

Pandemic Stress

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Diana Hill: It's almost like ACT was made for pandemic stress. ACT has six processes that are involved in promoting Psychological Flexibility. And if there's one thing that will help us get through pandemic stress and all of the stressors that we're facing, Psychological Flexibility is key.

Debbie Sorensen: it's okay to be going through a hard time. Right now, all your emotions are valid in this hard situation and you're not alone. . We have to do what works best for us. There's a lot of different ways of coping with this. That was us, Diana and Debbie, on Psychologists Off the Clock.

Diana Hill: We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado.

Diana Hill: I'm Dr. Diana Hill practicing in seaside, Santa Barbara, [00:01:00] California.

Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book Of Act Metaphors.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Diana Hill: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

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So register now , through our website offtheclockpsych.com.

Debbie Sorensen: And we'd also like to invite you to a virtual book club with our cohost, Jill [00:02:00] Stoddard about her book, Be Mighty that's happening in October. And if you go to our website and link to it through our sponsors page, you can get a 15% discount at checkout.

If you enjoy the podcast. Please consider making a values based donation on Patrimon. Even a small contribution helps us with some of our expenses. You could think of it as taking a cohost out for a cup of coffee and you can link to Patrimon on our website or just search for us on patrimon.com.

Diana Hill: it's good to be back here. This is Diana with Debbie today for a special episode, talking about the current stressors we are all facing, and we're really using this podcast today as a way to get some tools out to you that hopefully will be helpful right now.

And also a reminder to ourselves to pick up those tools and use them. One of the things that I love about this podcast and about ACT is the opportunity to live out the principles that we're learning in our own lives. So today we'll talk a bit about those.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes, it's very helpful. Sometimes. Just to [00:03:00] be a therapist and to have these tools available because we need them too, and we both talk all the time. We're about how we practice these things and we're hoping to share some of what we know with our listeners today.

Diana Hill: And just to note that Debbie and I have both done some writings and offerings on pandemic stress and using ACT. At Debbie's website,

drdebbiesorensen.com, she has a great blog on pandemic, stress and anxiety. And I have also have a fun handout for you in terms of body-based practices that are based in ACT for you to use.

And you can get those at my website, which is drdianahill.com

We're going to be drawing a lot from ACT and contextual behavioral science. And one of the reasons why we're doing that is it's almost like ACT was made for pandemic stress. ACT has six processes that are involved in promoting psychological flexibility. And if there's one thing that will help us get through pandemic stress and all of the stressors that we're facing psychological flexibility is key.

[00:04:00] It's about learning processes that help you navigate uncertainty and painful emotions, how to deal with sticky nagging thoughts, and also how to address big questions about impermanence.

And what really matters to you. ACT is also about staying focused on. Daily often small actions that line up with what you care most about. So today we're going to break down some of those processes, and hopefully you'll find them helpful in your everyday life.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, just about everything in our lives has been completely turned upside down within this past year. If you think about yourself a year ago, versus now so much has changed in every aspect of our day to day lives from. You know how we relate to

our neighbors and our friends and family to how we are doing school and work to just those little day things like going to the grocery store and getting our hair cut.

And so no wonder. Right.

Diana Hill: What's one of the big things that's been turned upside down or sideways for you,

Debbie Sorensen: Um, I don't even know where to begin to answer that question. Like my whole day structure, my kids are home. [00:05:00] I'm home a lot. I think all the, you know, I'm. Pretty social. And I'm just, I'm kind of a hermit. Not really, but I'm, I'm home a lot. And so many things have changed. How about you Diana?

Diana Hill: It's funny when you talk about being social and how you miss that, I'm sort of the opposite of I miss my alone time. There's never a time where I go into my house and it's just quiet and there's no one there there's always a kid there's always. Just that even that 10 minute break between clients where I would just have a breather of no one talking at me, it's become like, mom, could you play balloon ball? Mom,

what's this mean? What, you know, what do we have in for lunch? So for me, just that, that, that quiet space or the time to kind of regroup and, and feel a little bit more me is I feel like that's gone. And I really miss that.

Debbie Sorensen: You know, I actually think that one upside of the not having as many so social plans is that I'm actually just enjoying more chill time. I'm with my family. It's, you know, we talk a lot about how there's just so many things, emotional ups and downs [00:06:00] of this. And there are moments where my family's together and I'm like, this is nice.

You know, we don't normally spend this much time together.

Diana Hill: Yeah, it's a lot of together. Time

Debbie Sorensen: Too much. Maybe sometimes get away from me. Yeah.

Diana Hill: So, so we have the, yeah. You know, we have this stress of the pandemic. That's turned everything upside down, but it's, it's also this experience of, you know, that saying of like, when is the next shoe gonna drop? It's like many shoes are being thrown at us at the same time.

So the pandemic is. On top of, ongoing stressors that were preexisting, but also are really brought come to the surface right now. So things like systemic racism, police violence, and oppression, uh, extreme political division, financial uncertainty, and economic inequities, uh, parental burnout, and this collision of work and home and a climate crisis.

Debbie Sorensen: you know, we're recording at the very weekend we found out on Friday that justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died. [00:07:00] And I, it just felt like we now this on top of everything else. Not just grieving her life and what she's done. In her work, but also just the uncertainty around the politics of it, which was already stressing me out.

And Diana, I know in California you have the fires. We have them here too in Colorado.

Diana Hill: here in Santa Barbara that we had some really smoky days, the whole state of California it's been experiencing smoke and there was one morning where we ended up having to cancel school for the day.

And it, it becomes like At points where it feels like it's just too much. And I know that a lot of people have experienced that in different ways, over the course of this pandemic, uh, times when it feels like a too much. And then times when they come up for air and there's, there's, you know, really wonderful things that are happening as well.

Debbie Sorensen: In moments of hope. I mean, I think it's so up and down. Yeah.

