forgive yourself this time, saying you'll change. Yet, days later, you find yourself in the same predicament, falling into an endless cycle.

So, what went wrong? Isn't self-forgiveness supposed to benefit us?

The biggest flaw in self-forgiveness is the diffusion of responsibility away from the self. Wohl and McLaughlin (2014) highlighted that self-forgiveness allows an individual to be let off the hook—to attribute their wrong-doings to other, external factors when in fact they were the one responsible. Accordingly, this diffuses feelings of guilt, which serves as a powerful motivator for change. This serves to be counterintuitive to the idea of self-forgiveness because instead of motivating rectification, individuals stick to the status quo and continue to reoffend. Think about it, how often have you told yourself, "Oh well, I just can't help it"?

Practising Self-Forgiveness

So how can we practise self-forgiveness to reap the benefits while avoiding passivity? Extensive research has pointed to one crucial element to achieve this—responsibility. Specifically, individuals must recognise that their actions were wrong and take full responsibility for the harm inflicted (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014). By assigning responsibility to the self, it acts as a psychological glue to connect ourselves to our actions. Accordingly, the internalised guilt motivates us to learn from our mistakes and to change our behaviours (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014). In turn, actively reminding ourselves of our personal responsibility for our actions will allow us to cope with our emotions while preventing us from reoffending. Clearly, it's time to stop lying about how "this is the last time" and focus on reforming instead.

Conclusion

We've all beat ourselves up at least once for something wrong we did. But we're here to say that that's *completely okay*. Rather than ruminating on the mistakes you've made, forgiving yourself and moving on may be the best action you can take for your overall well-being. Don't be too hard on yourself.



When is "Perfection" the Enemy of "Excellence"?

By Benjamin Low



We all want to excel at work, in recreational endeavours, or being a supportive person to those around us. There is nothing wrong with striving to be "better" in various areas of life. At the same time, however, our ability to exert ourselves and achieve desired outcomes tends to vary. We have "good days" and "bad days", but frustration may arise if we do not meet our ideals. This frustration is proportionate to the perfection we expect of ourselves and, at higher levels, may foster hopelessness or even depression. This article discusses how we can harness perfectionism healthily for a better life and feel "okay" with ourselves as we are.

Clinical Perfectionism

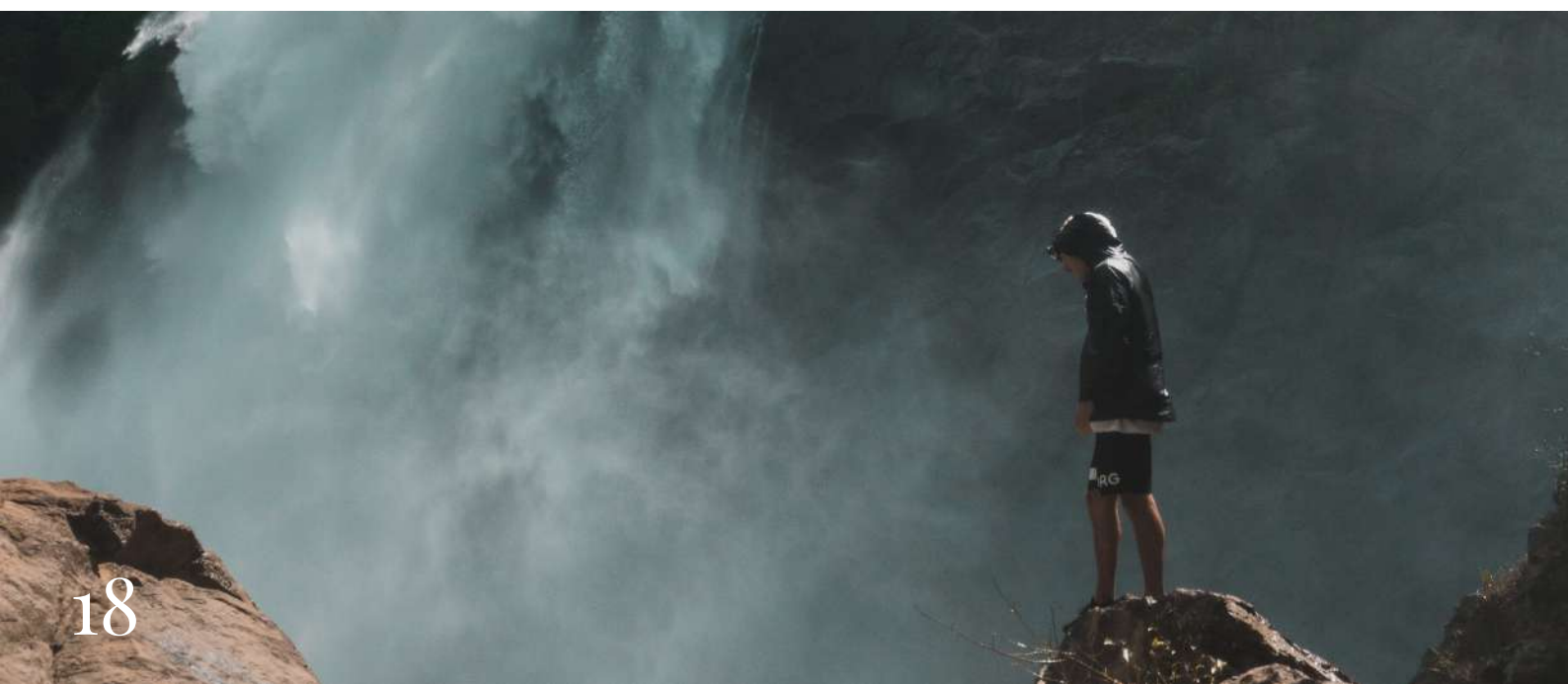
Excessive perfectionism turns aspiration into desperation. There may be times when innocent and uncluttered aspirations start to become bogged down by negative thoughts and feelings. These can include variations of "This is not my usual standard", "Why aren't I improving as much anymore?", or "I'm going to fall short of expectations". Over time, the successes we have experienced can turn into a default standard we set for ourselves—consciously or otherwise—and gain the flavour of desperation; whereby we feel a strong need to achieve those standards and anything less feels inadequate. Perfection is no longer an aspiration then, but a slave master that holds our self-esteem at ransom. Such an overdependence on self-evaluation that is based on demanding, self-imposed standards despite adverse consequences is known as "clinical perfectionism" (Egan et al., 2011). This will be simply referred to as "perfectionism" for the rest of this article.



The Conceptualised Self

Perfectionism can become our slave master when it forms a large part of the perceptions and stories we have about ourselves. This is known as a conceptualised self (Luoma et al., 2007). Our conceptualized self is a learned representation of how we see ourselves. It is not necessarily a bad thing until we feel that we *have* to live up to it, even when we do not. For example, it is common for technical experts to feel a loss of mastery when they become managers and need to lead people, or for high-achieving university students to feel disoriented when they transition to working life where the definition of "success" is far more ambiguous. Instant or perfect success may feel needed. However, it is also unrealistic because we need time to learn.

Unhealthy perfectionism will not tolerate that. Clinical experience suggests that a conceptualised self with strong perfectionism may be accompanied by thoughts that "I should..." or "I must..." perform at a high standard in valued domains, along with worries about negative consequences or self-criticism if they are not achieved. These are the tell-tale signs that a perfectionistic conceptualised self has started to become our slave master.





Consequences

There is thus a fundamental internal conflict. On the one hand, human effort and performance varies. On the other hand, a perfectionistic conceptualised self demands consistent perfection for positive self-regard. It is hence unsurprising that perfectionism has been linked to a variety of psychological disorders (Egan et al., 2011). It also contributes to impostor syndrome, where individuals have perfectionistic tendencies and do not internalise their achievements despite objective success (Bravata et al., 2019). Moreover, individuals may see their successes as mere luck or, at worst, a fraud (Bravata et al., 2019; Feenstra et al., 2020). Clinical experience suggests that this becomes a vicious cycle; where a person may try hard to achieve unrealistic expectations, fall short of them, feel that their self-esteem is threatened, and try even harder next time. They may or may not do better, but improvement brings relief rather than joy.

