



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #9:

SURVIVING ANOTHER SEPTEMBER



September always ushers a whirlwind of change into our lives that make it notoriously one of the most stressful months of the year. As long summer light fades earlier and temperature shifts signal to foliage that the end of the growing season is near, people start to ramp up their activities. September tends to be frantic. We shrug off those relaxed summertime vibes and focus on getting back to routines and structured activities. This year, you may notice that with the arrival of sweater weather and back-to-school backpacks, there isn't the same hint of exuberance as in years past. There's a good reason for that.

In Canada, it is our second September living with the wide-reaching effects of COVID-19. While we continue making strides towards turning a more confident corner against the pandemic through vaccination programs and diligent adherence to safety practices, the path to get to this point has not been easy. There have been confusing and changing pandemic regulations that vary from province to

province. Information about various vaccines has also been confusing and problematic from a supply standpoint, not to mention concerns about side effects, and mixing vaccination formulas for second doses. There's been so much loss: people we care about, life's moments and milestones, and for many economic and food insecurities. Our summers are short. Spending time outside seemed to be a way to regain some semblance of everyday activities and normalcy. We're all exhausted from living this pandemic-altered reality. Unpredictability and uncertainty pile on in a month already full of change. Frankly, we think it's important to acknowledge that we're a bit off our collective game, and that's okay.



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Instead of letting overwhelming feelings hold us in their grip, we can name those stressors and look at supports that will help us move beyond them with confidence. Perhaps it starts by anchoring ourselves to what we do know about September. It can engage our senses with a beautiful display of autumn-coloured leaves, nostalgic smells and sounds that jump out at us in the cooler air. When we pause to ground ourselves, it can help us feel like we're on more familiar ground so that we can move forward again.

Recognizing and managing stress

Stress is a normal part of our lives. It's a holdover from prehistoric times when humans needed to respond to threats to stay alive. Today's stressors may not have the same kinds of life-or-death moments encountered by our neanderthal cousins. However, they can still induce the same types of physical and mental responses.

Think about how you might respond to these situations:

- Your boss just called to ask you to have a report ready today at noon instead of two days from now.
- Your kids wouldn't cooperate with getting dressed or eating breakfast today, and you need to be somewhere by the top of the hour.
- You don't want to do the dishes alone again this week while your partner has gone to watch a program.
- You've been unable to work because you've been so sick.
- You argued with a friend.

These are stressful situations that are all related to external stimuli. They will cause you to feel pressure at the moment, but once the problems have been resolved, the stress subsides. You are experiencing normal stress. It's not life-or-death.

But what about when the stress doesn't go away, and you develop "persistent feeling[s] of apprehension or dread in situations that are not actually threatening?"¹ In this case, you are moving into chronic stress territory. The responses being triggered are something you've created through internal dialogue and your reactions may trigger anxiety.

What are some signs of stress and anxiety?

Stress

- Caused by situations you experience.
- Can be traced back to an external cause.
- You use coping tools.
- After they are resolved, the stress diminishes or disappears.

Anxiety

- Caused without an external stressor and linked to your internal dialogue.
- Typically prolonged and chronic.
- Left unmanaged can build from being mild, short-term, and manageable to severe disorders that can last for months and "negatively affect mood and functioning."²

Both stress and anxiety

- Panic attacks
- Insomnia
- Trouble focusing
- Anger
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Muscle pain
- Difficulty with digestion.

We must remember that stress is not always bad. Stress is an important reaction that protects you from danger. When experiencing stress, your body releases hormones, adrenaline and cortisol increasing your blood pressure and heart rate providing the energy needed to fight or flee from crisis scenarios. Without adequate stress in your life, you are likely to feel less motivated, and unenthused. You may lack the necessary reasoning to pursue personal goals and may find difficulty enjoying simple pleasures and the enthusiasm to start living life to its fullest. In contrast, having too much stress will manifest in physical, mental, and emotional ailments with feelings of anxiousness and pressure.



How has COVID-19 been stressful?

With the pandemic, we've all been dealing with isolation and being apart from friends and family. Simultaneously, we've been fearful of contracting the virus. Researchers are tracking how the pandemic's mental stress is translating to increased and prolonged anxiety and depression. We've been grieving our losses. In some cases, people we know have lost their lives directly because of the virus. Others may have indirectly because of delays in treatment or therapy caused by shifts in healthcare resource priorities. It's been stressful working virtually using video and tele-conference technology which is not the same as being together in the same room. For those who haven't been able to work from home, remembering to social distance and remain physically distant makes everyone more cautious and less natural. Similarly, after a year of pandemic-related stay-at-home orders, you might find that your patience and tolerance have diminished with the people with whom you live.

