



Comparison Can Be Cruel: One coping strategy does not fit all

By Rachel Wagner, MSW

Your inbox is full of emails with subject headings like, “How to De-stress during COVID-19.” You’re scrolling through social media and consuming more content, images and subliminal messages than you usually do. Everyone wants to be helpful, and everyone has great ideas. So do you really need another reminder to breathe; practice gratitude; create structure; go outside; connect with ones you love; read; meditate; journal; set boundaries; exercise; laugh; and be gentle with yourself?

My answer is “yes,” – and “no”! The desire to do the “right” thing, while navigating uncharted territory is strong. So, of all the reminders out there currently flooding your screens, the one that I encourage us to focus on most is to be gentle with ourselves. There is no one correct way to get through this and it can be dangerous to compare yourself against the well-intentioned, self-help messaging machine. Surviving this COVID-19 crisis is not a contest.

Let’s be clear – you do not need to “do this” pandemic perfectly or like anyone else. We are all struggling in our own way to tolerate ambiguity and to try and create a new normal ... not to mention those of us who may be struggling financially or suffering physically, tortured emotionally or grappling with grief.

One of my dearest friends lost his mother to cancer a couple days ago. She passed without family around her, in a hospital full of pandemic fear. This week, there will be a funeral where only two people are permitted to attend. As I absorbed this news, I was flooded with memories. We all have shared weddings and baby showers, milestones and heartbreaks over the past twenty years, but I can’t attend this funeral. I can’t hold my friend’s hand.

Sans pandemic, I would have hopped in my car immediately, driven three hours and showed up with bagels – because bagels have and always will be our thing. Feeling helpless, my brain went into hyper-drive. Could I travel three hours in the middle of the night; buy a million bagels and create some gigantic heart-shaped bagel art on their front lawn? This idea wouldn't require face-to-face contact, but I thought it might show my friend and his family how much they are loved. Another idea that popped into my head was laying out Christmas lights that spell out a loving message; another was a thousand paper cranes hung from their trees. My sweet husband listened to me riff on idea after idea for about twenty minutes, and finally just said, "Why can't you just call them? Do what you do best and listen. Maybe during a worldwide pandemic, grand gestures aren't required, especially ones that put you at risk and makes them feel sad knowing you were outside their house, but they couldn't hug you."

Wow! That husband of mine certainly has his moments, and this moment got me thinking about why I felt the need to cook up some grand gesture. Grand gestures are not my style or my love language. I know I felt helpless, but in that moment, I realized it was social media infiltrating my psyche. Some time before hearing the news of my friend's mother passing, I was mindlessly consuming way more time on Facebook than non-pandemic life would allow. I stumbled upon a post about a touching moment between a woman with stage four cancer and her dearest friends. During this pandemic, she opened her front door to see all of her sorority sisters, spread six feet apart, standing on her lawn and singing to her in solidarity as she wept. As a person whose life has been touched by cancer – and as a human being with feelings – I wept, as well.

I am unbearably sad for my friend who is grieving, but as I tried to reach for "normal," I lost my balance. There is no common normal. Each of us is currently adjusting to our own new normal, and it has us all off our axis and searching for the "right way" to handle both the big and small challenges in life. How are we supposed to "do life" during this pandemic? What is the right way to work from home while your kids are around? How are we supposed to have Zoom family dinners? What about church? And ... how in the world am I supposed to stop comfort-eating and start exercising? So many questions. It is all very unsettling and destabilizing.

Without stability, we may be a little more likely to fall into the trap of comparison while desperately seeking reference points for "normal." My initial response to my friend's grief was guided by a screen instead of my gut. Rather than trusting our twenty-year friendship and our shared wisdom, I set myself up for an impossible comparison. This isn't to say that social media can't provide wonderful inspiration and helpful reference points. There is a lot of great stuff out there.

So where does sharing comfort, connection and inspiration end and the cruelty of comparison begin? It ends when you stop doing what you do best, when you stop speaking your love language or push yourself for picture-perfect posts. It ends when you stop trusting your gut and find yourself looking for all of your answers online. Like most of you, I am going to continue to take in a lot of inspirational and aspirational content over the never several weeks. Some of it can truly help, but lots of it can make you feel bad about yourself. I want to encourage you to look inside yourself instead. Trust your inner wisdom. Be gentle with yourself as you navigate these times, and please avoid the cruel trap of too much comparison.