The internal conflict may ironically take us further away from the outcomes we would like to achieve. For example, it can foster thoughts about negative social judgment, self-criticism, and a desperate attempt to hide perceived flaws and control the situation. People may unwittingly express defensive anger and hostility when their ideas are challenged at work or not say anything for fear or judgment. This may consequently compromise the working relationships they need for success. Anxiety may also disrupt their focus and prevent them from putting their best foot forward. In these ways, the unrelenting pursuit of excellence becomes a self-sabotaging endeavour.



The Way Forward

The solution is not to simply "stop it". The pursuit of excellence can be individually, interpersonally, and materially enriching and thus we should not simply throw the reins of life into the winds of fate. Rather, healthy excellence involves the re-employment of perfection as an advisor rather than a slave master. We recognise that our persons, or our realities, may not be accurately represented by the thoughts of the conceptualised self. Instead, it is more helpful to come into contact with the present and see what is actually the case.

At this point, you may agree with the logic or have already known it yourself before but think, "I still feel that way". There is a concession, then, that emotional acceptance of this logic is not easily attained and may even require psychotherapy. The conceptualised self is not born in a vacuum. It is learned (Westrup, 2014) through a life history where perfection is rewarded and/or its absence is catastrophic. Examples include professional families with high standards of achievement or cultures where personal worth is primarily recognised through academic or occupational achievement. Hence, given the personalised nature of the conceptualised self, its transformation from slave master to advisor may be better achieved in individual psychological therapy.

Conclusion

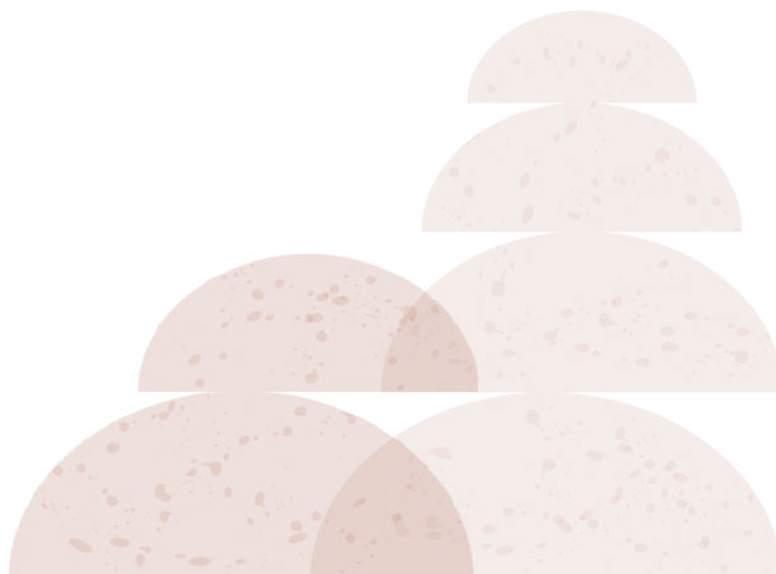
Aspirations are healthy and enriching unless a perfectionistic conceptualised self turns them into "desperations". This emerges from our life history where we (mis)learn the meaning of success and failure. We can be simultaneously excellent and emotionally healthy by recognizing when our conceptualised self is being unhelpful and consider what actually is "good enough" to improve our lives. In doing so, the slave master will become a helpful advisor instead. This is one way we can learn to be "okay" with ourselves. Psychotherapy can facilitate this process. While a better life does not magically appear "one day", the journey to it starts from "day one". Why not today?



Coping with Difficult Emotions: A Mindfulness Approach

By Ng Da Xuan

Every emotion is simply a physiological arousal in response to a situation (e.g., feeling heart palpitations when asked to speak in public or a sense of heaviness when you failed to receive your ideal exam grade). Emotion also sometimes comes with advice (e.g., "I need to relax; if not, others will notice and view me as incapable", "If I continue getting only a B grade, I will not get my first class honours", "If only I can relax during public speaking, others will see me as confident and capable"). The emotions and the accompanying thoughts are often based on our memories of similar situations, or from what we have learned from people around us. However, emotions and the accompanying thoughts are simply information. Like all information, we can attend to emotions with openness, curiosity and flexibility. In this article, I will share how to bring mindful attention to your difficult emotions this way.



Practising Mindfulness with the Right Purpose

Mindfulness is defined as the ability to pay attention to thoughts and sensations with intention and purpose. In other words, mindfulness is merely an ability. Like any other abilities, mindfulness can be used to serve various purposes (e.g., a sniper may use mindfulness to pay attention to their target; Cayoun, Francis, & Shires, 2019, pp. 3). However, without the right purpose, mindfulness does not inherently produce resilience or well-being—the result of mindfulness practice depends on the practitioner's intention. For example, a mindful practitioner who craves perfection may blame himself for paying attention to distracting thoughts and end up feeling worthless. In comparison, another practitioner may also judge the same distraction as undesirable but still practice with openness and curiosity. That is, mindfulness practitioners enjoy a better emotional well-being only when they practise mindfulness with the right intention and purpose.

Without the right purpose, mindfulness does not inherently produce resilience or well-being—the result of mindfulness practice depends on the practitioner's intention.

For most mindfulness practitioners the motivation for practising mindfulness comes from the wish to attain a mental state of equanimity—the moment-to-moment awareness of bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts, without craving for any particular experience or aversion towards any current experience. This aim towards equanimity means that the mindfulness practice revolves around becoming and remaining attentive to the inner experience, without craving for a more pleasant feeling nor feeling averse towards the current negative feeling. This state of equanimity allows the practitioner to experience the full range of emotions while remaining calm and emotionally non-reactive (Desbordes et al., 2015).



Benefits of Attending to Emotion Mindfully

Paying attention, with openness, curiosity, and flexibility, underlies all mindfulness practices. The more attuned we are with our feelings, the more likely we are to be able to regulate our behaviours. Without mindfulness, we risk losing a sense of connection with the people around us and underappreciating the crucial elements of our lived experience. For example, we might engage in a conversation without genuine openness and curiosity. We might be talking and listening, but without being fully present, we are simply going through the motions. With mindfulness, we can instead attend to the words spoken in the conversation, be curious about the meanings of these words, and notice the tones and nonverbal expression of the speaker—all while staying mindfully attuned to our thoughts, judgments, and reactions with openness and curiosity. Thus, we end up with a richer experience of the conversation and a better connection with others when we bring in mindfulness than without.

What is out of sight is usually out of mind. We need to direct our attention on purpose to notice, appreciate, and savour the meaningful and important aspects of our lived experiences. When we go about our day mindlessly with no purpose or intention, we might overlook important elements of our lives and end up with the impression that our life is dissatisfying or unfulfilling. It is like going on a vacation with your loved ones, but your attention is on the argument you had earlier with your parents; without appreciating and savouring your vacation, you will likely end up feeling upset and dissatisfied for most of your vacation.

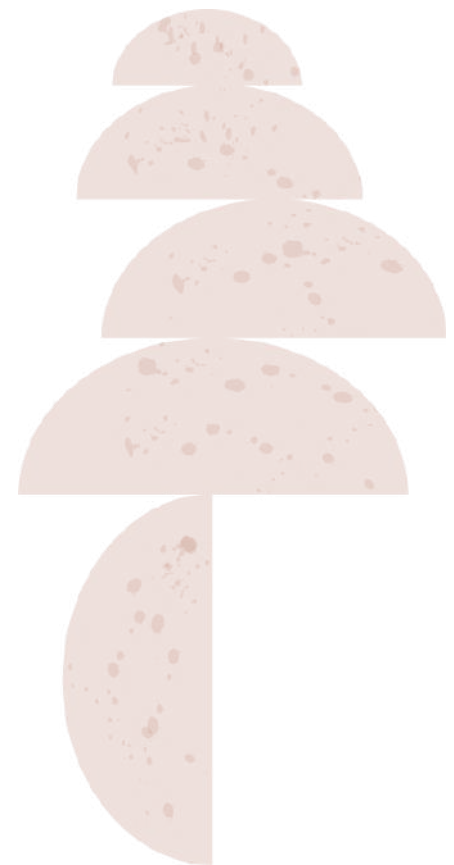
Mindfulness does not help you suppress or forget negative past experiences. Mindfulness does, however, allow us to hold the negative experience with curiosity and openness while also allowing us to flexibly direct our attention back to the sight of the beach, the sound of the sea waves, and the touch of wind blushing on our skin. Paying notice to the beauty around us and having the opportunity to practice gratitude for having the chance to experience beauty are some benefits of bringing mindfulness to our daily lived experiences.

