Sustaining Ourselves in Changing Times

It is a mystery what our social landscape will look like by the time you read this article. Much rides on the next few weeks and trying to understand what is happening is both confusing and maddening. Reports conflict and making future plans seems impossible. This is more abnormal than a new normal. We are grieving a loss of normalcy. So how do we help sustain ourselves in uncertainty?

It makes sense to look to oppressed groups of people for wisdom. Across the board, cultures formed in the fire of difficulty have developed rich traditions. These encompass oral history, dance, music, art, writing, and fashion. When oppressive forces seek to dominate, it is common that these forms of humanity and ritual are banned. While sheltering in place to flatten the curve is not an oppressive force, our ability to express ourselves and connect with others has changed. Energy comes from this expression and connection, but now our options are limited and we have to be more intentional.

When people sing or play music together, research shows that their heartbeats and brain waves synchronize, and they become more charitable in their thoughts and actions toward one another. Unexpected beauty, in the form of nature or art, provides pleasure and small bursts of positive emotion. The brain creates higher levels of dopamine and oxytocin and resets our body’s physical response to stress. This allows us to continue caring, loving, and working from a place of wellbeing and strength. Regular, short periods of positive activity can assist us in keeping a healthy baseline.

Though social distancing has isolated us in certain ways, we can choose to be creative. We can still celebrate, even if it looks different than before. Celebration helps us maintain cohesiveness and we cannot give up our ability to find pleasure in whatever remains.

Some would argue that joy and pleasure are marks of privilege and abundance. In contrast, it seems they are necessities that cannot be taken, but that we can choose to let go. Joy and pleasure are marks of humanity and by fighting to hold on, we choose vitality. Our circumstances can only take these from us if we let them.

What does this look like? First, we can be cautious with who and what we give our energy to. Are there things we are allowing to drain us when we could choose something better? We can find beauty. In her book *Wild*, author Cheryl Strayed tells about her mother’s choice advice: “There’s always a sunrise and always a sunset and it’s up to you to choose to be there for it.” If you happen to miss it, remember that there will be 364 more chances during the year to tune in. Work to develop mindfulness and pay attention to the present to avoid missing out on everyday gifts. The benefits of mindfulness and being present may be as simple as concentrating on our surroundings and taking a deep breath.

Grace and humor can also bring us joy. Often it is simply a change in our lens that can give us the empathy we need for ourselves and for others. When we can choose kindness, we not only lift others up, but we get a boost ourselves. And humor, in addition to providing empathy for others, can often unlock new methods of self-expression as we laugh at our novel attempts. When was the last time you sang in the shower? Would it be okay to observe some rust in your voice or some wrong notes?

Lastly, hang onto treasured art forms and rituals. Make sure that you are taking time for dance parties, coloring fests, home fashion or cooking shows, making bouquets from your neighbor’s dandelions, or whatever brings you pleasure. It does not have to be complicated. In fact, the simpler the better. Breathe and take in what is present for you. There is beauty to be found right where you are and you can choose to preserve your vitality. Fight for it – you are worth the effort.
A Toilet Paper Fort

If you are reading this article, it is now summer, and you have thus far navigated the spring of COVID-19. What started out as an almost off-the-radar report of a mysterious virus in China became the focus of global attention in a matter of weeks. It is literally in our face nonstop on all media outlets. Whether in print or digital formats – it is inescapable! Our very lives depend on following new guidelines that feel awkward and disconnecting, just at a time when human beings crave to reach out and literally be touched with a reassuring hand or hug. Consider smiles that can telegraph warmth and acceptance are now hidden behind the ubiquitous mask. “We’re in this together” has become clichéd to the point where it no longer registers on our consciousness. We question when this nightmare will be over or when things will go back to normal. What will normal be in the future?

Some may wonder, where is my next meal coming from? For others, it is who can take care of me if I get sick? How are my siblings and parents faring? When will I get to see my family again? Is it going to be safe for me in my own home? What did I (we) do to deserve this? And as these and similar questions swirl in our collective minds, it dawned on me that we have heard these questions before. They are the very questions we often attribute to children in foster care; either they are unspoken, or the children come right out and ask their case manager or their temporary caregivers. And with that realization, a new perspective of this pandemic took shape.

This pandemic is providing us with an opportunity to rework some of our assumptions and understanding of the children who are entrusted in our care. If our questions mimic those of a foster child, do we allow ourselves to be open to the vulnerability that is required to face uncertainty and the loss of perceived control? It is the exposure of our own vulnerability that builds the foundation of empathy for children who have suffered great loss. If we have empathy for a child who is grieving so many losses, we are in a much better place to understand and tolerate behavior that is essentially driven by the need to survive and be in control. If you think that a child’s challenging behaviors are deliberate, just to irritate or get back at adults, I present exhibit number one: the stripping of store shelves and hoarding of toilet paper by usually sane, rational adults. That seemingly absurd behavior is an adult’s unconscious desire to be in control. If adults engage in such behavior, so too will children.

