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To: Ann Duckless
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Supporting Your Mental Health While Navigating Change

Change when things are uncertain is hard. Change that we didn't choose is harder. Change that has a potential impact on our mental wellness may be the most challenging of all.

The most valuable thing I've ever learned about how to navigate change came from a white-water rafting instructor when I was 15 years old. I couldn't tell you what he looked like, or even who else was in the 6-person raft with me, but I never forgot the lesson, which has helped me at times when I have struggled with my own mental wellness. It went something like this:

If you are thrown out of the raft when the rapids are rough, your first instinct is going to be to stand up, try to resist the rapids, and do your best to climb back into the raft, which is moving. Don't. Trying to stand up in rapids increases the likelihood your legs will get stuck on rocks and that you could be seriously injured. The raft is moving and slippery, and you won't likely get back into it easily, no matter how hard you try. Better to wrap your arms around your life vest (which you are wearing) as if you are hugging it, pull your feet up in front of you, and let the rapids carry you down the river until you are in calmer waters. There you can assess the best way to get to land or to where your raft is, since

it may or may not be floating down the river with you. If another rafting group is there and you are both in calmer waters, you can get in their raft. The trained guides (in kayaks) will also be looking for you.

I can't tell you how many times, when things have been uncertain and I have felt anxious, I've come back to that image of floating down the river with my feet up and trusting my life vest until waters are calmer.

We are in some uncertain times. We may wonder if the rapids ahead of us will be rougher than where we are right now, if our current rafts will be meeting us down the river, or if we will be in new rafts when things are calm. This worry may be impacting our mental health.

If you are navigating change and want to support your mental health:

1. **Reach out to who and what you know helps.** Turn to the people in your life who are supportive and can listen. Talk about your anxiety, if it helps you, or talk about other things that help you regain a sense of calm. If you feel you have no one to turn to right now, know that there are people who are trained to listen and help, such as a mental health provider. Reach out to them – you don't need to manage difficult times alone. Supportive people and those trained to help are our life vests.
2. **Do the things that you know help take care of you.** Exercise, drink water, take your medication on time and as prescribed, and seek comfort in music, books, journaling, meditation, your pets, or other healthy distractions when things feel too much.
3. **Challenge negative beliefs about change.** One thing you can control is your response in the situation. Challenge your negative beliefs about how you cope with change, especially if those beliefs are rooted in the past. It's okay to feel overwhelmed, but that doesn't mean you won't move forward in a positive way. One way to do this is to engage in small actions that help you gain a sense of control and calm. One thing you

can control right now is your breath. Deep breathing will help you regain calm, and costs nothing. There are lots of phone apps, YouTube videos and other resources to help us all practice breathing a little more deeply right now.

4. **Go in the direction of the change.** What's happening right now is moving us all in a direction to be more mindful of how we are in the world, how we relate to one another, and how we take care of our health. Conversations are happening now that were unheard of two months ago, and perspectives are changing in a way that can be good. Remember, change often happens where progress is needed, too.
5. **It's okay if you end up in a different raft.** While you may not know what's ahead, you can trust that there are many others (an entire world of people, in fact) who are navigating this change with you. You are not alone and there will be others to greet you as things change. Things may be different, but that doesn't mean you won't be well or be able to weather new challenges.
6. **The guides are available and looking to help you.** Please know that there are support services out there if you are struggling with your mental health and alone. You don't need to navigate any of this by yourself. Text TALK to 741741 at the Crisis Text Line or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1800 273-TALK (8255). Many counselors and other helping professionals are also looking to provide telehealth services right now. Take some time to learn about resources in your community, including those that may be online.

We can all do things to help support our mental health in times of change, and in doing so, we encourage others to make their mental health a priority, no matter what is changing around them.

Sincerely,

Doreen Marshall, Ph.D.
AFSP Vice President of Programs



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