Without mindfulness, we risk losing a sense of connection with the people around us and underappreciating the crucial elements of our lived experience. For example, we might engage in a conversation without genuine openness and curiosity.



A Guide to Coping with Difficult Emotion Mindfully

When applied to difficult emotions, a mindfulness practitioner follows this 3-step process: stop, observe, and return. First, stop whatever we are doing. Then, notice and acknowledge the presence of the feeling by saying silently, "Here is the emotion of anxiety" or "Here comes the fear of uncertainty". Like a curious and objective scientist, we should also observe whatever else is going on in our inner world, like thoughts, memories, feelings, physical sensations, and images. Thereafter, gently bring attention to the bodily sensation closely associated with the emotion (e.g., heaviness in the chest for sadness, pulsation in the chest for anxiety, or butterflies in the stomach for fear). We do this by locating the sensation (e.g., is the sensation located in the shoulders, jaws, eyebrows, stomach, or chest?), the size of the sensation, and nature of the sensation (e.g., is it heavy or light, vibrating or still, hot or cold?). We pay careful attention to the body sensation by observing the sensation from moment to moment, without craving (for another sensation) nor aversion (to the current sensation). Whenever we catch ourselves being distracted, we can kindly redirect our attention back to the body sensation of the emotions. Finally, when we find that we are no longer reactive towards the sensation and feel ready to return, do a short breathing exercise (slowly breathing in and out) before shifting our full attention back to the task or activity at hand.



When applied to difficult emotions, a mindfulness practitioner follows this 3-step process: stop, observe, and return.

Summary

Effective emotional regulation requires two major skills: accurately tracking ongoing emotional states and knowing when and how to intervene (Barrett & Gross, 2001). Mindfulness directly promotes the use of these emotion regulation skills (Baer et al., 2006). The method as described here for difficult emotions can also be used for pleasant emotions (e.g., awe, bliss, contentment) to help us better appreciate our lived experiences. Like all skills and abilities, some individuals are naturally good at being mindful, but all individuals will need guidance to become competent at it. It is important to emphasise that practising mindfulness can potentially trigger adverse effects such as depersonalisation and traumatic memory re-experiencing (Aizik-Reebs et al., 2021). It is therefore strongly encouraged that individuals seek out guidance from mindfulness teachers who are trauma-sensitive and are competent in managing these potential adverse effects of mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness is a great ability for helping us manage our difficult emotions; however, only when mindfulness is used under the right contexts and for the right purpose. Recent evidence found that mindfulness interventions are most suitable for managing mild to moderate emotional symptoms, but may not be appropriate for certain populations and conditions. A recent meta-analysis revealed that mindfulness-based interventions are most effective with children and adults, for depression, substance use, and stress management, but least effective with college students, and for anxiety, pain, and sleep management (Goldberg et al., 2022). Individuals who are interested in using mindfulness for the management of their physical or psychological conditions should consider seeking advice from their primary care provider or their therapist. To find out more about how you can use mindfulness to cope with difficult emotions, do consider seeking out consultation with a mindfulness-trained therapist.

Killing Time

By Jessy Yong

"Remember that time is money."

- Benjamin Franklin, 1748

What is Time?

Perhaps it is best explained by psychologists John Boyd and Philip Zimbardo—unlike diamonds, gold, and hundred-dollar bills, time cannot be possessed and saved; once time has passed, it is gone forever. Viewed in this way, Benjamin Franklin's analogy of time to money becomes untrue. Time, our scarcest resource, is actually more valuable than money.

And this treasured, yet limited resource permeates our everyday life. From innocuous ideas like there being a "golden hour" for sleep or photography or medicine, to dense topics like the liminal boundaries between work and play, time allows us to make sense of ourselves and the world every day.

But there was also a time when some of these ideas did not exist. The "golden hour" had yet to become mainstream, and distinctions between work and leisure were not prevalent. That is because, beyond the theory of relativity in physics, time is also relative in the social sciences—our ideas and perceptions of time can change.

The (Relative) Ticking Clock in Psychology

As psychologist Robert Ornstein explains in his book *On the Experience of Time*, we perceive time using cognitive processes that are subject to cognitive illusions. For example, a cancer patient's time perception can be altered when they are immersed in a virtual reality (VR) environment during chemotherapy. This can assist them by making the treatments feel shorter and more tolerable (Schneider et al., 2011).

Across the world, there are also different and relative time perspectives that lead to different outcomes. Social psychologist Robert Levine studied how time works and referred to people's attitudes toward time as their "pace of life". Of the thirty-one countries measured, it was found that Western European countries had the most rapid pace of life, while Mexico had the slowest (Levine, 1990). However, in 2006, Professor Richard Wiseman replicated Levine's study and instead found Singapore to be the fastest moving city, with locals taking an average of 10.55 seconds to walk 19 metres.

Unfortunately, taking the #1 spot this time is not good news for Singapore, as a fast pace of life is consistently linked to higher rates of coronary heart disease (Levine, 1997).

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Time perception also becomes problematic when we are faced with continual psychological threats. While planning for the future can prevent impulsive behaviours like gambling, it can also create excessive worry and chronic stress (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). Just think about the typical never-ending slew of concerns when it comes to planning for a future in Singapore: get through school, find a job, buy a house, build a family, get your children through school...and the list continues. Most aptly described by Stanford sociobiologist Robert Sapolsky, the human capacity to prepare for and worry about the future is both a blessing and a curse (Sapolsky, 1994).

Let the joy of being alive drive us in the present, and to envision a hopeful future with optimism

A Rat's Race Against Time

With time seemingly working against the human race, Zimbardo and Boyd (2008) wrote a book described to be like a self-help guide to counteract the workings of a fast-paced, anxiety-ridden life; which may be of particular relevance to countries like Singapore. For a person to "live a longer, fuller, more successful, and happier life" (p. 295), they suggested that people should balance their perceptions of the past, present, and future. In other words, they recommend us to connect with our roots and build a positive past, let the joy of being alive drive us in the present, and to envision a hopeful future with optimism. Zimbardo and Boyd's advice is laden with actionable solutions: look through your school yearbook, go to an amusement park, practice flossing as a daily ritual, and more.



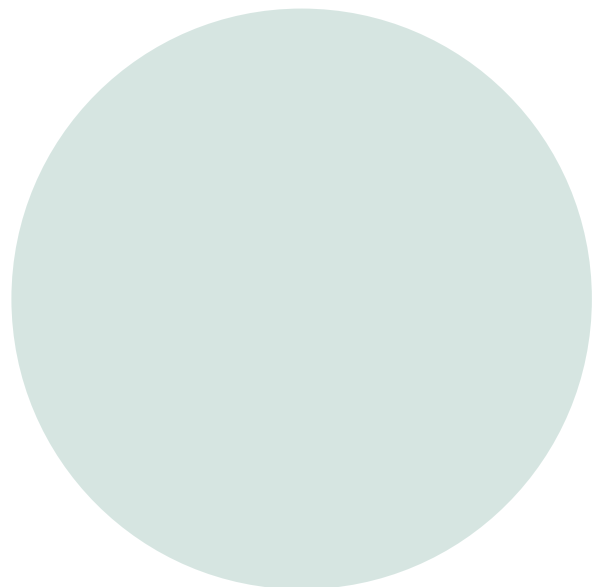
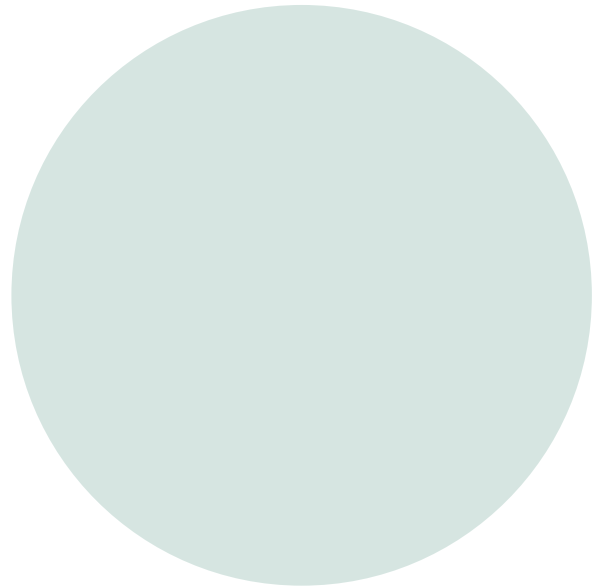
Even so, there is something limiting in getting advice from a self-help book. As Larsson and Sanne (2005) write, leaving time management to personal responsibility is more likely to work if the person has an internal locus of control (i.e., if they believe they have control over their lives), as it is much easier to convince someone to change if they themselves think that their actions matter. But what about those who believe otherwise (namely, that their successes or failures result from factors beyond their control)?

