Pandemic Braining:
Dealing with "I feel so overloaded."

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This all started with a student asking for advice because they were feeling emotionally overloaded right now and didn't know how they could focus on being productive during the pandemic. I thought it might be helpful to others (students, faculty, staff, others…)

Ok, let's talk about these issues in order, because a few are peeking through:
- (1) emotions/emotional reactions,
- (2) how to react to the pandemic, and
- (3) keeping productive during the hellscape that is 2020.

Emotional Responses

On the topic of emotions and emotional reactions -- These are all VERY normal reactions right now. Remember that we're going to see an increase in a lot of symptoms of psychological diagnoses right now in the short- and long-term as a result of the changes we're seeing from COVID. For example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULdW78vnRQs

And, remember that everyone reacts differently. Some folks are more likely to cry. Some people are withdrawn. Some are angry, aggressive. But all of those reactions tell you that something is going on. It's time to consider what's up, and what you can do to help.

So, if the symptoms are relatively brief in duration, check your self-care. Are you taking care of yourself? I DON'T mean self-care like #TreatYoSelf; I mean self-care like the less glamorous but way more important questions: "did you actually eat? Did you get enough sleep? Are you taking your meds?" See also: https://youfeellikeshit.com/

Caring for others can make this pandemic experience a lot worse, especially if you're providing more care or your own systems of support and relief are overwhelmed or gone due to safety risks (like losing a babysitter, losing in-home nursing care, etc.) If you're providing care for others, you're going to be stretched thin, but YOUR needs are still important! In fact, they're doubly important right now because **you cannot pour from an empty cup**. if you get stretched too thin or burn out, it's possible others won't be able to step in to help. However, it's sort of like flying in a plane; put on YOUR mask before attempting to assist others. So be sure to check in on yourself regularly and often, before attending to the needs of others (if you can).

Are you symptoms lasting longer than a day or two? Are you noticing that the symptoms interfere regularly with your life? Can't get anything done? Feeling REALLY down, or consider self-harm? It's never a bad idea to get guidance from an actual professional, and we have wonderful resources in our community. Here are a few at UAA:

- https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/students/health-safety/health-counseling-center
- https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/academics/college-of-arts-and-sciences/departments/psychology/psychological-services-center/
- In crisis? Visit https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/ or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Reacting to Pandemic Conditions

OK! So, moving away from the psychological/emotional, how does this fit into the pandemic? Well, it sucks. We're disconnected. We can't get relief and respite care in the same way. All of our systems for doing everything are disrupted. Coupled with the fact that everyone is essentially trying to do all of the same things, but remotely without many of their regular tools, makes us slow and less productive. Things that used to take 3 minutes now take an hour, or get lost entirely.

And let's talk about the role of stimulus control in all of this!

Stimulus control is the idea that certain places set the occasion for certain behaviors. Before COVID, school was for school things, sometimes social things. NOW, home is the place for all of that (if you're privileged enough to work from home). Or you're trying to do all the same things while potentially exposing yourself to illness (for those who work in public, work with others, study in public spaces because they can't work from home).

And it's terrifying because there is no clear stimulus associated with potential illness. Think about it: If there was some clear sign that showed "Oh, they're sick," you could avoid the person. But we're learning that there's no clear indicator of illness. People can be asymptomatic carriers; they can be passing illness to others without knowing they're ill. And you don't know if you were exposed until 2+ weeks later, which means the punisher is unclear and delayed. All of these combined leads to paranoia and fear. Then you've got the social conflict from mask-wearers vs. anti-maskers; while that conflict is important and emotionally draining, that's not the point of this work and I'll decline to talk about that further.

SO, the emotions are incredibly difficult and the uncertainty around COVID makes all of this much worse. But what can you do to take care of yourself? How can you keep your head up and keep moving forward?

Keeping Your Head Up/Moving Forward

1. **Recognize that it's ok to NOT be ok**. That is, there's nothing we can do right now to change what's going on in the world and even considering the gravity and scope of what's going on is going to make some days are going to be harder than others. The first priority should be putting on your OWN air mask.

2. **Keep a consistent sleep schedule.** With so much of the world upside down right now, it's SO easy to stay up a bit later than you intend, or choose to sleep in -- after all, it's not like you're *going* anywhere… But sleep is the ultimate 'reset' button; nothing short-circuits any feelings of regularity you might have during these unusual times like a wonky sleep schedule. When we're well-rested, we make better decisions and we are able to process our environment better, so fight the urge to stay up late or sleep in as best you can. There are environmental and behavioral strategies we can take to improve the quality of our *sleep hygiene*. For example, set a timer to go off at bedtime and keep a regular wake-up time. Avoid bright lights (like your phone, laptop, or TV) 1-2 hours before bed. Programs like F.lux can be helpful because they can automatically dim and shift the color of light coming from your devices, which is a handy reminder that it's time to go to sleep.

   Most importantly, use your bed ONLY for sleep -- not sleep AND studying AND watching videos AND hanging out online. Using your bed *only* for sleep helps establish stimulus control;

more on that later. [Click here](#) for some other ideas about improving your sleep!

