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Responding Creatively: A Time Called for Physical Distancing

By: Virginia Jahyu

"I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge – even wisdom. Like art." - Toni Morrison

It was 8:00 pm on a Wednesday evening when I received a phone call notifying me that my grandfather, who lived in a long-term care center, had tested positive for COVID-19. The helplessness I felt in that moment still lingers. The physical distancing meant there was no way for anyone he recognized as family to be by his side. He passed away the next day at noon. I was devastated and mourned the loss of both my grandfather and the traditional rituals we could not have.

I found myself in moments of daze, reminiscing, and deep contemplations of existentialism and mortality. I recognize that I was naturally reacting to the death of my grandfather. When something happens, our body is going to react; this is a survival instinct that is imbedded in the makeup of being human. With that said, there is another way of processing this hardship, and it is by responding to the situation. I remind myself that Reacting is instinctual and Responding is a conscious choice.

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What is your understanding of the difference between “reacting” and “responding”?



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Reacting to my situation was experienced as deep sadness, and I chose to respond to take some control back in my life. Exercising compassion for myself, and aware that all these emotions are a part of the natural processes of grief and loss, I chose to give myself breaks from this sadness. One way to help me respond to the situation is choosing to give myself a break; I call them healthy distractions.

Physical distancing has disrupted our social and public life experience; healthy distractions can be a way of coping with what comes with the pandemic we are all experiencing.



Distractions are often seen as a thing that prevents someone from fully giving attention to something else; with this definition, distractions are generally considered as unfavourable. However, the risk of distracted driving or using distraction to avoid coping with life is different from healthy distraction.

Healthy distraction can break cycles. It takes you out of your negative, unconscious, and habitual way of thinking. It reduces the intensity of the negative emotion, so it is easier to manage and allows you to take a conscious time-out. That does not mean you deny or run away from difficult emotions. Later, you will return to the emotion and process it when you are in a better position to come up with a creative resolution.

It seems appropriate as an expressive arts therapist to address the current lived experience during physical distancing. In my clinical work with persons with intellectual disabilities, themes of stress and anxiety – more specifically, irritability, isolation, fear, and hopelessness – amongst those who live with disabilities are heightened during this time. There have been many articles and resources circulating about all the ways we can keep ourselves healthy; this may include social things that we can do at a distance: online classes, webinars, trainings, music concert series, drop-in programs to name a few. It is important for people to maintain social connections in this time of increased stress.

This article aims to share practical tools in the form of prompts and “Call out boxes” to creatively respond to the pandemic we are experiencing. The purpose of “Call out boxes” are to offer the reader opportunities to journal or explore the question or statement at hand. This can be used as a reflective tool for yourself, your team, or the people you support.

It is even more important now, to be united as a community of direct support professionals and to imagine together how to respond creatively to this situation, in service of ourselves and others. The effects of the current pandemic have shifted everyone’s way of living. We might feel alone, yet we are not. We all have access and creative tools to deal with adversities and have demonstrated resilience in different ways in the past. We can start to look at the very thing that has “helped” us in the past as resources to bring into the present and future. With the arts as a companion, we can shape, hope, and build resilience.

**Think about a time in your life when you were dealing with a difficult situation.
What helped you get through it?**

Imagination is the power of creativity which is activated and developed within yourselves. It is a powerful tool that we use every day. When we look up into the sky and start to see images appear in the clouds, that is our imagination at work. When we hear music in our head without it playing out loud, that is our imagination at work. When our body moves, sways, and dances in response to music, that is our imagination at work. The ability to create images in your head with word descriptions is also the act of imagination and creativity. Creativity can be seen in the tasks of everyday life, like choosing which outfits we want to wear, what colour we want to paint with, or how we like to decorate our rooms.

List five (5) ways you exercise creativity.

Turning to creative solutions includes working with the imagination. Sometimes, this means trying new ways of doing old things or stepping outside of the box of what is obvious. As direct support professionals, it is a part of our job to be creative and resourceful. Adaptation is all about creativity. Remember that you already have these skills with which to start.

In activating the imagination, individuals create new experiences for themselves, which open doors to new awareness and provide new avenues for engaging in life. During this time, hope seems to be lacking in our community. The imagination is about accessing possibilities and, in this way, it can help us restore hope.

Sometimes, it is difficult or impossible to express feelings with just words. Emotions can be hard to articulate and, often, words do not seem to completely convey their meaning. Art making can be particularly beneficial in circumstances where overwhelming or complex emotions need to be expressed. The art-making process may help people confront emotions, overcome depression, integrate traumatic experiences, and find relief and resolution.

Sixteen journal prompts to play with and explore:

1. List five nice things that happened today.
2. Write a letter to your poet-self.
3. Name ten (10) people who have positively impacted you.
4. What are your favourite scents?
5. List books, movies, and games that give you comfort.
6. List your favourite things about your favourite people.
7. What would be your magical power if you had one?
8. Write, draw, or talk about the funniest thing that has ever happened to you.
9. Draw or write down a list of your favourite things in your house.
10. Name three (3) people that trigger you, then two (2) nice things about them.
11. Look out the window and list or draw what you see.
12. If you were a tree, what would you look like?
13. What is your favourite season? What do you enjoy doing during that season?
14. List a few people you would like to see right now.
15. Write a three-line poem about the sunrise or sunset.
16. Come up with five (5) journal prompts.

Choosing prompts that resonate with you will make this process more fun — adapt as necessary and skip the ones you do not want to do. You may choose to print out these prompts and have a daily draw to work on it together as a group or perhaps independently.

“Exploring the Other Side” visualization and arts exercise:

1. Imagine a door. Notice the details. Draw it.
2. Where does this door lead to? Open the door and see what you see. Draw it.
3. Is the other side of the door a comfortable and safe place?
 - If not, what does it need to be comfortable and safe?
 - If so, what tells you it is comfortable and safe?

I came across a meme that read: “If you can't go outside, go inside.” I thought this was a wonderful reminder that all of us have many resources within ourselves to enjoy a quality lived experience. To go inside, to dig deeper, to realize and tend to those things that have been put on hold.

Take a moment to reflect on one part of your life that deserves your attention, that deserves cultivation because it has been neglected. Write this out and then write down one simple action step that you will take to honour this under-served part of your life.

With things changing rapidly, there is one thing that remains the same: our innate desire and need to be seen, heard, and belong. We know that prioritizing connection and joy enhance health, well-being, and a sense of purpose and belonging. With the uncertainty of when physical distancing will come to an end, many people will find this process stressful. And it is important for us as direct support professionals to continue being flexible and creative in responding to physical distancing. Therefore, healthy distractions and creative activities can be very useful and grounding.

If I could speak in the language of gestures, it would be like this: one hand protecting my heart and the other hand up in the air, waving. We are all affected by the pandemic, and we are in it together even when we feel we are alone. Perhaps this experience will help us refine and understand what is most important to us and restore the hope that lives within.

And when the distancing ban lifts, I look forward to the rituals that will honour my late grandfather. May he and the people who have lost their lives due to the pandemic rest in peace.

About the author

Virginia Jahyu, M.A., is an expressive arts therapist and co-founding therapist of the Trauma to Trust Clinic where she works with people living with disabilities who have experienced trauma. Her work is centered around relationships, using the arts and dialogue for positive change, and transformation. She uses a variety of artistic modalities: music, poetry, visual arts, movement, and play to engage and empower individual's creative spirit and expressive voice. Her passion for the arts, accessibility, and equity continues to guide her work.

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