Time is on Your Side

If self-help books do not work for you, then should you forget everything I said? Is time really equal to, or more valuable than, money? Certainly, we can measure time that way if we base our measure on economics.

However, if you have an external locus of control, and thereby you feel a lack of control over the outcome of events in your life, you might not believe your actions matter. If so, thinking time has value will not motivate you. Neither will the past-present-future balance suggested earlier be persuasive. Ultimately, the perception will be that time controls you, more than you can control time.

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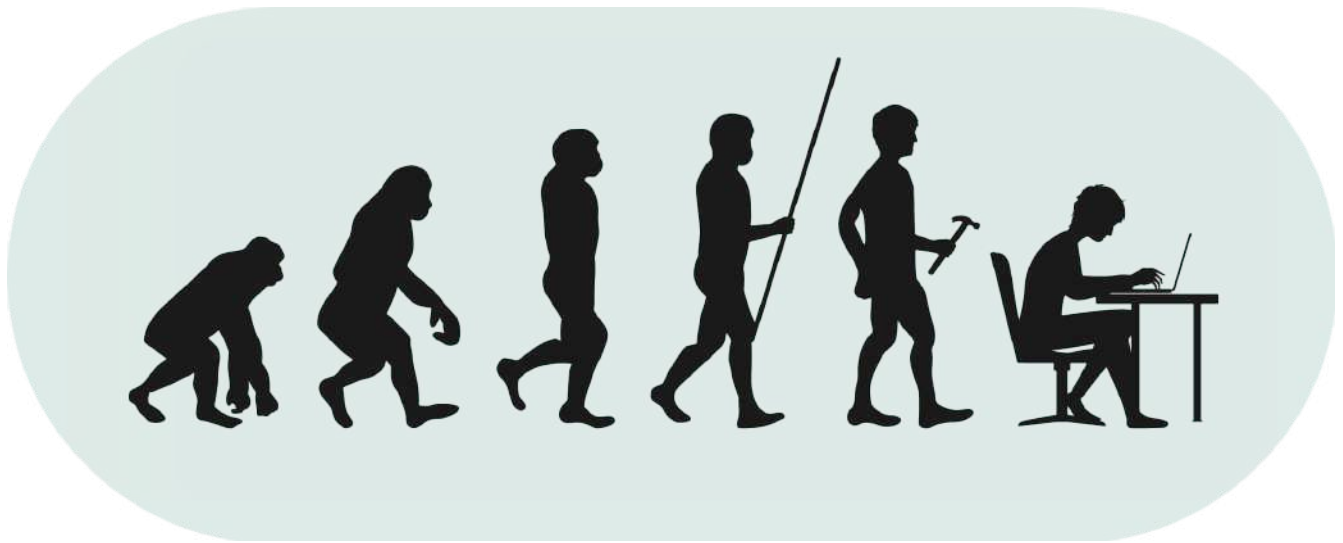


Figure 1: Common Graphic Representation of Darwin's Theory of Evolution

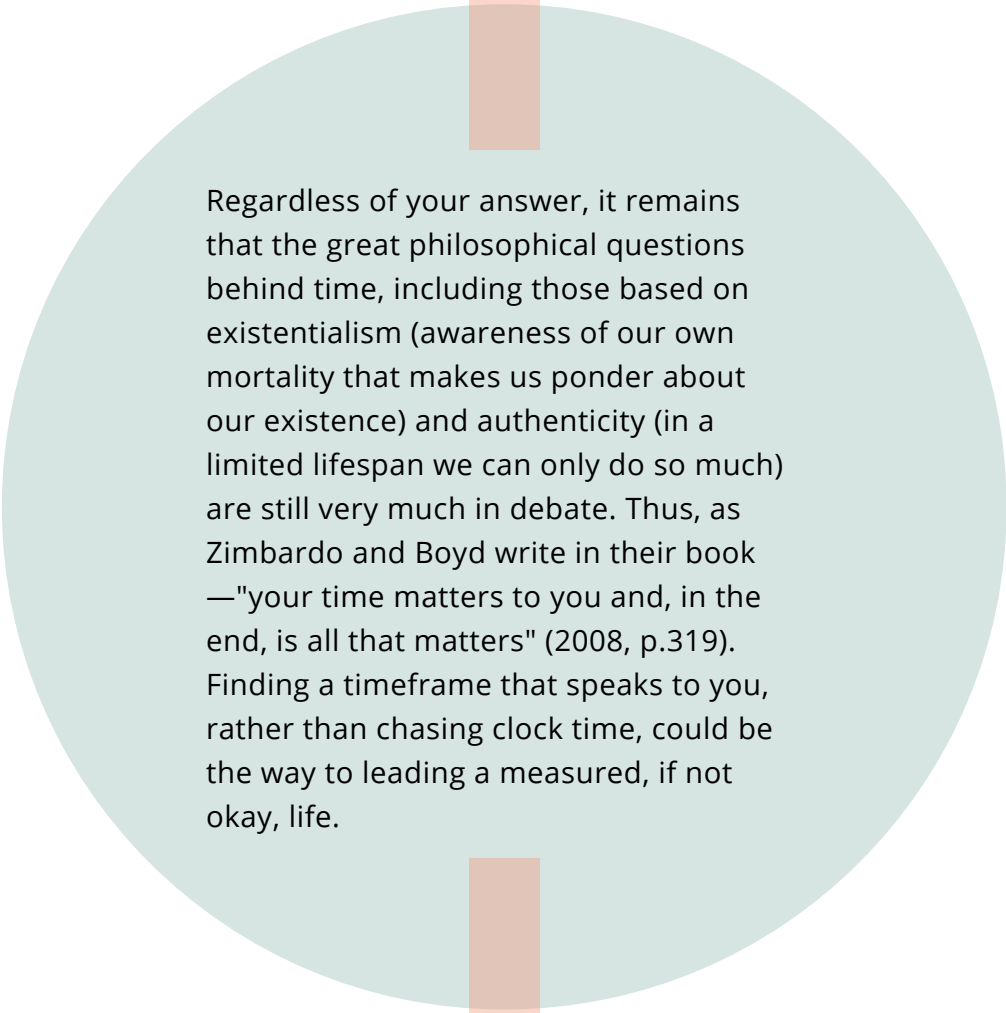
If you feel as though you are locked down by such a fixed time trajectory, then you are not wrong. Inspired by Darwin's theory of evolution, this chart (figure 1) illustrates the idea of a linear progression of the human species, advancing from hairy primates to smooth-skinned creatures over time. But surprise, surprise—evolution does not happen in a straight line! Instead, Darwin's theory did not actually propose any special direction in evolution, or linearity for that matter (Wheeler et al., 2020).

Yet, the misconception of there being a specific direction of evolution is pervasive (including this misleading visualisation of evolution). But how many times have we assumed and mistaken linearity for progression? A "third world" country becoming "first world" does not mean it used to be backward. A person does not have to get a job, get married, and have children to signal maturity in adulthood. And moving from past to present and future does not necessitate improvement. Recognising this linear pressure borne out of systemically created milestones can be important for those who feel that time controls them. In fact, it might even be reassuring to say it is alright if your time is nonlinear.

