

Unmasking the Pandemic... Thriving in Uncertain Times

Discover how to shift your mindset from surviving a long-term crisis to thriving.

Introduction

When was the last time you sat down, in person, and talked with someone outside of your immediate safety “bubble?” The majority, if not all of us, are tired of this pandemic. Tired of social distancing, Zoom and Microsoft Teams meetings, remembering our masks, hand sanitizer and monitoring our health. “Am I tired and aching because I just worked out or shoveled snow, is it a symptom of COVID-19, or am I just tired?” Living in Wisconsin in the middle of winter is not helping, either. We spend most of our day inside, and although daylight is lengthening, taking all this together can result in depressed mood and, for some, pandemic fatigue.

Defining Pandemic Fatigue

The World Health Organization defines pandemic fatigue as “emerging demotivation to engage in protection behaviors and seek COVID-19-related information” and as “complacency, alienation and hopelessness.” Pandemic fatigue is a natural response to this long-drawn-out crisis. Our brains are wired for a short-term fight or flight response to immediate danger. Dealing with stressful circumstances over a long period of time requires different coping strategies.

Signs of Pandemic Fatigue

Some of the signs being reported: becoming less concerned with CDC guidelines for public health measures, difficulty concentrating, loss of appetite or stress eating, along with a general increase in anxiety.

For those of us working remotely, we may be experiencing lower productivity (even though we are in front of our computers all day). Keeping a work-life balance may be a struggle. For parents who have been working from home, job duties coupled with keeping children engaged through the day may have doubled your stress. Staff going into the office may be concerned about exposure to COVID-19. The stress caused by the pandemic may be further compounded by personal issues: “Have I or someone that I care about contracted COVID-19?” “Has someone close to me died as a result of the virus?”

Survive or Thrive... It Is Your Choice!

Is your goal to survive this pandemic or is your goal to thrive during this period of immense change? The answer to that question is heavily dependent on your mindset.

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On any given day, we are trying to remain resilient, adapting and working through tough times and life's challenges with the least negative impact. Initially, during this pandemic, many of us focused on the adjustments that were necessary to just get through this...to survive. However, due to the length of the pandemic, we are starting to see some of the negative impact of staying in the survival mode for an extended period, such as increased reports of depression due to a sense of isolation and lack of positive experiences, and uncertainty in the future: when will this end. With all the uncertainty, it is easy to stay in the survival mode.

Surviving is a grim struggle. You are white knuckling your way through each day, waiting for your "real" life to return. You are hoping to resume right where we left off. In the long-term, this is a very unfulfilling way to operate. For most of us, we continue to hold on to the thought of getting back to "normal."

The Shift to Thriving

Times have changed, possibly forever. Many people are using the term "new normal," although there does not seem to be anything normal about this. If you have ever had to deal with a significant loss in your life, you have probably also experienced the process involved in incorporating the loss into your life to move forward. What we are experiencing with the pandemic is grieving for the loss of what our lives were like pre-pandemic. And for many of us, we may also be grieving from the loss of family members and friends. However, grief can also provide an opportunity for appreciating what we do have, and it is this shift in focus that allows us to thrive.

Changing Your Mindset

To thrive, you need to change your mindset. Are you fixated on the loss of what your world used to be or are you looking forward? Shifting from surviving to thriving is a process. It takes deliberate action. Thriving is a choice; surviving is the default. Fortunately, there is strong evidence that mindsets can be changed by developing self-awareness in people about their fixed mindset triggers and assisting them to recognize when they are at play. Thriving goes beyond survival and resilience.

There are several actions that can move us into the thriving mode:

1. Most of us are tired of the vigilance regarding the pandemic after living it for a year. But that does not mean we should not keep doing it or that we cannot. However, it is how we frame this that shifts it into being a personal choice and not an imposition.
2. Review and update your Business Continuity/Disaster Recovery Plan. Considering the changes that have been put in place because of the pandemic, are there additional risks/threats that you need to address?

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3. Plan your workday (especially those of us working remotely). Schedule breaks and shift from sitting to standing. Take a break from the computer screen.
4. Keep meetings on track and turn off the video aspect (and invite others to do so) if possible. Why do we find video calls so draining? In part, it is because they force us to focus more intently on conversations to absorb information. They also require us to stare directly at a screen for minutes at a time without any visual or mental break. In person, how often do you stand within three feet of a colleague and stare at their face? Probably never. This is because having to engage in a “constant gaze” makes us uncomfortable, and in the world of nature, this is threatening.
5. Maintain a healthy work-life balance. It is very easy to allow the lines to blur when working remotely, especially if you are also having to keep your children engaged.
6. Practice random acts of kindness. On any given day, there are moments or opportunities to act on kindness towards others. In those opportunities, just a kind word or smile may change someone's stressful day, including your own. Research has concluded that some of the physiological benefits that result from being kind include an increase in energy and immune system performance, enhanced cognitive function, lower heart rate, and a balance in cortisol levels, which reduces stress.

Looking Forward

If you find yourself struggling to shift into the thrive mode, you may want to seek professional support to help identify any triggers that may be holding you back. One of the positive advancements that has resulted from this pandemic is an increased availability for using telehealth technology for both medical and psychological assessments and support. Insurance payers and health care professional associations have supported the transition to telehealth services during the pandemic.

It has been a very difficult year for everyone. The pandemic has dealt us many hardships and has provided us with many challenges that have shifted both our business and personal lives. Shifting our mindset from surviving to thriving is a critical strategy for individuals and organizations to successfully deal with this crisis.

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