They say that pandemics like this one. lead to What's called a second pandemic, which is the mental health consequences, like depression, anxiety, [00:08:00] PTSD. And I think we're seeing that now there's some early research on what people are noticing with the rates of mental health issues and addictions, domestic abuse, all are on the rise right now, as this continues to go on in the future and multiple stressors pile up and really.

As therapists, I think we're on the front lines of that aspect of the pandemic. I think that we're seeing how people are struggling in our work. And just a quick shout out to all the therapists who are listening, that this is really important and hard work that we're doing right now. And we are also meanwhile, going through this.

Diana Hill: I found the episode with Susan David, that Jill did a while back really helpful because she talked about how as therapists we are, are simultaneously processing our own experience of upheaval and the pandemic and all the changes in our lives while our clients are going through it at the same time.

And I don't think I've ever quite felt so [00:09:00] intimately. Connected all the same page with ever, and it's hard. And you know, at times I just want to cry with them or I feel, I just want to say, yeah, I'm, I'm feeling exactly the same way.

Debbie Sorensen: No. I do say that sometimes, because I think that I can relate I was like, yes, I also didn't sleep last night and that kind of thing. Yeah, no, it's true. And I think. I'm noticing that there are periods where it almost feels kind of normal, semi normal in its own special way.

Everything feels like it'll be all right. And then there's other periods where it just feels really, really hard and scary. And I think some of our usual outlets for responding to stress aren't as available to us. And so that, that can make it hard as well.

Diana Hill: So APA does this annual stress in America survey that I've talked about. Other episodes, but they usually do annually and they started doing a monthly this summer. Understandably why? And in that survey, they, they reported that of Americans that 72% of Americans say that this is the lowest point in history.

[00:10:00] They can remember. Other research has pointed to the prevalence of depression and anxiety is more than three times the rate, uh, in 2020 than it was. In 2019, but at the

same time. Yeah. And some of the stats that are coming out are also interesting from the APA stress at America study, 82% of parents agree that they're grateful for time at home with their parents, with their kids.

And more than three and five adults are taking action against racism. And a majority of adults agree that the movement against racism is going to result in meaningful change. So here we are, this is acceptance and commitment therapy in a nutshell, right. That life and includes pain, distress, uncomfortable emotions.

Yeah. Difficult things are part of life. And what are we going to do about that? How do we turn this pain into something that is maybe worthwhile?

Debbie Sorensen: So we're all stressed and anxious right now. And why wouldn't we be given the circumstances that we just talked about? We have [00:11:00] so much uncertainty right now so much, and that's really hard for people. And we're also seeing so many financial stressors.

A lot of families disproportionately. People of color are facing. Job and income and food uncertainty pay cuts, just not knowing whether people will be able to make their rent, pay their bills. And so some of those extra pleasures of life are also less accessible to people that just make life more enjoyable and fun.

In the U S we also have uncertainty about where we're headed with the election , and globally, we're looking at the future of our world with climate change. The stress and uncertainty impacts us in a lot of ways. I am exhausted sometimes.

And that's like the number one word I keep hearing from people is people are exhausted. This is so tiring. A special form of exhaustion I'm experiencing is around decision making, decision, making fatigue. I like to call it it's. I think we have to constantly be weighing the risks and benefits of what we're doing.

We don't [00:12:00] know what the outcome is going to be. So everything from little tiny decisions like. Should I put on a mask and go to the hardware store or not to these big decisions, you know, should I send my child to school or not? Which is a decision I happen to be making right now in my family. It's very hard.

And I think sometimes just feeling the weight of having to make those decisions is hard.

Diana Hill: and part of that stress and exhaustion is just that our threat system is on overdrive. Right? We've. We have a lot of stressful stimuli coming at us. And we may even have some attentional biases associated of seeing things as more threatening because our threat system is on overdrive. For me, that really shows up in irritability, uh, and sometimes even right, angry outbursts, which I can, I think people can make may be able to relate to.

I had this moment with. My computer this week where I just lost it because I had piled so many things on my desktop because I couldn't deal with them that my computer was going so slow. It wouldn't even move. [00:13:00] And I just started yelling at it. and that's not really

typical of me, but under these types of stressors, I think we're engaging in ways that aren't really typical.

Cause this isn't a typical time.

Debbie Sorensen: We're noticing problems with sleep. So many people I've talked to are, their sleep is impaired and I've had nights, not every night, but I've had nights where I wake up in the middle of the night and I just, that my mind starts going.

And it's a, I think it's a very common experience

we're also noticing a rise in unhealthy behaviors to cope such as alcohol use and other substance abuse. I think we're, we're feeling chronically revved up with racing thoughts, and it's just hard to focus. A lot of people are having trouble just. Keeping their mind focused on their work, their school.

And we might act sometimes from our threat system rather than from our values. So, you know, when you're irritable and you take it out on your family or your roommate, instead of acting the way you, you wouldn't want to be. And I actually even read an article Diana, [00:14:00] that dentist are seeing more broken teeth because people are so stressed out.

They're like clenching their jaws and grinding their teeth at night. And so I think we're all experiencing some version of stress and these are just some of the things that we're seeing.

Diana Hill: yeah, that sort of chronic stress inside oabracing, our bodies, you know, to, to deal with it. And I think it's also in part due to the fact that we. Aren't moving around in our lives. As much as we used to, there was ways that we could dissipate some of the stress. Right. We'd go walk, walk around and talk to somebody or go and drive and pick up our kids or go to the grocery store more often.

Debbie Sorensen: yes, we're holding it in

Diana Hill: holding it in and we're grinding our poor teeth down.

Debbie Sorensen: loosen those jaw muscles people

Diana Hill: But we don't have some of those same ways of dealing with our stress that we used to.

noticing in terms of your own pandemic stress, Debbie?