Have the Time of Your Life

Although time is systemic in that the perception of time affects our entire lives, it is also relative. Ultimately, you can see time in your own way. Some people have assimilated Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, where you live the same life over and over like a circle, unable to change anything, and thereby embrace life as it is (Popova, 2018).

You could also live like Luhman, who believes time is not scarce. Rather, he states that the scarcity of time is created from our own expectations and aspirations (Nowotny, 1994). Another article in this issue (When is "Perfection" the Enemy of "Excellence"?, p. 17), summarises the potential problem of having overly high expectations and aspirations in this statement: "Excessive perfectionism turns aspiration into desperation." This tells us that adjusting our thwarted expectations is another way to manage our sense of urgency.



Regardless of your answer, it remains that the great philosophical questions behind time, including those based on existentialism (awareness of our own mortality that makes us ponder about our existence) and authenticity (in a limited lifespan we can only do so much) are still very much in debate. Thus, as Zimbardo and Boyd write in their book —"your time matters to you and, in the end, is all that matters" (2008, p.319). Finding a timeframe that speaks to you, rather than chasing clock time, could be the way to leading a measured, if not okay, life.

Gratitude When The Going's Not Great

By Sameer Ehsaan

After its first reported sighting on the final day of 2019 and its first visit to Singapore just shy of a month after that (Goh & Toh, 2020), COVID-19 has gone on to overwhelm humankind in many ways. The list is endless: the loss of lives, economic decline, inclines in retrenchment rates, restricted physical interactions across people, an overwhelmed healthcare system, frontline workers at the brink of chronic burnout, and persistent travel restrictions being just some of the consequences. Locally, public health measures (e.g., the Circuit Breaker period) have stressed Singaporeans. These measures have been linked to significant upticks in family violence-related offences and increased mental health issues (Cheon, 2020). Sources such as the risk of COVID-19 infections amongst loved ones, financial loss, and loss of employment are also identified as significant stressors (Ministry of Health Singapore, 2021). Another survey quoted declining mental health rates even in relatively more stable individuals, health and wealth-wise (Cheon, 2020). Suffice to say that people generally feel not so good in what might be considered as an associated mental health pandemic.



But there is an antidote that can help us cope with all this doom and gloom, be it inner or outer: gratitude. Yes, the opportunities are ripe for us to be thankful for what we have (or do not have), especially now. But how would gratitude work when life seems to have more cons than pros?

Gratitude is defined as a state of thankfulness, appreciation, and wonder for life that one can express to oneself, other people and animals (such as pets), other entities (such as higher beings), and even environments (such as nature and the universe) (Snyder & Lopez, 2014). This definition broadens the scope of what we generally think about the meaning of gratitude, including the aspects of life that we usually take for granted. We might be immensely thankful if a loved one gifted us a new pair of expensive, wireless earbuds, but how often do we feel grateful for the mere ability to hear sounds? In the context of COVID-19, do we feel thankful for the relaxation of public health measures and our cautioned ability to catch up with loved ones in person, or do we still begrudge the continued need for health precautions?

More importantly, gratitude is also a trait (or attitude) that helps us cope with all of life's adversities, not just COVID-19. It is associated with other positive feelings such as happiness and hope (Overwalle et al., 1995), as well as contentment (Walker & Pitts, 1998), and is also positively and negatively related to life satisfaction and depression, respectively (Wood et al., 2008). However, we must caution that gratitude is not implied as a panacea for depression but is one of many strategies to help oneself adaptively cope with depressive symptoms.



How does one benefit from the positive effects of gratitude as both a state and a trait? Gratitude interventions help us focus on what to be grateful for and how to express such resultant feelings of gratitude to external sources. Letters of gratitude are one of the most common gratitude interventions practised. They offer a simple way to express one's gratitude, especially when one is too shy to express gratitude to someone else verbally. Toepfer et al. (2012) conducted a study that analysed writing gratitude letters on well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction. The participants in the experimental group (letter writers) were tasked to write three letters of gratitude, at one-week intervals, to three unique individuals in their lives. The letter writers had been asked to be self-reflective and expressive in their letters, and they had full knowledge that the research team would eventually send those letters to the intended recipients. The results from the post-writing session questionnaires showed that they had experienced higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness as well as a decrease in depressive symptoms from this intentional letter-writing practice.

But why stop at people? It can be your pet or the device from which you're reading this article. It can even be a tree in your neighbourhood. Yes, that's something that has been happening. In Australia, the Melbourne City Council created a program called the *Urban Forest Visual*, where trees in Melbourne have been tagged with ID numbers and associated emails for city citizens to report structural risks that these trees might pose to people and property (Burin, 2018). From its inception in 2013, the program eventually evolved into something more: thousands of Melbournians and people worldwide started to send unrelated,

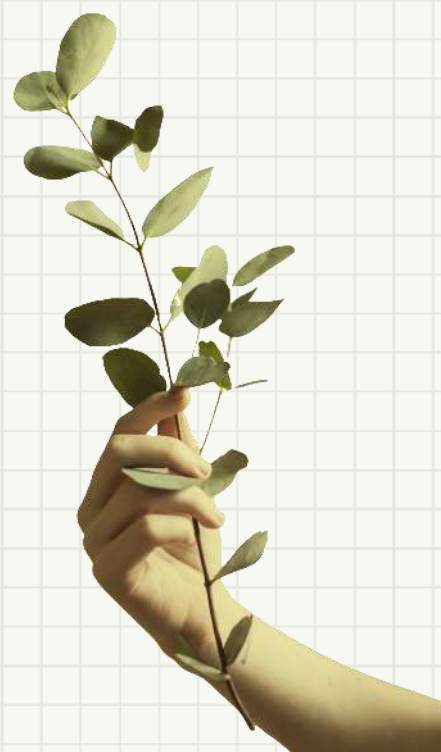
yet wholesome emails, such as letters of appreciation. These senders were grateful for the trees' attractiveness and ability to photosynthesise and produce oxygen for our consumption, for instance (LaFrance, 2015). If a human sender is lucky enough, they might receive a curated and educational email "reply" from the tree they sent a message to, which is always a nice surprise.

Similarly, the *Letters to Trees* program in the city of Vancouver (in Washington, USA) invites people to write, draw, or paint submissions, in any language, to significant trees in the city (the Heritage Trees), where these submissions can be published in the city's *Urban Forestry Newsletter* (City of Vancouver, n.d.). The program has been made accessible for learning in schools, where students can learn how to write better or understand the biological role that trees play in the environments they're in. Family members can also forge closer bonds through engaging in a shared activity related to learning about one or more of the *Heritage Trees*.



Another common gratitude intervention is gratitude journals—written records and accounts of what one is grateful for within any time interval (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly). O'Connell et al. (2017) conducted a study where participants in the "reflective-only" and "reflective-behavioural" conditions wrote nine gratitude journal entries (three instances a week, over three weeks), alongside a control condition. Participants of the manipulated conditions were instructed to reflect and write down "...a number of positive social interactions over the day or friendships/relationships [they] are grateful for", with the difference being that the reflective-behavioural participants also had to "...express [their] gratitude to a person of [their] choice face-to-face or through e-mail, Facebook, a kind note, tell him/her how much [they] appreciate[d] something specific that he/she does and reflect on the person of interest, in terms of gratitude reaction and how [they] feel." Participants in the control condition completed the same journal writing task but did not have any prompt relating to gratitude in their instructions. Results from the questionnaire given to all participants right after the three-week writing period showed that participants in the reflective-behavioural condition experienced the most significant increase in affect balance (the balance between positive and negative emotions) and decreases in depressive symptoms across all three conditions.

However, harnessing the trait of gratitude can sometimes seem complicated, and it can be partly due to certain flaws in character. Solom et al. (2017) aptly dubbed four maladaptive personality traits as the "thieves of thankfulness": envy, materialism, narcissism, cynicism.



Solom et al. (2017) found that levels of all four of these traits were inversely correlated with gratitude, even after controlling for gratitude in the results of their pre-test and post-test questionnaires. In their study on materialism, envy, and gratitude, McCullough et al. (2002) reported that participant self-reports of materialism and envy were negatively associated with self-reports of gratitude. Additionally, Tsang et al. (2014) concluded that gratitude significantly contributed to the consistently negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction (i.e., persons with higher levels of materialism are less grateful and therefore experience lower life satisfaction).