What kinds of long-term changes could we begin to experience because of COVID-19?

The pandemic has shifted how we interact with each other and the types and locations of employment. For example, "the internet and social media have allowed us to reach into each other's homes" but also learn new skills and develop new hobbies.³ Cooking, gardening, and improvising because of supply shortages have become commonplace as more people discover their creative side. Similarly, for those who can work from home, this is a switch that may remain in place. New and additional safety protocols may be implemented for those who work in public settings in order to limit and reduce further community spread of infection. Additionally, with socially distanced and reduced ridership on mass transit, people may be more apt to walk or cycle to work. As a result, the hours where people need to be at work may shift, resulting in "the disappearance of the 9-5 altogether."⁴ Finally, with stay-at-home orders and a shift in commuting, the climate is getting some greatly needed relief. There have been drops in greenhouse gasses and harmful air contaminants. Similarly, traffic reductions have eliminated pollutants. Wildlife has returned. All of these events point to the prospect of how with a little more conscious decision-making, we can achieve a greener future.

COVID-19 also exposed social inequity identifying vulnerable institutions and populations within our society. There has been much debate around how to protect essential workers. Every essential worker, from doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers, to retail and restaurant workers, put themselves at risk and in harm's way in order to maintain their livelihoods. While recognition was strong early in the pandemic, collective fatigue has waned the recognition and declarations of gratefulness that people enthusiastically participated in. We have also seen that there must be a priority given to policy changes and funding discussions for healthcare in general. Too many systemic vulnerabilities have been exposed in rural, urban centres and Indigenous and immigrant communities.

Vaccinations are key

As vaccination programs continue, the hope is that all eligible and able citizens will become fully vaccinated. As we've been seeing, there is a direct correlation between the number of vaccinations administered and the shift in community transmission. It's only with the public's involvement in all countries that immunizations will help reduce the threat level of the virus.

Traditional September events

For back to school, be it elementary, secondary, or post-secondary, we're going to see a mix of teaching and learning styles in place as part of a new reality. While many students and teachers have been learning through remote, online sessions for some time, it's expected that pockets of the population will continue using these methods. For some, online learning has been a struggle; whereas others have thrived. With each term, teachers and instructors learn new techniques to help deliver classes most safely and effectively. Some programs may see an evolution where some students are present in the classroom, while others are remote.

With the end of summer, it's also often a time to refocus efforts at work with added attention to our professions. Again, there may be some workplaces that are eager to welcome employees back to their physical spaces. Still, others will take more time to develop return-to-work plans and modify their environments for safety. Other employees who have become accustomed to alternate work arrangements must be ready to follow their employer's expectations and instructions for when and how they will return. In some cases, employees may be permitted to continue their work from home arrangements.

Mental health: A shadow pandemic that workplaces can help address

People's mental health was of concern before the pandemic, however through COVID-19, it has "accelerated...mental health and emotional distress" crises.⁵ Workplaces can help by targeting "financial, physical and mental well-being" when working with employees.⁶ Investments in training managers in mental health first-aid, assisting employees in making connections to resources and services that can offer help, and shifting the culture to be supportive are all initiatives that will help employees re-adjust over time.

Coping, building resiliency and moving ahead

In the early days of the pandemic, people were optimistic that life would return to normal, but it may not be the normal we knew. You may have heard the term "new normal" used in conversations where people pondered and tried to imagine the effects of all the changes we have experienced to date. We can see now that many uncertainties are starting to recede. It will take time and patience to develop new practices and protocols that will be supportive and make good sense. Instead of focusing on a "new normal," perhaps it would be easier, for now, to consider what we're experiencing as a "next normal". A shift in our thinking here will help alleviate stress and be kinder to managing expectations without being overburdened. There will inevitably be changes, so learning how to cope can help reduce stress and anxiety.

Some easier ways to support this include:

• Take a self-imposed media break

- Sometimes you can be surprised and overcome by unproductive or negative thoughts and viewpoints expressed by social media connections. Recognize when social media and news media are elevating your stress levels and tune out. You may set daily limits or "mute" distressing content to give yourself a break.

• Get outside and keep moving

- Exercise is one of the best things you can do to stay healthy and find good well-being.

• Get enough rest

- Never underestimate the power of a regular sleep cycle. Sleep hygiene plays an integral part in "cleaning the brain," which can help alleviate brain fog symptoms and may help protect against neurocognitive decline.⁷

• Get help

- Seek professional supports through various resources and services, including your Employee and Family Assistance Plan (EFAP).
- Don't forget about free resources and collaborations such as Wellness Together Canada at wellnesstogether.ca. It provides people with counselling, coaching, and courses as part of a toolkit to improve their overall mental health and wellness in response to the stressors of the pandemic.

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