

Wellness Tip: Dealing With all the Losses

A staff member in FRM asked me to address the grief we are experiencing from all the losses we're currently facing. It is a timely topic, given how life has changed for all of us. For some it is the loss of celebrations, such as galas, graduations, and trips. Or it may be the loss of sharing grief from the death of a loved one through attending a funeral in person. And all of us are experiencing the loss of personal contact, the loss of a regular schedule, and the loss of freedom of movement.

As I started this write up, I was also hit with a personal loss as I was informed my contract as Wellness Coordinator for FRM would finish at the end of April and not be renewed. Although part of me expected this, given the great budget cuts that need to be made, I also held onto hope that mental health is important enough that my position might be spared. I want to share a bit of how I am dealing with this, as unfortunately there are many others at FRM who will undoubtedly receive news of your own positions being eliminated.

With all the losses – pandemic-related and budget-related – what we are experiencing is grief. It is important to acknowledge that so we can allow ourselves to feel the feelings that go along with grief. This may involve sadness, disappointment, anger, frustration, fear, and even despair. When feelings are ignored, they don't go away. They may get buried and come out in other ways, which is why it is healthiest to feel them, acknowledge them, and work through them. Letting ourselves feel and express what we are going through is an important step in the healing process.

The morning I was told my time was soon coming to an end at FRM, I told the students that had appointments with me that afternoon. They were upset and it was an opportunity to talk about loss. I confessed to feeling sad because I truly love working with the FRM students and staff. You are all in the helping profession, so are wonderful caring, sensitive people. You are all intelligent and motivated, so I've had some deep and thought-provoking interactions. I've been privileged to have people trust me to open up and share their challenges, their tears, and their pains. I will miss this.

I then spoke about how there is comfort in being sad when something, or someone, is no longer. Whenever I boarded a plane to return to Canada after spending many months in a place, such as Africa or the Middle East, I would often feel great sadness and was happy about that (for lack of better word to really explain this feeling). I know it sounds strange but if instead I was relieved to get on that plane to get out of there, it meant I didn't enjoy my time there or connect with the place and the people. Almost always I was sad as I had developed deep connections, had meaningful experiences, and truly enjoyed myself in many ways. This is how I feel about leaving FRM too, and for that I'm happy.

What I truly know from the deepest part of me, is that with every loss there is a gain. It may be a new opportunity, a stronger sense of gratitude for what is, a lesson learned, a chance to develop more coping skills, a realization that we can handle challenges, and on and on. Is it usually enough to say we're happy for the loss? No – but the losses we experience are often out of our control. What IS under our control is how we view it and what part we focus on. I am grateful for the time I had at FRM and will focus on that rather than the time I won't have. I am taking the position of curiosity. I wonder what is next? I wonder what other opportunities will arise or I will create?

With all the losses we are experiencing because of the COVID pandemic, we are experiencing such gains too. The world has quietened down. We have space and time to breathe, reflect, and reimagine our own lives and what we want the world to be like. We have cleaner air, an ozone layer that is healing, and less sound pollution. We have neighbourhoods creating community, such as people singing from windows and balconies in Italy, doing exercises together in Spain, and even bingo!? We are connecting more virtually as well with sing-alongs, dance parties, and wine gatherings. The sense of global togetherness is magnified as we are truly all in this together. People are becoming creative in how to hold weddings and funerals and stay in touch with loved ones they can't be with physically. People are checking up on each other more and offers of help are greatly increased. It is a kinder, gentler world right now.

Yes, there are losses with more to come. But there are also gains and although we have no control over much about this virus and many other challenges in life, we always have control over what we choose to focus on. And that makes all the difference. However, we are not machines and our emotions naturally go through ups and downs. We cannot sustain a steady upward trajectory, but we can lessen the sting of the downs and move through them quicker.

I am here until the end of April only so invite you to make an appointment soon if you want to meet with me by emailing wellnessfrm@ualberta.ca.

Much gratitude to all of you for what you do to add to the 'gains' in so many ways.

Merna Schmidt
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