Even then, the most imperfect of us can start to become more grateful since gratitude is akin to a muscle. We can learn gratitude as a trait through intentional and consistent practice in the same way that consistent and focused effort exerted by the prototypical muscle can strengthen it over time.

A meta-analysis of thirty-eight gratitude studies showed that gratitude interventions, in general, positively benefit people's levels of happiness, life satisfaction, gratefulness in one's character and positive affect, and they relieve the effects of depressive symptoms as well (Dickens, 2017). As such, intentional involvement in any of the gratitude interventions suggested here can positively influence mental health outcomes, despite external circumstances.

You may have heard the quote, "Tough times don't last, but tough people do", but if we need to be tough against what life throws against us, we need to be thankful for what life provides to us too. One's journey to lead a more grateful life can start with a simple question: Who has helped me with something in the past week, and how can I show them my gratitude?

Who is that person (or other entity) to you, and how will you thank them?



Finding Solace in Music Through the Lens of "Dear Evan Hansen"

By Xavier Lim

"Music can also evoke worlds very different from the personal, remembered worlds of events, people, places we have known." – Oliver Sacks (2010)

Prologue

Figuratively speaking, it is peculiarly fascinating that we play with and listen to seemingly meaningless tonal patterns—that which we call music. The humanistic tendency to gravitate towards music shares similarities with what Wilson (1984) calls "biophilia"—the innate desire to affiliate with nature, to the extent Sacks (2010) dubbed this musical affiliation "musicophilia". Our propensity for music is pervasive through all developmental phases in life and has probably been with us since the beginning of time (Wallin et al., 2001).



Embedding music as an artform, various artists have designed stories delivered through music—Broadway musicals are an example of this form. Readers who are familiar with the musical scene would recognise iconic Broadway musicals that were previously performed in Singapore, such as *The Lion King* (2018) and *Les Misérables* (2016). More recently, *Dear Evan Hansen*, a Broadway musical about the intricacies of living with the desire to belong has garnered remarkable commendation in the United States. Beyond conveying human essence through a musical medium, *Dear Evan Hansen* taught me what it truly means to feel "okay" in the company of music. This article cannot fully capture why music speaks to us in an oddly humanistic way, but through insights from psychology and musicology, I attempt to explain why some of us find solace in music, through the lens of *Dear Evan Hansen*.



Dear Evan Hansen: A Synopsis

Centred on the life of Evan Hansen, *Dear Evan Hansen* is a story about finding one's identity—about the desire to feel a sense of belonging amidst social isolation and anxiety in the social media era. Having encountered the passing of a student in his high school, Evan Hansen finds himself writing a letter that was never meant to be read, telling a lie that was never meant to be told, and living a life that he was never meant to live. Encapsulating the inner thoughts and emotions of the characters, *Dear Evan Hansen* uses well-orchestrated songs to demonstrate character growth; the story emphasises the power of music as a conveyance and in finding solace.

Music as Conveyance

Serving as the musical's theme song, *Waving Through A Window* portrays the mental model of a socially anxious adolescent—Evan—and how he yearns to connect with the outside world whilst trapped behind a window. The song introduces itself with a quirky rhythmic structure where upbeats are phrased awkwardly—synonymous with our protagonist Evan's socially inept character.

As a means of engaging empathetic understanding and perspective-taking, *Waving Through A Window* is a cardinal example of an experience that Green and Brock (2000) dubbed psychological transportation.

Psychological transportation (or narrative transportation theory) proposes that when engaging with a narrative, people "transport" themselves out of reality into the context of the narrative and, in the process, they experience the world evoked by the narrative. Even though the theory is commonly applied in social psychology, music psychology researchers have concurrently adopted this model to explain the perception of music (Costabile & Terman, 2013).

As we assume the perspective of Evan Hansen, we are witnessing the ability of music as a conveyance—a communication medium beyond verbalisation. In *Waving Through A Window*, various metaphors are used to allow us to immerse ourselves in Evan's reality. For instance, "Step out of the sun, if you keep getting burned" drives the idea of staying away from social interactions to avoid rejections, while "When you're falling in a forest, and there's nobody around, do you ever really crash or even make a sound?" emphasises Evan's solitude. Even without the interactional nature of human language, music can still "communicate" with us in its unique way.



"I've learned to slam on the break, before I even turn the key."

– *Dear Evan Hansen*,
"Waving Through A
Window" (Atlantic Records,
2017)

Human language and music are intrinsically intertwined to the extent that music psychology researchers question their simultaneous existence (Cross, 2014). This fundamental question has branched research on the psychology of music (and its uniqueness from language) into different domains, such as the linguistic function of music (Atherton et al., 2018), music cognition (Jacoby et al., 2020), and other functions of music (Andrews et al., 2020). In this reflection, we investigate a particular function of music—allowing us to find solace in sorrowful times.



– Dear Evan Hansen, "You Will Be Found" (Atlantic Records, 2017)

Music as Solace

Culminating at a major arc's finale, *You Will Be Found* portrays the outlook that none of us is truly alone. The song seeks to advocate for persons living with mental health conditions, giving them a voice in the community to overcome their difficulties. *You Will Be Found* attempts to comfort those who feel dejected, allowing listeners to find solace in its expressive lyrics.

One psychologist—Csikszentmihalyi—has conducted extensive research into the factors that allow us to flourish in life, and his theory of *flow* (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) allows us to understand why some of us find solace in music. Flow describes a mental state where one is authentically engaged in the present moment, which Seligman (2011) described as "being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity".

Even though it may seem counterintuitive to listen to seemingly dejecting music when feeling down, the experience of flow from listening to these experientially congruent songs instead promotes various positive emotions associated with well-being (Carpentier et al., 2011). For music listeners, the promotion of positive emotions is likely influenced by a process called *music empathizing*, which Kreutz et al. (2008) described as the tendency to feel a sense of "disassociation" from displeasure as a result of feeling absorbed in sad music (Vuoskoski et al., 2011).

Epilogue

As the saying goes, "When words fail, music can often speak.". The existence of music and its variations has universally influenced humans since the dawn of time. Music performs many functions, whether we choose to consider ourselves "musical" or not—some of us simply choose to turn to music to feel "okay" in sorrowful times.

W.H.A.T. Are Your

Priorities?

By Janice See, Joyce Yeung, Jonathan Ee



"Are you okay?" An instinctive reply might be "Yes, I am fine". Seldom would we consider and share our true feelings. In our society, we have been conditioned to flaunt positive images of ourselves and not to share any negative emotions and thoughts. Inevitably, we have been habituated to keep our feelings to ourselves. It has become common to react in a way that is socially acceptable for survival and progression. We have been mastering unconsciously the Chinese art of face changing to protect our inner selves and not to share our emotional vulnerabilities.

Change is inevitable and has increased drastically in recent years due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Ambiguity and fear caused by influences such as globalization and PESTEL (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal) factors have led individuals to accept higher levels of compromise, control, conformity, compliance and being conditioned.

This results in the need for synchronisation of individuals' values, beliefs, norms, and cultural influences across our systems along with factors such as wealth, health, ability, and time. Frequent thoughts of having more money, stability, status, promotion, commitments, and other factors have resulted in significant increases in burnout and associated psychological issues such as stress, anxiety and depression.

A shift of priorities and life values can lead to the revitalisation of individual well-being; for instance, unsatisfied or frustrated employees might resign from their jobs to pursue what is important to them. Imagine each of us as an iceberg (Figure 1). On the surface, we depict the successful version of us that we want others to see. Beneath the hidden portion of the iceberg are the true emotions and situations that we are handling silently.

We have been accustomed to avoid portraying and sharing feelings. Constantly putting out "fires" and accumulating more burdens can result in a spiral of negative thinking patterns that can lead people to doubt their self-worth. Adapting a mindset to realign our priorities can help to build our resilience in the long run. It is a norm for human beings not to know everything individually. More important is that we acknowledge the need to take steps to seek assistance and guidance instead of being critical towards ourselves. We recommend taking small steps to focus on self-compassion and self-care so as to be more effective and sustainable during periods of uncertainty. Seek advice and discuss ways to deal with issues beyond personal control. Here we share a model of suppressed negativity; next we offer some guidance towards addressing what's beneath the surface.