3. **Assess yo-self.** Are there days/times when the feelings are worse than others? Better than others? Understanding where and when you're feeling overwhelmed can help you understand

okay, time to tackle the ol' to do list! let's see... monday:

today's wednesday.
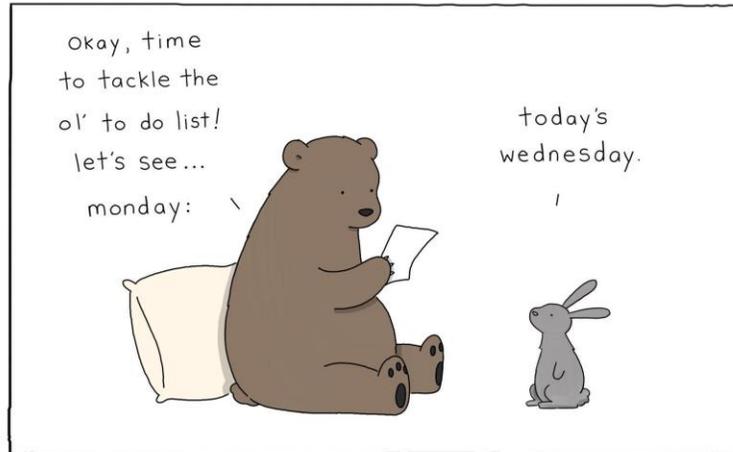
oh well, better luck next week.
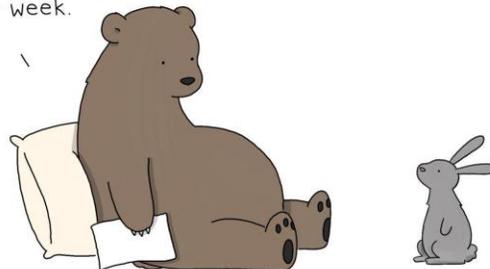
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if there's something you should be avoiding... (*COUGHCOUGH* *SOCIAL MEDIA* *COUGHCOUGH*)... or doing more of. And collect data (as a diary, or with simple [ABC recording](#)). Note when you're feeling good and where/when/what happened, note when you're feeling especially crappy and where/when/what happened. This is a [descriptive assessment](#). Keeping this journal/data over time can help you identify patterns that could be easy for us to miss even under the best circumstances.

4. **Got a therapist?** If not, consider getting one! OR, if you're feeling like traditional therapy is not your jam, make a community of people you can check in regularly with. A Friday evening Zoom call with friends can be incredible and restorative.

Keeping Productive

1. **Make a dedicated work space.** Use the dedicated "work" space to help establish stimulus control (even if it's a super-small space like a spot on the counter in your kitchen). DON'T use that space for anything except work! Eventually, you'll feel more motivated to work just by going to that space. (This is the same advice we gave above about sleep. Use your bed ONLY for sleeping, and you'll eventually be sleepy just by being there, and using your dedicated work space *only* for work can make you more motivated just by being there!)

2. **Schedule your time & take time for yourself.** Keep a planner and dedicate time to working. Start with the Pomodoro technique; beginning with 25 minutes of work and then a 5 minute break. Schedule lots of BREAKS in your time so you can get up, attend to self-care/bio needs, take a moment to reflect on the good work you're doing.
   a. Pomodoro not working? 25 minutes too much? That's fine! Start with 10.
   b. Can't do 10 minutes? That's ok, too! Start as small as you need to, then gradually work

Just take it ten seconds at a time. Everything will be okay

   your way up.

   c. **Need a timer?** Try MarinaraTimer.com (it's free and easy to use).
3. **To-Do Lists.** To-do lists are our friends and our enemies. They're frenemies. They're great for reminding us what to do, which is awesome because our memories are all shot and we walk into rooms trying to remember why we came here... but to-do lists are also cruel reminders of all the little things that have to get done. It can feel overwhelming to remember everything, and the list just sits there... mocking you with it's un-done-ness. And then when you get one task done, another task is there to demand our attention.

   To-do lists are the ultimate exercise in negative reinforcement (behavior that allows us to escape and avoid), and being overwhelmed with a to-do list is negative reinforcement extinction because the list is *never done*! SO…

4. **ACHIEVEMENT LIST!** If you get to the end of the day and think "Oh, god I've done NOTHING today, I'm such a worthless failure", but you know that's not true and you busted your hump all day, it could be that the tasks are too small that they're not getting onto your to-do list and not

getting crossed off. Instead, reorient your attention to making an achievement list, and keep it close/handy to your to-do list.

Write down the things you got accomplished, no matter how small, on your achievement list. At the end of the day, your to-do list might not have gotten shorter, but all of the hard work and productivity you did during the day will be reflected on the achievement list and you can rest assured that your time was not wasted.
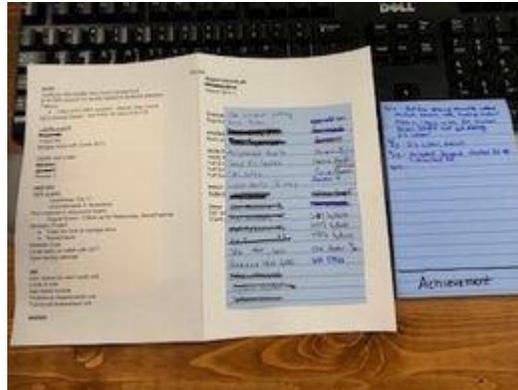
Pictured: to-do list, left, and achievement list, right