

Week 4 - Lockdown

“You will have bad times but they will always wake you up to the stuff you weren't paying attention to” - Robin Williams

I, like many I have spoken to this week seemed to hit a bit of a slump this Easter weekend. For me it magnified the isolation at a time when ordinarily I would have been enjoying a well-deserved break after the long stretch from Christmas, spending precious time with friends and family and seeking out new adventures.

I had to work harder than normal at the basics to not give in to that slump and pick myself up, ready to start a new week with more gusto than the previous one had ended. I had felt a heightened level of anxiety and I knew that I was being emotionally hijacked! Anxiety lies to you and convinces you that you cannot manage your stress levels and calm yourself but it is possible to manage it. If we can remember that anxiety, whilst a very powerful emotion, is still only an emotion and therefore one we can learn to calm and take control of. There are many techniques that you can use to help you – breathing, reframing, relaxing and so on - which can all be very helpful tools. Different things work for different people, in the pursuit to reduce the feeling of the power that anxiety may hold over you.

For me, I am practical in my coping style. In trying to write my ramblings this week, I read a blog written by Helen Sharman, who some of you may remember was the first British astronaut, as well as the first woman to visit the *Mir* space station in 1991. In it she uses her thoughts from her time in space on confinement and isolation, to help us with these challenging times that we are all facing today in our own confinement. The tips she shared seemed to resonate with me and are in common with a lot of current advice. Like Helen, we are all trying to make our own way through an unfamiliar landscape, so I feel the advice bears repeating.

Keep Communicating – In space there were only the basics for life of food and shelter and crew mates for company. What astronauts miss most is friends and family and the relationships we all take for granted on earth. There are so many ways we can maintain contact with people than were available then.

Respect and Tolerance – Living in a confined space with other people requires a bit more respect and tolerance than normal to maintain cordial relationships. We need to understand each other's frustrations- what annoys us and what helps us to relax and it helps if the grotty jobs are shared!

Teamwork – We knew that we relied on each other for our lives.... if we missed the docking port by a few centimetres, we could damage our spacecraft and we would all die. Thirty years on, my crew and I are still friends – hard times shared can be a truly bonding experience.

Take Control – Mission control scheduled my days to the nearest minute. Now, we have been told to stay at home but we still have some control (no one is telling us which book to read or what time to get up, after all) and there is a huge purpose : TO SAVE LIVES.

Have a plan – space travel required plans and back up systems. The same could be said today.

Set targets, be useful - if suddenly our work diminishes and our days become less busy, we can feel at a loss. We can still have targets and make achievements every day that are useful.

Enjoy new things – Astronauts on long duration missions enjoy catching up with films or books, for instance. On Earth, even just at home, we have a whole load of activity to choose from. And we can plan something nice to look forward to because this WILL NOT LAST FOREVER.

Observe nature – As we orbited earth, the planet rotated below so the view was constantly changing. I was entranced with how the sun reflected off lakes on earth, seeing lights in cities appear as we entered dusk was magical and sunrise was spectacular. But I could not experience weather and fresh air in space. Now, we have time to stop and enjoy things...appreciating the beauty in clouds and smelling the outside air as we open a window (I couldn't do that in space!)

Value what we have – During my entire space mission, I did not once think about possessions, the objects that we often strive to own, perhaps to show off our wealth and identity. Back on earth and confronted by materialism, I downgraded the relative value of 'stuff' in my life and I think Covid-19 will have a similar effect on many of us. Being less of a consumer society will benefit the environment and reserve resources for what we really need, but I think we will feel the change in society that will be more communal, more cohesive, and generally nicer. When the pandemic is over, the world will be a better place to live in.

Helen Sharman - March 2020

So, we near the end of another week in lockdown. This Monday sees the start of a new school week and the end of hopefully the strangest Easter we will ever have! I can now emphatically agree with the late, brilliant Robin Williams, that I, we, the world are waking up to the stuff we weren't paying attention to. And that is what drives me forward and will help me through this time, offering homage to the small things, the random acts of kindness - the togetherness whilst separated. IT'S NOT FOREVER.

Hang in there all,

Anna McQuade

School and Relate Young People's Counsellor

Contact time2talk@SGHS.org.uk if you would like an appointment and follow us @mabels.tails on Instagram.