Debbie Sorensen: Well, I'm, I relate to what you're saying about not moving as much, because I think I just, I am trying to get out and walk my dog and do some things, but I think normally I'm just pretty active in my [00:15:00] day to day life. And I'm much more sedentary.

And I think I can relate to pretty much everything on there to some degree. How about you?

Diana Hill: Yeah, it sort of reminds me of grad school when I would check off everything on the generalized anxiety list, generalized anxiety disorder, yeah, that's me. That's me. The context was graduate school, right? So now it's like the context is pandemic. So a lot of these responses are normal human responses to being in a stressful situation.

And , it's our attempt to respond to threat, right. And keep us safe. And there's actually , a lot of good neuroscience in terms of the difference between threat, fear, and anxiety that our systems have built in a threat detector, right? In our amygdala that protects us, moves away from toxins or danger and moves towards a rewards and even single cell organisms have threat detection, but.

The nature of the human body and the human brain is that [00:16:00] we take threats and we can turn them into fear, which are, is our interpretation of a real or perceived threat. So once that amygdala detects the threat, it sends information to newer brain areas like the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus campus, where we can make meaning of it.

And these systems have templates from previous times when we felt. Stressors or memories of threat. And we have higher order cognition like language and mental simulations and self stories that can create the experience of fear. And then once we take fear and we projected into the future, which humans have the capacity to do with language as well, it becomes anxiety and anxiety can be Helpful in the short term, in terms of motivating us to prepare, to create, you know, safety, do things like make sure that I'm okay, you know, for our house, we're getting rid of all the things that might catch on fire around our house. We're doing that preparation action because of our anxiety, but longterm, it can become quite problematic.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, it's interesting to think about that thing. You said about language and the [00:17:00] ability. Think about the future and create solutions in the context of the pandemic, because the virus, this is abstract for most of us. Right. We can't see it. It's tiny. Um, Hmm. Most of us don't even have a direct experience with having.

Had the virus ourselves, but we're able to still learn about it from other people. Talk about it. That anxiety motivates us to S take steps to keep us alive, like wearing masks and social distancing. So it's really that ability to problem solve and think it through. That that is helping us stay safe and anxieties motivating us.

But at the same, same time, it can be not so helpful because I sit around, I don't know about you. I check the data all the time about rates, how many people are getting it in my area. I can overthink. I can worry. I can get really trapped in a place where I'm struggling with this experience. So we can start to create problems in our own mind that don't even really exist related to this.

So it's a definite double edged sword.

[00:18:00] **Diana Hill:** this concept of a double edged sword and language also. Plays into technology and how we're using a lot more technology currently to communicate. It's are probably the primary way of communicating. at least in the U S a lot of our kids are being schooled through technology and.

The benefits of technology are really showing up right now during a pandemic, right? We can, we can talk with our loved ones or we can do telemedicine or teletherapy with our clients and still be in a safe environment. But some of the, the dark side of technology is that our own language-making brain can also fill in.

A tone or fill in missing information or keep on pressing that, that, that feed button over and over again, so that we're overstimulating our threat system with images and fear-based information all day long. And so one of the things that we're going to talk about today is how do you make more of a, um, intentional use of some of these tools, even intentional use of your own language in your mind

so what [00:19:00] happens when we get anxious or threats are present in this way? We do what humans do and what a lot of organisms do is we try and control the threat or avoid it. And that works really well with things outside of our skin or things outside of ourselves.

It doesn't work so well when 1. We can't control what's happening outside of us. And 2. When we're trying to control what's happening underneath our skin, our own thoughts, emotions, memories, sensations, urges.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And you know, a lot of times I think that we do things to avoid our emotions or avoid, avoid our experience. And that can include things like just trying to stay distracted or numbed out. We might try to constantly overthink and try to think our way out of this problem. We might. Sometimes want to give up, we might use too many substances or do things that aren't super helpful in the long term.

And I think there are a lot of examples of these kinds of things that are people doing in the pandemic. Diana, what are you, what are you, are you noticing? Are you doing any forms of experiential [00:20:00] avoidance yourself?

Diana Hill: I think I check Mark everything you just listed and more, I sometimes experiential avoidance helps us get through right in the short term, it could be helpful. Uh, but for me, where it becomes problematic is actually when I use work as a form of experiential avoidance, maybe I'm feeling just like sad or don't have a sense of to make something of my day.

That would be. Meaningful and connecting. And so I just turned to work cause it's easier. And now that we have, I have the ability to work 24/7. That really becomes a problem because I feel like, uh, you know, how free divers talk about, they love to go down to the bottom of the ocean without a wet suit or without a pack on their back, because they feel so much closer and connected to what they are in.

I feel with work and with all my experiential avoidance I'm packing on yeah. All of these barriers to really being fully in my life. How about you, Debbie?

Debbie Sorensen: I can relate to what you're saying for sure with kind of overworking [00:21:00] too much screen time. I think I don't do this all the time, but I can easily slip into watching. Too much, Netflix. I watched like five Schitt's Creek episodes in a row because I was just like, I just want to pretend like life is normal. I also can occasionally slip into a

pattern of, you know, pouring a couple glass of wine in the evening as a way to just kinda chill out.

Um, but I think one of the main things I'm doing is I'm just constantly, like I said, over analyzing. Checking the news, just kind of thinking too much about all this, but in a kind of avoidant way where it's just like, my wheels are spinning and not getting me anywhere. And sometimes I even avoid situations like that are probably pretty low risk in terms of getting an exposed to the virus.

But I just don't really know. And I think, because it feels scary to me, I'm just kind of like, yeah, I'm just going to not do that. That's that one's a balancing act though. I feel like.

Diana Hill: yeah, it's tricky in my practice. I'm actually seeing some subtle beginning [00:22:00] signs of a little bit of agoraphobia. I was talking with a client about, you know, encouraging to go out for a hike and how she was really starting to feel like even doing like that, even though it would be safe and it would she'd wear a mask or would be really distanced from people that was starting to feel a little bit too much out of her comfort zone.