Figure 1: Iceberg Model



Figure 2: Some simple ways of self-care

Why is Self-Care Important?

Research has shown that poor self-care can result in stress, loss of concentration and demoralization (Parthasarathi et al, 2017). Self-care is part and parcel of our daily life and yet is an aspect that is often neglected. In fact, we can achieve it by introducing some basic activities into pockets of our time and/or whenever we feel any mental fatigue (Figure 2).

For example, we can include one of the following practices into a daily routine.

- Start the day with some deep breathing, listening to some light music while having breakfast and/or before starting work.
- Take a 5–10 minute power nap to rest from time to time.
- Pause, breath and calm down to think before rushing to react to any challenging events/issues.
- Pause to feel gratitude and acknowledge positive thoughts before ending the day.

Realignment of Life Goals

Realization of evolved life values and a shift in priorities may have been derived from a realignment and re-prioritisation of life goals. We are aware that we must set goals which are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound (S.M.A.R.T); however, we tend to overestimate by incorporating too much. We suggest setting reminders to ourselves to be kind to ourselves, listen to our hearts, reflect on whether an action is feasible, be mindful and be agile in the process. Figure 3 illustrates how we can set our priorities.

The Wealth, Health, Ability and Time (W.H.A.T.) model developed by Fong and Tripathi (2021) could serve as a guide to prioritize life goals from four main aspects. There is no specific order to the model.

For example, students may prioritise ability, working professionals may prioritize wealth, a patient may prioritise health and a retiree may prioritise time. A university student who needs to earn a living to pay their school fees might prioritize wealth, followed by ability, followed by time and health. The rationale behind this ordering (W. A. T. H) is that money is needed to pay for school fees (W), in order to learn a new skill (A) (T) with an aim towards a better future. In this scenario, health would be the least important factor, but is not omitted.

According to Fong and Tripathi, the W.H.A.T. aspects of our lives can be assessed by a risk and value inventory that is classified into four categories: namely, Finances, Family, Fitness and Future. Within each of the categories, the impact is analysed with the outcomes providing the framework on which of the W.H.A.T. we would like to prioritize.

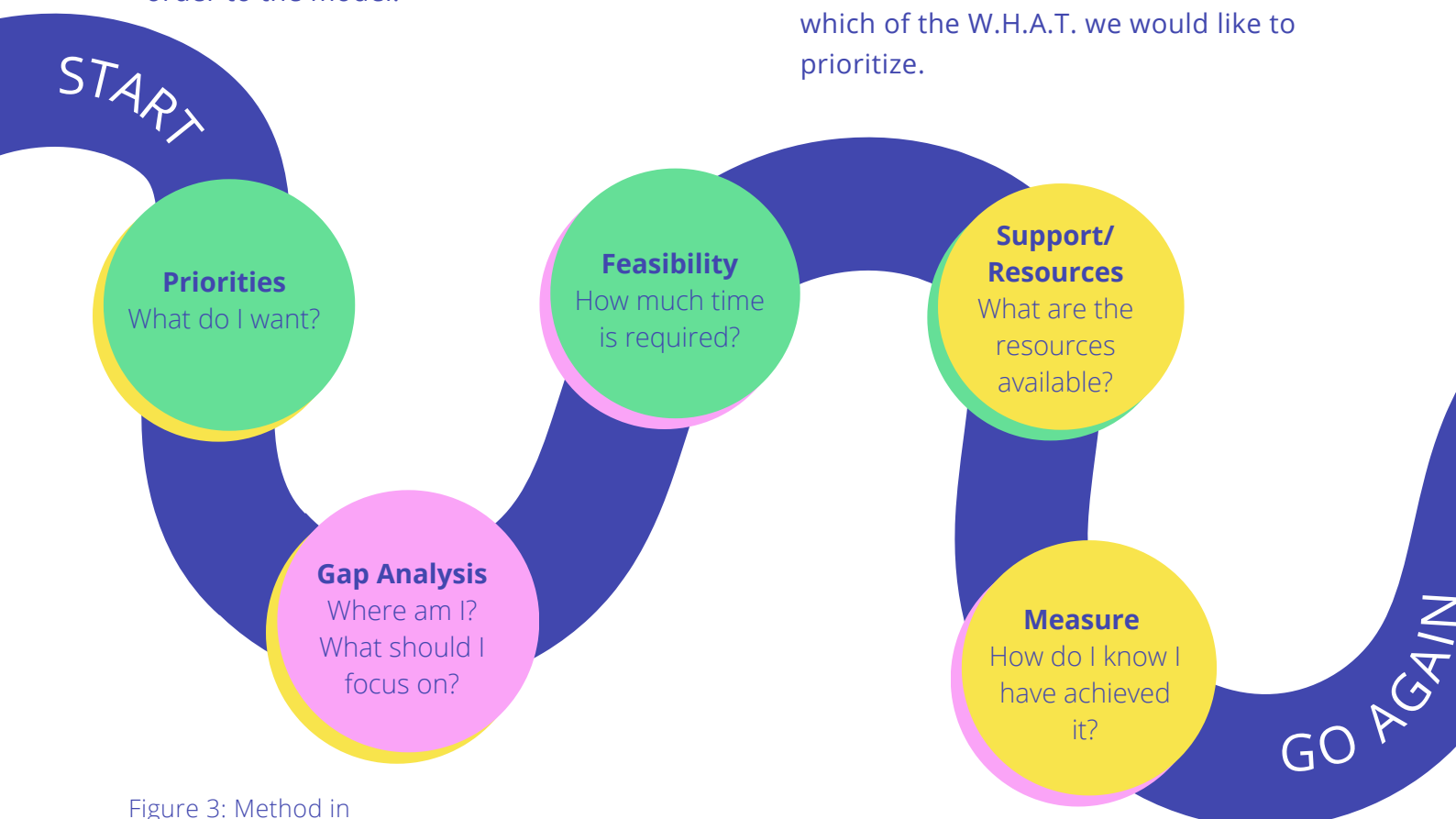






Figure 3: Method in setting priorities

	Finance	Family	Fitness	Future
 Wealth	<p>How is the current state of my finances?</p> <p>E.g., loans, financial, liabilities, budget, savings, assets, etc.</p>	<p>Based on my goals, how are my current finances, savings, investment plans performing in terms of returns, bonuses, and interests?</p>	<p>How is my current state of financial knowledge and ability to invest, save, buy and financially plan for myself?</p>	<p>How is my current time length before I get my financial returns and dividends?</p>
 Health	<p>How is my current financial commitment towards my domestic budget and other related family expenditures monthly?</p>	<p>How is the current health state of my family members?</p> <p>E.g., disabilities, psychological, behavioural and general wellbeing.</p>	<p>How is my current commitment to my family as a child, parent, spouse, caregiver, guardian, etc.?</p>	<p>How is the quality of time spent with my loved ones?</p>
 Ability	<p>How is my current commitment towards saving money for the future/intended studies, retirement, and other plans needing a budget for myself?</p>	<p>How is my current state of my own health, motivation, mental well-being to any existing medical condition needing long term management?</p>	<p>In planning for my future, how am I situated in acquiring certain skills, abilities, knowledge, academic papers, life, or work experiences in preparation for my expected future?</p>	<p>How do I feel about the time needed to reach my goals?</p>
 Time	<p>How is my current state of financial commitment towards health insurances, budget for gym membership, supplements, and health products or emotional wellbeing programs?</p>	<p>How is my current health? No prior medical health issues warranting medical visits and medication.</p>	<p>How is my ability in managing my physical and emotional well-being?</p>	<p>How is my current state of time devoted to physical training and/or emotional well-being exercises?</p>

Extracted from Fong, C., & Tripathi, S. (2021). Multicultural Workplace Counselling and the Impact of Wealth, Health, Ability and Time (WHAT) on Mental Health under COVID-19 Pandemic. *Psychology*, 12, 1743-1755. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2021.1211105>

Table 1: Personal risk and values inventory

Table 1 summarises guidelines to help us identify and prioritise each of the W.H.A.T. aspects to help us work most effectively towards our goals. After reviewing and prioritising what is important to us, we can better allocate time and effort towards achieving the important aspects. Change is constant and inevitable; hence it is necessary for us to revisit the model, preferably every 6 months or when there is a huge change in our lives. With clarity and alignment of goals comes a reduction in frustrations, distractions, anxiety, and stress derived by competing priorities.

