

A message from Dr. Janet Morrison



Five Ways to Wellbeing

June 4, 2020

Colleagues:

Today, I want to start by thanking the many individuals who have reached out to me over the last three months to communicate messages of solidarity and support. The pandemic has reinforced the goodness that underpins our community; personally, your kindness has played an integral role in keeping me focused and positive through some challenging (and long!) days. I know I'm not alone in the struggle or the path to thriving.

On an Oakville Chamber of Commerce podcast yesterday, a leader from Ipsos argued that the shadow -- but equally consequential -- pandemic facing our nation is one of negative mental health. Specifically: the precipitous and all-encompassing disruption, social isolation, and economic hardship that have stemmed from the imperative to 'flatten the curve' has caused significant, tangential harm. I see evidence of this across my personal and professional networks; depression and anxiety, specifically, are on the rise.

Over the course of my life and career, I've been an advocate for positive mental health, wellbeing and 'flourishing'. These are issues that matter to me as a professional, parent, partner, and friend. Fredrickson (2009) defined flourishing as: "feeling satisfied with your life and also functioning well in it". She further argued that the way to measure functioning is to assess whether people feel as if they are learning, growing, and making contributions to society.

Through that lens, I've been thinking a lot about the path to flourishing -- versus floundering -- in the face of a crisis, like the one posed by COVID-19. I do not purport to have all the answers, but have *personally* found a 2008 model called, [5 Ways to Wellbeing](#) particularly helpful. In the hope that others will find it equally practical, I thought I'd reflect briefly on each of its tenets: connect; be active; keep learning; give; and, take notice.

Connect

So much is tied to feeling connected. Alf Lizzio's model on Transitions posits that -- among a list of five 'senses' -- a sense of connectedness is key to student success. Essentially, students with stronger connections are more likely to be successful learners, engaged campus citizens and happy people. A student's sense of connectedness depends on the quality of relationships with peers, with staff and their feelings of identification or affiliation with their school. This is why the serious concerns raised by marginalized students are so troubling to me: feeling like you don't belong or aren't valued undermines connection, which in turn poses a significant threat to student success.

Social distancing and the risk of transmission demands that each of us finds new ways to stay connected. My extended family and I, for example, engage in weekly Zoom calls. The use of technology is new for my parents and in-laws but, in some ways, I'm finding it more intimate. On the work front, my 'coffee chats' with colleagues are serving to cement my sense of belonging as a member of the Sheridan community.

Be Active

I learned a long time ago that my mental and physical health are coupled. To that end, I've had to find new ways to maintain social distancing without compromising my commitment to fitness. Specifically, my kids and I work out three times a week, my partner and I walk our dog (Cooper) twice a day, and I'm gardening like it's an endurance sport. My best advice is that you should discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility. Simply: it makes you feel good.

Keep Learning

A mentor taught me that everyone who works on a post-secondary campus is an educator. He also told me that to be an effective educator, you have to be a good learner. And so ... I've tried throughout my career to consciously take on new things that involve a steep learning curve. Here's what I know based on that commitment: learning is hard. It isn't always fun. But... it keeps you fresh, and makes you feel alive. In our line of work, learning also cultivates empathy, or the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing from within the other person's frame of reference.

In the age of COVID-19, there is no shortage of learning! As I drink from the firehose, I've recommitted to reading more, spending time on self-reflection, and engaging in provocative discussions with smart people. I think learning new things makes us more confident and more agile.

Give

In my family, volunteering is non-negotiable. From a very early age, I was taught the concept of privilege and about my responsibility to give back. For both my parents, volunteering is as fundamental to their Canadian identity as hockey and the Northern Lights. They are heroes to many, including me.

Drawing on their example, I'm trying to say yes to every person who asks me for help. I've taken multiple calls with anxious students and parents; I've participated in panels and podcasts; and, I've renewed my commitments to support the sport organizations that matter to my kids. More broadly (and consistent with Sheridan's identity), I'm working hard to be kind, express gratitude, and smile more. I'm convinced the little things will make a big difference.

Take Notice

This one is hard for me! My partner often speaks of the 'hamsters' that run rampant in my brain, rarely affording a moment of stillness. Over time, however, I think I've become more proficient at savoring the moment and being aware of the world around me. These are remarkable times; being conscious of what we're experiencing will, I think, make us more grateful for what matters most.

To be clear: this is my *personal* recipe for maintaining my health and wellbeing during the pandemic. I want to thank members of the community, again, for helping me stay connected, teaching me new things, being generous, and kind. I'm determined to keep striving for 'flourishing'.

Warmly,

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