So this nature of we're needing to avoid to S for some degree to keep us safe, and yet avoidance can lead to a, to a narrowing of life. And that's, that's where. Uh, experiential avoidance sort of that fine line between is this experiential avoidance pulling us away from our valued actions and does this experiential avoidance have secondary problems associated with them?

And we're always weighing those benefits and costs in terms of the pandemic, but also looking at the small, subtle ways in which is this self care or is this avoidance and how do I, how do I know the difference?

Debbie Sorensen: Well, and on the other end, I mean, I think some people are experiencing a form of experiential avoidance where they're just pretending like this isn't happening. And they're saying, I'm not doing any of that. I'm [00:23:00] not social distancing. I'm not. So it can happen in a lot of different ways I think.

And it might all be based in the same thing, which is just that this is very hard and unpleasant and people don't like it.

Diana Hill: Right. And that's where psychological flexibility. Comes in. So today we're going to be talking about psychological flexibility and its role in the face of stress and uncertainty and psychological flexibility is really about how we respond to the stressors that we're facing in, in a way that lines up with what we care about, what matters to us in this moment in time.

Right. And it's a way that maybe you really key to navigating what Debbie referenced as the second pandemic. So Stephen Hayes define psychological flexibility as the skill of changing or persisting in the behavior when doing so serves and individuals valued ends. And what that means is being able to flexibly, adapt and change change based on your values, even in the face.

Of discomfort. [00:24:00] And there's been a number of studies that have shown that psychological flexibility is really not only key to mental health and one of the biggest predictors over time of, wellbeing, but it's also key in navigating stressors that are out of our control. Things like chronic pain, anxiety, thoughts, loss, grief, cancer, more recently, there's been some more correlational studies looking at the role of psychological effects and mental health during COVID.

There was a study by Packenham and colleagues in 2020, looking at mental health with Italians during lockdown and found that being totally flexible, helped mitigate the effects of COVID on anxiety and depression and Brooke Smith and colleagues just released a paper in the journal of contextual behavioral science. Showing that our ability to be psychologically flexible, tolerate uncertainty and accept our emotional experience may really help buffer the negative effects of social isolation.

During this time

Debbie Sorensen: Now we're going to walk through some of the psychological flexibility processes that are really [00:25:00] key to building this skill that might be helpful to you. And we're going to do that. Highlighting some examples of some of the things that people are experiencing related to pandemic stress. One act process is present moment focus. As I talked about anxiety is anticipation of future feared events. That's coupled with avoidance behaviors focusing on the present moment. Can help us break up some of the anxiety loops we get in, when you, when you focus on, on the present, just focusing on your five senses, like, what am I saying?

Diana Hill: Seeing hearing, smelling, et cetera, you refocus your attention back. Yeah. To the task at hand. And just sort of this one thing right now, it also allows you to see more clearly because when we're off in this future forecasting or ruminating about the past, we're not as much in the here and the now what's happening right here right now in front of our eyes.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And we often, when we look at this moment right here and now it's like, I'm okay right now, you know, and that can be really centering to just remind ourselves of that. I'm Okay. In this moment, [00:26:00] another process is acceptance, acceptance and commitment therapy. It's clearly, it's a big one

And this is about both accepting you can't change and. We'll get into the part about changing what you can. Right? So as an example, we can't change the virus and make it go away, but we can control what we do in response to the environment. So, you know, we can wait, wear a mask. We can make decisions. We can think about how we're taking care of our health and interacting with others, that type of thing. , It but acceptance at also it means more than that. It also means accepting all of the hard emotions that you might be experiencing the sadness, the anger, the fear, whatever it might be. I think if we acknowledge that these emotions are a very normal human reaction to a really stressful situation, we can be freed up to just allow them to come and go, and it can actually help us if we just let ourselves feel our feelings.

When they arise and then we can move forward. And I think as we just talked about earlier, it's when [00:27:00] we get into a struggle or try to avoid our emotions, that things just get worse.

Diana Hill: this is certainly the case. They've done a lot of research on things like craving, right? Like knowing that the craving will rise up. It'll plateau it'll come back down. The same is true of our difficult, painful emotions. We've all experienced that. There's there's times where we feel like this is really intense and then times where we can find some peace in it all.

And so acceptance, loosens up our struggle so that we can tell our energy and our focus and put it where it not, where it really matters instead of fighting what's happening in our bodies or inside. Another word that I think is helpful to use. If acceptance doesn't fit for you is just the word curious.

Sometimes curious is easier to think about or to embrace than acceptance. Like, I'm just, I'm just curious about what the sensation is I'm feeling, or I'm curious about, uh, my emotions or I'm even just curious what will happen next, you know, being open and allowing rather than resisting, what is.

Debbie Sorensen: We have a few [00:28:00] pandemic-related areas. We're seeing where emotional acceptance can be really useful grief and moral distress. So let's just talk for a moment about grief. I think we're seeing with this pandemic that people are experiencing loss both sometimes directly, if they lose someone that they care about from COVID or if they're around people who have been impacted in that way, but we're also noticing non bereavement loss.

So for instance, that trip you were supposed to take, or some activities, even small ones that you normally enjoy, the graduation ceremony that got canceled, those types of things are also experienced as a loss are there things that you're experiencing as a loss in the midst of this?

Diana Hill: yeah, I mean, I think there's loss around seeing people, my, you know, my loved ones that don't live. In my town or in our state and plans that we had had for the summer to spend time and with them it's and loss for my kids because so much changes in a year. [00:29:00] Right. And if they're not seeing their grandparents in that physical way so much will have changed by the time maybe they can.