Rather than viewing the pandemic in the strictest terms of a horrible scourge upon the planet, consider the gift we are getting from it; the gift of insight into the heart and mind of our hurting children. Ah, truth dawns! Or is it just the light streaming through the cracks in the vulnerable fort of protection we have constructed of toilet paper? We need to give ourselves the grace to overlook our irrational behaviors during this challenging time and maybe even laugh. If we can do that for ourselves, how can we do no less for our children? Let us be the calm, wise, and safe guide for our children during this scariest of times.
More Than One Pandemic

As the world has struggled with a pandemic, we in the United States have seen an inequality in the way the virus and its impact have affected people. With the economy shuttered for over three months, the greatest inequality is seen among working individuals who have been furloughed, laid off, or lost their jobs. This often occurs among the lowest paid in industries that provide service, such as the hospitality industry, or those whose jobs have been deemed non-essential. Such jobs are often held by women, single moms, immigrants, and minorities. Still others continue to work in jobs that put them at a high risk for exposure. Families may have suffered the pangs of hunger or the emotional stress of wondering about eviction. Or will they bring home this virus to infect their children?

For others, inequality comes from the disproportionate rate of infection and ultimately death among people of minority heritage in this country. Whether it is due to insufficient testing, underlying health issues, or lack of routine medical care is of little concern to those who find themselves in a fight for their lives.

This pandemic has ushered in a very difficult time for our country, but our attention has now been shifted to an issue that is even more deadly than the virus; it is the unnecessary death of people of color as a result of longstanding injustice and systemic racism.

All parents, regardless of their race, need to have ongoing dialogue with their children about the deadly issues and social ills that plague our communities. For those who parent children who do not reflect their own race or ethnicity, we can take this opportunity to discuss what these current events mean for them, family, and the community at large. Parents cannot assume that potential silence on their children’s part communicates a lack of concern or interest for the issues. If children do not broach the topic, then adults must spark the conversation. Parents who are privileged because they belong in the white majority should ask their children of color, “What do you need from us?” Yes, many will feel inadequate to discuss the topic, but we need to learn to rest in that awkwardness. Two online sources offering multiple formats for furthering a parent’s education on race are bit.ly/ANTIRACISMRESOURCES and embracerace.org.

Children who have begun their lives with traumatic experiences should not suffer systemic racism to further compound the challenges they face. The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to do nothing. If we want peace, we must all address injustice.
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Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.
Educational Opportunities for Adoptive and Foster Parents

Visit familyforwardmo.org/calendar to view training information online. Summer classes will be hosted virtually and plans are still in motion, so monitor regularly for additions. Complete training details and registration instructions will be provided.

Each session counts as training toward your licensure requirement (30 hours every two years). Perhaps one silver lining of the pandemic is being able to engage in virtual classes without having to leave your home and arrange for childcare. We appreciate your commitment and encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities. Sessions are provided at low or no cost to all adoptive and foster parents. Registration is required.

COVID-19 Updates

FamilyForward is still here to provide help, hope, and healing. Check the COVID-19 Updates section of familyforwardmo.org for always current information about our service delivery and operations.

Our Children’s Homes remain open for residential care but access is limited to essential personnel only. There are still many unknowns about COVID-19 and we plan to take a strategic, proactive, and controlled approach to expanding building access at the four other FamilyForward sites and resuming in-person services. These are difficult times and we are doing whatever it takes to support our clients, participants, and community.

Register for Training

Contact Sarah Gamblin at 314.968.2350 ext. 5230 or sarah.gamblin@familyforwardmo.org

Visit familyforwardmo.org/calendar to view training information online.
Diversity Crossword Puzzle

Across
4. Person or group compared with another in an unfair way
7. Organized system of belief in a higher power
9. Ex. "All football players are dumb jocks."
11. Blending cultures
14. Ninth month of fasting in the Muslim calendar
15. A culture where health is a balance of yin and yang
16. Systemic and pervasive nature of social inequity
17. Unearned rights given to group based on membership

Down
1. A person who comes from another country
2. Commemorates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt
3. Opinion not based on reason or experience
5. Unreasonable fear or intolerance of LGBTQ
6. Including people with many differences
8. Ideology that invalidates a negative racial experience
10. Hatred or intolerance of another race
12. Involving two or more racial groups, as in adoption
13. A person who denies the existence of a supreme being