Life is like a seedling; we need to devote time, effort, and tender loving care to nurture it so that it can develop and flourish. Life can also be viewed as a journey that offers many lessons to be learned, unlearned, and relearned. It is okay to express what we need to help us along the journey whenever we feel that we are not okay. Seeking guidance signifies a gaining of strength or growth that allows one to leap forward. Perhaps next time if someone asks "Are you okay?", remember to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect before instinctively replying, "Yes, I am fine".



I'm Okay If Earth Is Okay

By Dr Denise Dillon

The River And The Tree

"You are white and tall and swaying," sang the river
to the tree,
"And your leaves are touched with silver—but you
never smile on me;
For your branches murmur love songs to the sun-
kissed turquoise sky,
And you seem so far above me that I always hurry
by!"

"You are laughing in your shallows, you are somber
in your deeps,
And below your shining surface there's a heart that
never sleeps;
But all day you pass me, dancing, and at evening
time you dream,
And I didn't think you liked me," sang the birch-
tree to the stream.

So they got a bit acquainted on a glowing summer
day,
And they found they liked each other (which is often
times the way);
And the river got so friendly, and it ran so very slow,
That the birch-tree shone reflected in the water down
below!

Margaret Elizabeth Sangster (1838–1912)

The state of being well is often described as being okay; it appears that many are not okay. The Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study 2017 (GBD 2017) revealed that mental disorders are responsible for more than 14% of age-standardised years of healthy life lost due to disability, and this has been so for three decades. The global mental health crisis affecting a reported 13% of the population indicates that many of us are not okay; depression and anxiety are common features of the crisis, which leaves health professionals reaching for ways to ease the burden. To this end, some therapeutic, preventative healthcare approaches draw on individual attentional focus to either internal or external stimuli, thereby enabling therapeutic effects in accessible and cost-effective formats.

Mindfulness has an internal focus on presence of mind, slow and conscious breathing, and sensory engagement. The history of mindfulness is long, and reaches across both Eastern and Western cultures and both religious and secular traditions. Mindfulness reputedly works through self-regulation of thoughts and emotions that ultimately leads to a clear and calm mind. However, the practice of mindfulness can itself pose well-being risks for vulnerable groups experiencing mental health challenges (Clarke et al.).

Forest bathing, also known as nature and forest therapy or *shinrin-yoku*, draws on some aspects of mindfulness but has a more recent origin. Originating in Japan in 1982 and with subsequent adaptations across many countries, this approach has an external, sensory focus on the environment, which can prove less challenging for those with mental health vulnerabilities. While sharing aspects of mindfulness such as slowing down and sensory engagement, the intention is for an immersive experience in nature that enables attention restoration—to take oneself out of one's conscious presence and into a sensory forest immersion. This is often enabled through a series of invitations to engage in recreational or relaxation activities in outdoor environments.

While it appears that there is little cause to be concerned about forest bathing practices, more research is needed to determine the specific mechanisms behind reported benefits, and to fully explore effects of key aspects of forest bathing such as self-compassion, isolation and nature connectedness (Kotera et al., 2020). Benefits of forest bathing thus far reported in the literature include enhanced physiological and psychological well-being for self, and enhanced environmental well-being through the awakening of a biophilic imperative to connect with and to feel a belonging in nature (Clarke et al., 2021).

This latter effect might be assumed a secondary concern given the broad reach of the global mental health crisis, but consider also the broad reach of the global climate crisis. Heightened concern about the climate crisis can also lead to psychological disorders, a consequence recognized by the American Psychology Association as eco-anxiety (Clayton et al., 2017). Experts predict that mental health disorders such as stress, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder will increase in alignment with worsening climatic conditions associated with climate change. We need the Earth's natural systems to be okay to alleviate such concerns and for us to feel okay.

Several systematic reviews indicate that mental health benefits can be gained by practicing forest bathing for as little as 15 minutes (Hansen, et al., 2017; Kotera et al., 2020; Rajoo et al., 2020); this needs to be repeated for sustained effects. Repeated visits to favourite nature locations can develop into place attachment over time, which in turn can lead to feelings of connectedness (or rootedness) to place. A strong sense of connectedness helps build resilience and optimism, both of which can lead to a resolve towards pro-environmental behaviours that add purpose and meaning to one's life through the development or strengthening of an environmental identity.

Clayton defines an environmental identity as "one part of the way in which people form their self-concept". She elaborates that such an identity involves "a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the ways in which we perceive and act toward the world". Another component is "a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are" (Clayton, 2003, pp. 45-46). Formalised forest bathing sessions or therapy are not essential to foster one's environmental identity. Noticing nature can be accomplished alone, in small increments of time, beginning with observations of outdoor greenery from the comfort and security of one's home, and leading to brief ventures into outdoor green spaces. Over a period of weeks, the duration of time and the quality of experiences in outdoor environments can be increased and enhanced as one becomes more accustomed to being immersed in natural environments.

In some countries, General Practitioners (GPs) have recognized the therapeutic efficacy of spending quality time in nature. Begun in 2013 and now in operation across 34 US states, the national ParkRx movement focuses on programs or interventions that include a health or social service provider who encourages their patients/clients to spend time in nature with the goal of improving their health and well-being (<https://www.parkrx.org/>). Mere exposure isn't enough; "the kind of connection that makes the difference involves more than simply spending time outdoors" according to the Noticing Nature Report (National Trust, Feb 2020). Actively tuning in and relating to nature regularly, even for small periods of time, can be effective for establishing closer connections and new relationships with nature. In Shetland in 2017, RSPB Scotland (a nature conservation charity) partnered with NHS Shetland to offer Nature Prescriptions, an initiative which was subsequently rolled out to all 10 GP practices across Shetland in 2018. The success of Nature Prescriptions is such that GPs in five Edinburgh practices now prescribe nature in a pilot to explore the potential for this to be one of Scotland's national-level health strategies (Mason, 3 November, 2020).

If you're not feeling okay, perhaps it's time to revisit your own sense of connection to our nonhuman natural environment and reconnect with your environmental identity. Here are some ways to engage in self-directed preventive healthcare through nature immersion. These activities are free of charge, can be done close to home, and they might even make you feel okay again.

Nine Weeks to Nature and Self

Week 1 (20 seconds–2 minutes)

- Listen to birdsong
- Listen to sound of leaves blown by the breeze
- Touch bark, leaves or grass

Week 2 (2–5 minutes)

- Smell a tree or flowers
- Watch the clouds
- Watch a bird flying or resting
- Gaze up at the moon or stars

Week 3 (5–8 minutes)

- Watch bees, butterflies or dragonflies hovering
- Find a bug or ant in the grass
- Go barefoot in grass, mud or sand

Week 4 (8–12 minutes)

- Take and share a photo of nature
- Rise early to watch the sunrise
- Observe patterns of light as the sun shines through leaves

Week 5 (12–15 minutes)

- Catch falling leaves and observe them closely
- Follow an ant trail with your eyes
- Find a spot to stay and watch the sunset

Week 6 (15–18 minutes)

- Engage in 10 minutes of mindfulness and immerse yourself in the sensations of nature
- Get active in nature; go for a walk, jog or run

Week 7 (18–20 minutes)

- Sketch a flower or animal as you observe it
- Go for a walk up a hill to see the view over trees

Week 8 (20 minutes)

- Engage in a cleanup activity by picking up litter in your local park or at the beach
- Get creative with wild art (e.g., create a mandala with leaves)

Week 9 (20 minutes)

- Find a comfortable spot to sit and observe a tree
- Stop under a canopy of trees, close your eyes and just listen

Note. Adapted from the UK National Trust Noticing Nature Week by Week Guide.

<https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/national-trust-noticing-nature-week-by-week-guide.pdf>



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