Yeah. So there's, I think there's loss around relationships and, and the time going by and how this time would have been different if we weren't in this situation. How about for you, Debbie?

Debbie Sorensen: I mean, the kid one is huge. One of my daughters finished preschool and started elementary school. And there's all these rituals that happen and we didn't get to do them or, or they were all altered. And I think I, yeah, I just miss things being normal. I miss doing day to day things with people I care about.

I'm. I'm missing some of my friends that I just don't get to see. I'm sorry. Zoom is just not the same. It's been really hard.

Diana Hill: Yeah, I miss my yoga studio. I miss. And, and being in with that group of people and just a moment of feeling good in a space and being able to let everything go for an hour and just be somewhere else than my house.

Debbie Sorensen: I know I missed travel. I just had, I had a big trip planned this summer and it was [00:30:00] canceled. And so many things we could probably spend the rest of the time talking about

Diana Hill: Yeah. We could reminisce on our losses. Sorry to sorry to be such a downers here.

Debbie Sorensen: Everyone has them. Yeah.

Diana Hill: has them. And actually it's acceptance and allowing grief to flow through us, like having a good morning cry. I've been doing that throughout this pandemic of just crying more than usual.

It allows that, uh, the grief to move. Through us. I have to shout out to my friend Gwendolyn. Who's actually, she's a song circle leader. That's what she does. And and this, these were the words to her song. She said silver linings and little deaths all wrapped up in this human experiment. In the spirit of love or in the name of fear, why are we choosing this?

Let's be very clear. We're weaving the old ways in a new way. We are grieving opening a new day. And I feel like that really wraps up this experience of it's both loss and then also change all happening at once.

Debbie Sorensen: We're also seeing a lot of moral distress and [00:31:00] guilt around some of this it's really. Interesting. I think you think of maybe the doctor who has to make a decision about a patient and that's really obvious and okay.

Extreme form of moral injury or moral distress, but we're also seeing it in smaller ways. So for instance, You believe that it's a good idea to wear a mask, but you don't, or, you know, you might face the consequences of a decision that you made and just feel terrible about it. So an example, I know someone who tested positive and when I called her to check in the first thing she said to me was not about herself.

It was that she felt so terrible because she had been around family members without realizing that she had the virus and she might've spread it to them. And I think sometimes we're making decisions based on that. Best of information we have available, but we still might end up in a place where we feel like we made the wrong one.

We feel guilty. And I think act can be really helpful here. This idea of acceptance, because these are [00:32:00] also. Very normal emotions to have. These are our moral emotions, like guilt and shame that exists because we're social creatures who are tied to one another, and we can actually use these emotions. I think when they do show up as a reminder of our

values, they can kind of guide you, guide our behavior in the direction of what we feel is the right thing to do.

Diana Hill: Yeah, I, I love how, um, Dr. Borges has written on this and talked about this concept of actually these moral emotions pointing to our values and when we cover them up or we. Emotionally, avoid them or experientially avoid them. We, we miss out on something that's really important there. So feeling that means that you care about something.

, for example, , how and when do I see people in person in my office, do we sit outside 10 feet apart with mass sun? But then what if someone were to contract.

COVID and I would have to do some sort of contact tracing with my clients. It's really challenging because at the same [00:33:00] time, I see how some people are socially isolated and they really would benefit from seeing me in person. It's hard to make these types of decisions.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, Lauren Borges who you just mentioned has been on the podcast before to talk about moral injury. And she also has an article out we'll link to about moral injury during. COVID so check that out. If you're interested. We also do have a couple of episodes about grief as well. So we'll link to all of that.

If, if you're struggling with grief or with moral distress, take a look. So we've talked about acceptance. Now let's go back to the change side of the equation, and we're going to talk about another act process, committed action. And I think in every moment we do, you get to make some choices about what we're actually doing.

And we can always do the next right thing. So if any of you are frozen 2 fans like me, there's a song that Ana the character, honest things. I know, I'm sorry. I have to say to Diane, she's smiling at me on the screen. [00:34:00] My daughter who's eight was kind of making fun of me because as I was preparing for this episode, I listened to it and I just.

I really started kind of sobbing. So if you need a good cry, pull up that song because Anna's just in this very dark place of grief and fear, and she sort of realizes that she has to listen to that little voice inside of her. That's telling her to just take the next step and take the next step and take the next step.

And I honestly think that there are some days in the pandemic where if you can just make yourself breakfast, take the garbage out, maybe get a little work done. Maybe not. Call your mom, your grandma, your friend, whatever you need to do. Just doing a few of those things every day. Whatever's right in front of you.

That's a step in the right direction. and Then sometimes that's enough.

Diana Hill: yeah. Act is more about workability than it is about should or big like life goals that you need to catapult towards. It's more about what's workable in your [00:35:00] life and workable right now. Maybe super, super, super tiny. And that is absolutely fine. Self-compassion is, is sort of like a big blanket over all of these processes.

Self-compassion being. Noticing that we are suffering, that we're in pain, that we're struggling and then taking actions to help alleviate our own suffering. Right? So this isn't necessarily the time to take on a couch to five K plan or whatever those things are called. But if that helps you, if that, if that gives you a sense of.

working on something with mastery. Great. Go for it. But I do think it's more about committed action is more about what are your values in this moment, right, right now. And how can you point yourself in that direction with what you're doing in the here and now

Debbie Sorensen: Can I take a quick detour about what you just said? Because unrealistic personal expectations came up in an article. I read about Pandem Stress. And I have to just tell you, I, at the start of this pandemic, I had [00:36:00] this big plan that this is the time I'm going to be home.

So I'm going to declutter my entire basement. And I stacked up all these books. I've been meaning to read it. And I mean like substantial books, you know, like I I'm sitting there thinking I'm going to be reading these kind of heavy. Well, none of that has happened. And I think at some point in this, I had to just be like, you know what?

