

## **Feeling Good in Difficult Times:**

### **Positive Psychology, Mental Health, and Reading for Pleasure During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Winter 2020 saw the declaration of a global pandemic of the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), an infectious respiratory virus. In order to prevent the spread of the virus, much of the world has seen governments enforce temporary lockdowns, with people ordered to stay at home, work from home, and avoid close social contact (World Health Organization, 2021). Measures to prevent the spread of the virus are still in place at the time of the writing of this article in April 2021. After over a year of uncertainty and limits on social and physical contact, it seems inevitable that there may be both temporary and lasting effects on people's mental health.

Galea et al. (2020) draw on the limited amount of literature available about the after-effects of major health events and disasters, noting that in these histories, there has been high incidence of PTSD following these traumatic events. However, they note that the closure of public spaces, need for physical distancing, and changes to the normal social patterns of life during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to lead to an increase in more diverse ways. They suggest increases in anxiety and depression are likely, as well as a general increase in loneliness as people are asked to stay away from others, instead of being able to gather with loved ones as way of finding support when faced with a new threat to our well-being. Later publications including Waters et al. (2020) note that these increases are indeed being seen in the early reporting from many countries.

In difficult times, facing negative mental health outcomes, methods to buffer and reduce stress levels are increasingly important to consider. In considering how to address these issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, one discipline that we may turn to is positive psychology. Looking at factors that enable people to survive and thrive, positive psychology focuses on strengths and prosocial behaviours (Waters et al., 2020). One aspect of positive psychology that may be a support during difficult times are positive emotions. Although feeling positive emotions may be short-lived, just feeling these emotions

can support well-being. Waters et al. (2020) note the presence of an “upward spiral,” (p. 10) as feeling positive emotions with regularity can build a person’s cognitive awareness, which then allows them to gather more information to build resilience, social connectedness, and thus allows them to cope with adversity and place themselves in situations that offer more positive emotions in the future. Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) note that this upward spiral, also called the “broaden-and-build” theory, may allow individuals to recognize that experiencing positive emotions can help to regulate their responses to all kinds of situations, including those situations that would generally elicit a negative emotional response (p. 328). Because of this awareness, they may be more likely to identify novel and positive ways to deal with difficult situations.

Addressing mental health issues caused by COVID-19 restrictions, Yamaguchi et al. (2020) note research findings within positive psychology that positive emotions have an impact on “the psychological recovery process of individuals who have experienced intense stress or have developed mental disorders, such as depression” (para. 3). Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) similarly note that positive emotions are one of the facets that enable individuals who demonstrate high resilience to recover quickly from negative psychological experiences. They suggest that it is not that people who demonstrate high resilience to negative events completely disengage from negative emotions or threats, but rather that they are also able to focus on positive emotions during times of stress.

One possible intervention to increase positive emotions is reading. The Reading Agency (2015) conducted a literature review on the impacts of reading for pleasure, focusing largely on literature around children and youth. They noted the following main outcomes of recreational or pleasure reading on these groups: “enjoyment, knowledge of the self and other people, social interaction, social and cultural capital, imagination, focus and flow, relaxation and mood regulation” (p. 31). Morgan (2018) focuses on the benefits of reading specifically for young adults. Drawing on findings from The Reading Agency’s (2015) report, Morgan (2018) notes the importance of focusing on reading for pleasure and

promoting reading as a way to deliberately draw enjoyment and decrease stress levels. Coining the term “readaxation,” Morgan (2018) (para. 6) suggests that this is an important piece of curriculum for students, as lowering stress levels is related to better exam results and improved overall academic performance. It follows that the ability of pleasure reading to reduce stress levels could be a valuable intervention during the current pandemic when stress levels are likely to be high.

Given the risk factors and general difficulties associated with living through the COVID-19 pandemic, caring for one’s mental health and well-being is important. In addition to activities such as mindfulness, exercise, healthy eating habits, and other therapeutic interventions, reading for pleasure may be one way to bolster mental health during this difficult time. In addition to many of the benefits that reading may provide in terms of well-being and mental health, reading uplifting or feel-good stories can induce positive emotions within the reader, supporting an upward spiral allowing them to notice more positive elements in their world.

### **How to Support Readers During COVID-19**

- Curate lists of feel-good materials: While some readers may gravitate to materials with darker themes during difficult times, others may prefer escapist titles that offer them hope, inspiration, and humor. Find booklists in this issue of the YA Hotline or Goodreads.
- Program creatively: With social distancing requirements still in place in much of the world, programming events likely look very different than in the past. While traditional programs with large numbers of participants in one location may not be feasible, it’s important to offer flexible program options. This may mean developing programs that people can do online or from home, offering small group programs with distancing measures, or offering kits that people can pick up to do activities from home. Featuring programs that promote self-care and compassion can help participants to feel positive emotions that can buffer negative impacts of stressful situations.

- Highlight support services: Reaching out for help can be difficult. Try to remove barriers by making resources easily available, such as putting links to resources on your website, including brochures or posters with information on supports in multiple spaces in your library or workplace (e.g., near welcome/service desks, in washrooms, on bulletin boards, near elevators).
- Fill your own cup: In a time when everyone is experiencing an increase in stress, burnout is more of a risk than ever. Self-care is important, especially if you work in a profession where you are dealing with the public and may need to be a support person for others. Ask for help and support if you need it. Prioritize your own care and be willing to step back where necessary. Identify things that make you feel good and try to incorporate these into daily routines if possible.

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