When I was a young girl, I was always looking ahead. I couldn’t wait for Santa to come... I couldn’t wait for the weekend... I couldn’t wait to get my driver’s license... I couldn’t wait to graduate. There was always something better in the future that was going to make me happier or make my life better. And, I can remember my Dad always saying, “Don’t wish your life away.”

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about that advice, because I am anxious to put 2020 in my rearview mirror and move ahead into 2021. I know I’m not alone in this, but I’ve also wondered is it the right
attitude to have? Perhaps we should be looking back on the past year and taking stock of lessons learned during the pandemic.

For me, one of the biggest lessons learned is that much of life is beyond our control. The word I’ve been thinking about is “uncertainty” and how there is so much of it in our lives right now. From the Coronavirus and its effects to the November election and its aftermath, everything has a hue of uncertainty to it.

Mental Health Counselor Stacey Aiton writes in *Why Letting Go Can Improve Your Mental Health*, “It is scary to realize how much is out of our control. We have no control over the actions, thoughts, and feelings of others. We can influence others, but we cannot change or control them. However, we can control our thoughts and therefore our response to life.”

She recommends focusing on those things we can control and creating a plan. By taking control of what we can, which are those changes we make for ourselves, we can have a mentally healthier perspective. “Write down the changes you want to make,” recommends Aiton. “What is a small goal that is obtainable that you can do now? For instance, if your goal is to eat healthier, can you commit to meal prepping a healthy breakfast for the week?”

Setting small goals that are achievable is more motivating than setting big goals that may cause us to fail. Aiton says that incorporating self-care into our life is a way to control stress, including getting enough sleep, getting outdoors, hobbies, eating healthy and keeping in touch with our supports.
In addition to how we respond to the people in our lives, we do have some control over how we respond to COVID-19. While it is difficult not to experience stress and anxiety over the surge in COVID cases and daily news reports causing feelings of unease, there are ways we can control and improve our emotional wellbeing.

According to Brendan Street of Nuffield Health in his article titled *How to Manage Your Mental Health in Uncertain Times*, we can focus on four areas to help balance emotions, as well as manage symptoms of anxiety. He recommends:

1. **Work with your thoughts**
   - Be kind to yourself: Practice talking to yourself with understanding and compassion. Speak to yourself as you would to a friend to reassure them, or the way an encouraging coach would, rather than a critic
   - Don’t accept your thoughts as facts: Just because something feels scary, it doesn’t always mean something bad will happen. When you notice a change in your mood, ask yourself,
“What was I thinking about just before that?” Was the thought helpful or unhelpful? It can help to imagine a friend saying your thought out loud – if it’s unhelpful, what would you say to them to challenge their thinking?

- Accept that there will be some uncertainty: Letting go of worries about the future is easier said than done, but like any skill, it gets easier with practice. If you find yourself stuck in a cycle of anxious thoughts, you can use something called ‘Worry Time’. Tell yourself ‘I’ll worry about this later’ and then let yourself worry about it for half an hour in the evening, for example. Then, if there’s something you can do about your worry, make a plan, and if not, let it go.
- Put pen to paper: Putting your emotions into words can also help you get through stressful events. Don’t worry about crafting a literary masterpiece. Instead, try writing about your feelings for a few minutes nonstop. This can help you organize your thoughts and better cope with your emotions.

2. **Stay connected**
   - Keep in touch and interact with others: You should especially reach out to those who make you feel positive and energized. Use video calls if you’re self-isolating – a smile can be much more reassuring than just a voice
   - Form community groups: Working together and sharing resources can help overcome a survivalist ‘siege mentality’. Network and look after each other. Knowing you have each other’s backs can be a huge comfort
   - Talk to someone you trust: Speaking to people who help you rationalize the situation, or have a calming influence, can help you to counterbalance the hype and scaremongering.

3. **Look after your physical wellbeing**
   - Exercise regularly: Physical activity releases anxiety-reducing chemicals, while acting as a healthy distraction. There are many things you can do to keep exercising even if you’re at home more than usual or self-isolating.
   - Eat healthily: Good nutrition has a positive impact on your mood, while boosting your energy and immunity.
   - Improve your bedtime routine: Having a good bedtime routine will help you to switch off and rest easier.
   - Avoid stimulants and sedatives: Caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol can make anxiety symptoms worse.

4. **Build your emotional resilience**
   - Write down a list of all your strengths: Remember times in your life when you have overcome difficulties and remind yourself of all your resources and positive coping strategies
   - Limit your news updates: Reading every news report on every site can feed anxious cycles. Try to stick to one or two sources, once or twice a day
   - Access nature: Whether you’re self-isolating or social distancing, you may be spending a lot of time indoors, so make sure you get plenty of fresh air and light. Go for walks when you can and use your garden if you have one. While you’re inside, sit near a window and open it every now and again. You may need to think creatively. What about birdwatching? Or a windowsill garden?
   - Remember to breathe: When we experience stress, our breathing gets faster and shallower. When you feel yourself getting worked up, breathe slowly and deeply into your belly to override your stress response so that you feel calmer.
   - Find ways to relax: Relaxation techniques such as meditation and mindfulness can help you become more aware and accepting of your thoughts. They can also teach you to direct your attention away from worries by focusing on one thing, such as your breath. All this can help you unwind more easily.
   - Take part in activities that bring you into the present: Whether you’re reading, cooking, cleaning, or doing something creative, you’re concentrating on the task at hand, so you won’t be continually worrying about an unknown future.

I know I’m always going to be looking ahead in anticipation of an event, milestone or occasion, and I’ll still hear my father’s voice telling me not to wish my life away. My hope, however, is that as we leave 2020 behind, we cherish the good that came in the past 12 months, grieve for the losses, and heal as we move into this new year.
I will work to control those things in my life that I can when feelings of uncertainty take hold, and I will also marvel at the resiliency of the many people in my life, in our community and in our country. I look forward to turning the page on my calendar to 2021, but I will also take the joy, pleasure and lessons learned that I can from 2020 as we say goodbye to what has definitely been a challenging and unusual year.

I wish you all a Happy Holiday and a Blessed New Year!

Will You Share With Us?

Will you share with us on social media with the hashtag: #MHACopingWithCovid19 how you are dealing with the Coronavirus and how it is impacting your life? Do you have suggestions for others on how to deal with the stress and anxiety this is causing?

https://app.constantcontact.com/pages/campaigns/email-details/details/activity/c1ef4094-3aaf-4bca-a97a-49a85458779d
Mental Health America of Central Carolinas is dedicated to providing help, offering hope and promoting mental wellness through advocacy, education and prevention in Mecklenburg and Cabarrus Counties.

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