That's okay. I have to go easy on myself. Like this is not the time.

Diana Hill: thinking of it. Like it's a snow day. And we're snowed in, and this is the time to rearrange your closet, but this is a pandemic. It's not a snow day. So let's just regroup here. And I'm on the same page. Debbie, I took, I went and bought out all these frames, thinking that I was going to redo all of my pictures on my wall.

Those frames are still sitting in my office from six months ago with not a picture in any of them. And now they just become a feeling like every time I look at them, I feel a little bit of. Guilt. So that's, that's the, that's the dark side of taking on too much or having these types of expectations.

I think that be helpful to look at what are some of the stressors that are on [00:37:00] you right now? What are the loads that you're carrying? And is there anything that we can do to change some of those loads?

So maybe that's decreasing our expectations about what needs to be done, decreasing our expectations around how things need to look. one thing that I know was helpful for me was. The advice to not add anything new right now, it's like imagining that you're carrying in 10 loads of groceries from your car, and someone says here, can you hold my phone?

It's just as too much. So not adding on new things and maybe looking at what are the stressors that are impacting you. are there ways to be I'm more selective and wise

I do think that there's some benefit in being able to have routines, not schedules?

There's a difference between a schedule and a routine, but just sort of a routine, a regularity, something that I, an anchor that I can hold onto throughout my day. And for some people, it may be things that you've already done or had in place before that you hold onto. And you keep going,

to keep that, self care [00:38:00] practice and self-compassion and committed action in place. , there can be benefits to working in, like you said, a lot of us aren't moving as much. And movement, nutrition, and sleep. Not to make them to dues.

Our keys to, our mental wellbeing and health. So in a compassionate way, how can you, you integrate some more movement into your day, and that may be even doing some of Katy Bowman's work in terms of nutritious movement of, you know, for example, have different workstations that you, you move about in a way so that you're not in one space the whole time or sitting in one space, just to give you back a little bit of a break standing.

Having a ball, uh, and also looking at some of your sleep hygiene. We have some good as to great sleep episodes as well to take a look at.

act is also a behavioral psychology, which means we care a lot about the behaviors and what triggers behaviors to occur. act as something called functional analysis, where you take a look at what is the cue? What is, what is the behavior? And [00:39:00] then what is the consequence of that behavior?

we're actually going to be having a great episode coming up with Judd Brewer in October, all about, the habit loop of when they there's a trigger, we act in a certain way and we get a reward and how to reorganize your own habit loops in ways that are beneficial to you.

And that are more oriented towards your values if you're struggling with a certain type of behavior, there's ways you can step back and use some of your mindfulness skills to become aware of what your pattern is and see if you can make a tiny step or habit change to help you out.

And Debbie and I did an episode a while back on, on habits and habit formation that may be helpful for you right now. If you're struggling with, with some habits that aren't working so well for you.

Debbie Sorensen: Another process to think about is. Called cognitive diffusion. And what that means is, is not getting bogged down by your thoughts. So a lot of us, our thoughts are going a little bonkers right now, and our minds can be all over the place with this stuff. And [00:40:00] instead of trying to argue with your thoughts or.

Rationalize with them, or even just believing them, basically, just assuming that they must be true. You really want to notice your thoughts, be aware of them and just take a step back from them so that you're not latching onto them too tightly when they're showing up in unhelpful ways.

And I'll give a personal example. I definitely have some doom and gloom type thoughts about the future. You know, we're all going to die. The world is collapsing. I mean, it can get kind of dark in there sometimes. And I think, this happens, especially at 2:00 AM when I

something wakes me up and then, you know, I just go there and I think there's not much you can do to really just totally stop that.

But what you can do is to notice those thoughts, just realizing. I'm worried I'm stressed. So what my mind is doing, I don't know the future. I can just kind of take a step back from it and watch those thoughts from a different perspective. So I see them for what they are instead of just assuming that that's the [00:41:00] truth and we're all doomed.

Diana Hill: yeah. Yeah. I thought it's gonna be so convincing. Yeah. And I liked Debbie, how, in that example, you really practiced, just labeling them is helpful. , putting a label on something, stamping it like, Oh, that's a thought, that's my anxious thought. That's my 2:00 AM every night at 2:00 AM.

Whenever I wake up, it's going to have a tendency to be in that direction. And just being able to identify it for what it is. There's give it a label, give it a name. Uh, gives us a little bit more wiggle room to then to see them more clearly or choose whether or not we want to listen to them

Debbie Sorensen: You know, it's when I actually said it out loud and labeled them as doom and gloom, they actually, it actually sounds like almost a little ridiculous, which is funny because at 2:00 AM, that's not how it feels, but that's kind of what we're trying to do is to just see it for what it is.

Diana Hill: I love a Benji Schoendorf, if I did a workshop with him at ACBS world Worldcon and he has this great line of when we're stuck and we get hooked. So he talks about sometimes our thoughts can be like hooks that. As you a fish, swimming down a stream, you get hooked and it [00:42:00] pulls you in a different direction, the direction you want to be going.

And he said, it's just helpful just to say, say your name. This is Diana and I am hooked by the thought doom and gloom. Right. And just claiming it, claiming that you're hooked helps pull the hook out. You know, it's not, it's, it's nothing magical, but it works pretty well. And when it's 2:00 AM, you don't want to be rationalizing with irrational thoughts.

It's just, it will take you nowhere. So the fifth process that is so helpful right now is values. And a lot of the feelings, like we said before that we're having, whether they're moral dilemmas or it's our anxiety, are like flares that are, that are sending out a message to what we care about, what feels threatened to us.

