

Close Enough to Normal to Get By
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"I don't need a life that's normal, that's way too far away. But something next to normal would be okay ... that's the thing I'd like to try. Close enough to normal to get by ... we'll get by."

These lyrics from the 2009 Tony award-winning musical *Next to Normal* are sung by a mother and daughter in the midst of dealing with their mental health issues and its effects on their family.

So how do we strengthen our mental health for the short and long haul, as our own world is spinning out of control from the massive changes, shutdowns, chaos, fear, and increased insecurity that the onset of COVID-19 is causing? Additionally, how do we care for those who experience anxiety, depression, addictions, abuse, hypervigilance, PTSD, suicidal ideation and the like on a daily basis, now that everyone's anxiety is on high alert?

It is helpful to understand that whatever one's coping skills and behaviors have been in "normal" times – whether they lean towards health or sometimes spiral into dysfunction – these will now be in full bloom, especially when society as a whole is ramped up with anxiety and fear. Old patterns of dealing with grief, loss of control, trauma, and endings throughout our lives, will become the "go-to" with what is happening directly and indirectly all around us.

Have our patterns historically sent us toward cut-off? Anger? Violence? Addictions? Abuse of self or others? PTSD or other trauma reactive behaviors? Obsessive thoughts and worrying? Hoarding? Withdrawal? Over-functioning? Escapism or denial? Developing and practicing self-awareness is key to adapting our behavior and caring for others. In such a time as now when "normal" is way too far away, we are all faced with figuring out how to cope, attempting to create some semblance of "next to normal" moving us in the direction of health.

However, it is critical to recognize that the very actions that are needed to increase safety and protection from viral transmission, are unfortunately the conditions that may increase the level of risk for individuals who are prone to destructive, addictive, and abusive behaviors, and for those around them.

Here are some steps we can take to stay mentally safe:

- Develop and/or increase healthy coping skills and behaviors *now*, before reaching the breaking point (you know the drill – breaks away from screen time; read books; get outside; write notes; make phone calls; eat healthy, etc., etc., etc.),
- Expand on CDC guidelines with what I call the 3M Method of Handwashing -- 20 seconds of Mini Mindful Moments -- to re-center yourself with each handwashing, shifting from fear to compassion and gratitude. This is good for children as well, maybe singing a favorite and positive song while doing so,

- Be gracious and kind, forgiving yourself and those around you, because we are all getting overwhelmed, annoyed, frustrated, exhausted, and cranky,
- Relax about the homeschooling stuff. Yes, it's good for kids and teens to be doing their work, but ultimately how you and they feel about this less structured time at home with family, caring for self and others in need, will be much more important than any homework assigned.
- Look for the moments of joy, delight, gratitude and laughter in the midst of the stress and chaos. It will be there, so take it in when it comes.
- Create regular check-in times with those who are more prone to mental health concerns, so there is care and accountability,
- Make sure that medications are refilled early and safely stored,
- Remove guns or keep them locked away,
- Proactively set appointments with therapists and medical providers, most of whom are being encouraged to switch to TeleHealth options for the time being (meeting by phone or over online platforms). This allows them to safely continue to provide mental health services to new and existing clients, and insurance is supporting its use,
- Connect with online versions of 12-step programs to stay connected to structures of accountability that reduce tendencies toward addictive behaviors,
- Proactively and broadly distribute information about domestic violence hotlines, suicide phone and text hotlines, and other emergency mental health outreach services, all of whom remain operational, even if the means of access may have been adapted.

Within faith communities, we talk about our ministry of presence. This is being challenged right now when physical presence is restricted. But as many others have noted, there are many creative ways to be “present” and connected, especially for those experiencing mental health issues. Use these ideas to expand and create ones to meet your personal, family, and community needs.

What is “normal” may still be too far away, but by being mindful, being proactive, and yet gracious in how we care for self and others, we may find that we are “close enough to normal to get by.”