It wouldn't feel so scary if we didn't care so much. Or if things didn't, things didn't matter so much to us, things like the fires and climate change, it feels scary. Because our environment matters to us having a safe place to live, having a, you know, a stable climate is important. [00:43:00] So one thing that we can do when we're noticing our strong emotions is be able to look what's underneath them and see them as our values.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I think one area where this is coming up a lot right now is related to existential concerns that people are having about, you know, what's the point of all this fear of our own death. Just feeling like life is short and there's going to be loss. And I think that

that's very present for me right now and not just in that doom and gloom way, but much more of this thought around.

I'm not going to be here forever. My parents aren't going to be here forever. All the people I love are. And I think it's easy sometimes to pretend like that's not the case, but. In the middle of the pandemic. We're pretty aware of that. And I do think that, when we have existential thoughts and when we're in contact with the fact that we're going to die someday, it also, like you said, it points toward what matters to us.

And it gives us the sense that as Robyn Walser said on an episode about this with us a couple of months back, she said [00:44:00] that the clock is ticking. And that we only have so much time left. So what can I do in this time? That's really important to me.

Diana Hill: It's interesting because. many Buddhists actually practice on death, meditation or impermanence meditation purposefully, you know, before the pandemic, they were already focusing on this as a means to point you towards being very much here in the present moment and even taking refuge in the fact that this is, this is impermanent.

So just as the, the things that, that we love. Where we know that we will lose the things that we struggle with will also change over time. So impermanence is, is the one guarantee and it points us to committed action in the here and now.

Debbie Sorensen: And it also points us toward our sixth psychological flexibility process, which is perspective taking we. Sometimes get really caught up in our own stuff, right? Like our own problems, our own day to day concerns and perspectives taking as a way to just [00:45:00] zoom out and look at the big picture of our lives.

And if you think about all the ups and downs you've had over the course of your life and the ups and downs, That are ahead. You know, this is a pretty big down for most of us right now. It can be helpful to remember though that, you know, you have a whole life and it's a mixed bag. And also you can remember there's a little bit of a common humanity, in just remembering that most humans have suffered in various ways, whether it was.

A war, pandemic, personal loss, just the struggle to kind of make it through the day. And so there's almost a sense that yeah, we're United in that. And why should we be immune from that, that struggle and that suffering. And I think taking a look at it in the big context of that sometimes can be helpful when I'm so caught up in my own problems. And how this is impacting me is just taking a step back and looking at how it's impacting all of us and putting it in context.

Diana Hill: Yeah. I think that all of us have experienced times, maybe even just the lifes, our own lifespan, looking back of times that were [00:46:00] really hard and they may have been prolonged times, times, and we've lost someone times when we've gone through maybe having a newborn or an illness or a job change, and even zooming out and seeing how we got through those times and the strength and outgrowth that came.

From those times can be helpful. That's sort of this, this concept of posttraumatic growth that Debbie, you and I did an episode on actually, when I was evacuated from fires two years ago, we did an episode while I was evacuated on post traumatic growth. Right. So this is, this is the scope of our lives. And zooming out even further.

One of the things that I really valued from the conversation that I had with psychology of radical healing collective is the use of looking at our ancestors and what they've been through. And in particular, for people of color, seeing the strength and the resilience of your ancestors, what they have overcome can give a sense of radical hope.

Right? So I think that that is a really powerful zoom out perspective, taking tool. As well [00:47:00] as perspective taping in terms of getting behind the eyes of another. So, as we talked about self-compassion earlier, there's another component which is compassion for other and taking the perspective of other people that are struggling and how can I offer care and compassion and support to those that are, that are struggling and connect with them.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah that could mean all kinds of things, you know, if you have the time and resources, it could be volunteering, maybe working for the election. If you're worried about politics could be donating time or money to the food banks, if you're worried about the economic impact of this, it could also mean just small, compassionate act towards the people that you see in your life or the people that you can reach out to in your life who are also suffering. . And I think while we're talking about compassion, we should also talk about loneliness and social disconnection. That's a. Really a big issue for a lot of folks right now. . I think that this is really impacting people a lot.

And [00:48:00] especially, I think for people who are dating, dating is really tough right now. If you're looking for a relationship it's always hard, but I think there's some extra challenges at the moment, people who are living alone and then also older adults, people who are retired, so they might not have the day to day structure of work or young kids. , and so I think that really building social connection in whatever way works for you is really important. And that can mean a lot of different things for different people. Cause I think some people, want different types of social connection.

Right? Right. So for some people they might need to be out and about doing things, but for other people it might just having like one or two people, they can really. Confide in, and there's a lot of different things that you can do even in a pandemic to try to reach out and get support. And one of the main things I think is if you are finding that you're really struggling right now is talking to someone about it.

Just not being alone with that.

Diana Hill: I think it's hard. W because like there's sort of two main things that you talk about when, when somebody is depressed and [00:49:00] struggling, one is behavioral activation, engaging in positive pleasant events on a regular basis, right?

Getting yourself out in the world and doing things. And the second is social connection. And if we're feeling depressed and we're feeling lonely, How do we have the energy to go out and do the hard work of making connections? Right? It's not, that's not an easy thing.

And it's, and in particular right now, it's an even harder. Thing. And I think that is where again, and going back to technology can be helpful, finding a, a common interest or even taking a class there's a ton of online workshops classes. For example, the Rick Hanson, uh, program, he had even offers a free meditation on a weekly basis where after the meditation, he has small breakout groups that people can just meet other people and talk about their experience with it.

I think things like that can be. Small doors that we can walk through to not only just engage in connection, but have it be meaningful connection where we can talk about our vulnerabilities and our shared [00:50:00] experience.

Debbie Sorensen: I have a list right here, because there's an article about promoting social connections among older adults, because I think. They're at higher risk. And so therefore they're doing more social distancing and this list has all kinds of things, including writing emails or letters, care of pets, connecting with people over phone or videos, looking at photographs to remind yourselves of memories, calling a support line, and then even things that remind you of your connection with nature or a higher power.

Or our shared humanity, like getting fresh air, making art, listening to music, watching birds, looking at flowers, we'll link to this article online. But I think that there can be so many ways of doing that. And you're right. It's hard sometimes when you're down. But I think that they're, you know, this doesn't necessarily mean you have to go out and socialize with a big group.

It can be all these different things.

Diana Hill: Yeah. I love the idea of lists. Cause sometimes when we can't generate it ourselves, it's just helpful to have a list to go down and give it a try, give it a shot. And you might be [00:51:00] surprised that sort of beginner's mind right. Be open to the possibility that something could be helpful.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, tell me what to do.

Diana Hill: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: So that was our list of the psychological flexibility processes. And now we're going to talk about a few strategies for the specific situations of family stress. And working from home.

Diana Hill: I think what's interesting is that these six core, psychological flexibility processes are really showing up more and more in terms of when people are researching about a number of different things that could be, , helpful in our day to day lives like parenting and work.

There was , a recent study that came out by Jennifer Daks and , , colleagues that it looked at the family systems model, , and psychological flexibility during the pandemic. So the family systems model being that family, we all interact with and impact each other. And there can be some spillover effects that happen when we experience stressors.

So for example, if I get really stressed and I get really rigid and [00:52:00] controlling, it's going to impact how I parent is going to impact my partner. It's going to impact our whole family system. And what they found in that study was. That our ability to be flexible, uh, to allow difficult feelings to pass versus being rigid, predicts our effectiveness as parents and as well as the outcome for our kids during a stressful time, like COVID. thinking about psychological flexibility as not only benefiting you, but benefiting the whole system that you're interacting with them.

And part of that is using acceptance skills that we just talked about. Part of that is also thinking, how can I get. More flexible in my thinking more adaptable, less rigid and less rule governed in my behavior

Debbie Sorensen: And for those of you who are parents who are having a tough time with the kids right now, because so intense go back and check. I've got some of our recent episodes. We've done several that are. Designed [00:53:00] specifically for parents who are burnt out and stressed right now. So check those out if that would be helpful.

Diana Hill: So there's a lot that we're adjusting to right now in terms of working from home, uh, how we're gonna manage our time more effectively, because everything has just been kind of all grouped into this one big space of work and home and laundry and eating.

And how can we both on the one hand be flexible and not rigid and have to have it be a certain way while also being able to create sort of healthy containers and expectations for ourselves that, that make it so that we can be more effective and focused at our work. Debbie, you did it. Excellent. Well, we, you and I did it, but you were sort of taking the lead on an excellent, uh, episode a while back on focus and attention that I would highly recommend to people they're struggling with working from home.

Just some really it's small strategies that we could do that could be helpful.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think we talked earlier about how sometimes. In a stressful situation like this, it's very hard to focus. And I have [00:54:00] heard that from a lot of people, just the ability to sit down and do your schoolwork or focus on your job is really hard right now. I think one of the things that can be helpful is to just carve out some focus time when maybe you're not trying to do the laundry and make a snack and.

Get distracted by your phone and to just really carve out these brief periods of time, maybe half an hour, 45 minutes, because I do think that at the moment, it's hard to concentrate if you try to do it too long. And also if you're trying to multitask all day, so check out that episode.

Diana Hill: Being aware of multitasking and basically what that attentional residue factor that is every time you're switching from one task to another, your attention is sort of still left on the old task. So it's, it is helpful to, to try and focus on one thing at a time, even if it's for a short period of time and carve out space for yourself, it may mean that you're doing, you know, less work.

And maybe less in terms of a parent or sitting down with your kids with their work. But again, reminding ourselves this isn't a [00:55:00] snow day, it's a pandemic. So be easy on yourself.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, it's also really important, I think, to make time for social connection with coworkers, because one of the meaningful and important aspects of work that we sometimes overlook a little bit is just having. People around us that we work with and collaborate with and having that, you know, break room chat and the support of people.

And I think sometimes in this remote working era, but we'll want to just log on to zoom, have their meeting and then go about their day, but actually making time to, okay. Act with coworkers can actually help make your work, work life more fulfilling. Even in this strange circumstance we're in.

Diana Hill: Yeah, that's such an important prelude to our work conversation is just that chatty time or that check in time. That again, there's this awkward zoom, right? The kit that we're all trying to figure out where in the beginning, we're not even acknowledging each other. We're just figuring out our microphones and our, you know, sound and so different than how it used to be in terms of this, entering into a [00:56:00] space and looking at someone, you know, being in their presence.

But we can be more intentional about making time to connect, really asking people how they are doing and being honest about how we're doing in a vulnerable way, because that vulnerability is what creates it's closeness.

in this episode, we've talked about. A number of the common experiences that we're having and respect the pandemic and the global stressors. We're all experiencing right now. And we've really pointed to act as being, uh, an approach that could be helpful. And some of the strategies that we're using with our clients in our own lives,

Debbie Sorensen: if you're finding the pandemic is really hard for you emotionally reach out for support. There are mental health professionals that can help you. If you're really struggling, if you're in a really dark place or at least reach out to someone who cares about you and let them know what's going on, it's just so important to that.

We go easy on ourselves, just be aware of that tendency to be hard on ourselves and put extra pressure on ourselves. And remember that it's okay to be going through a hard time. Right now, [00:57:00] all your emotions are valid in this hard situation and you're not alone. We have to do what works best for us. There's a lot of different ways of coping with this. And so we hope that there's something in today's episode that you'll find helpful in terms of psychological flexibility. As we get through this tough time.

Diana Hill: we have a ton of resources from previous episodes on act. You could search act on our, a website off the clock, psych.com, or you could look into some of the episodes that we've listed at the bottom in the show notes for this episode, that could be useful for you for your. If you're having specific concerns and we hope that you found this episode helpful.

And we're thinking about you and wishing you the best during this challenging time.

Debbie Sorensen: Take care.

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