

Learning from the Pain of the Pandemic

📅 Wed, 7/14 9:39AM ⏱ 52:48

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, pandemic, uncertainty, life, happen, oxytocin, epidemic, transition, feelings, fear, trauma, manage, loneliness, lockdowns, lost, world, problem, months, opportunity, experienced

SPEAKERS

Tricia Johnson, Arthur Brooks, support message

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- S** support message 00:00

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 - T** Tricia Johnson 00:32

this is Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. For many of us the past 16 months have been emotionally excruciating. The pandemic's lockdowns increased loneliness, isolation and depression. And for people who lost loved ones, the toll of COVID-19 is incomprehensible. Arthur Brooks, a behavioral social scientist, says it is possible to turn post traumatic stress into post traumatic growth.
 - A** Arthur Brooks 00:56

When you deal with pain and sacrifice and you really lean into it and you learn from it, you can expect a number of very tangible benefits.
 - T** Tricia Johnson 01:04

Today he shares how we can come out of the pandemic happier, stronger and more resilient than when we went in. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute. Today's conversation is from the Aspen Ideas Festival. The coronavirus pandemic is the greatest threat to well being and prosperity in the United States since the Great Depression reports the Journal of the American Medical Association. Concerns such as a loved one dying or fear of contracting the virus have taken a toll on Americans' mental health. Since April of 2020, about 40% of US adults have reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. In 2019. That figure was just 11%. The American economy is affected. The cost of mental health problems is more than one and a half trillion dollars. Arthur Brooks, a happiness expert and business professor at Harvard, says he's taken lessons from his own family on how to emerge from the pandemic even stronger. Brooks spoke on the Aspen Institute campus in June during the digital Aspen Ideas Festival. Here's Brooks.

A

Arthur Brooks 02:09

I want to talk to you today about all the things that we've learned over the past year, the pain that we've experienced and maybe what we can learn from that pain, how we can come out of the coronavirus epidemic, happier, better, stronger, more resilient than we went in. When I think about this idea of getting better through adversity, I think often about my mother in law. I love my mother in law. These of course are words that are not very frequently heard in our society. But I do I love and I admire my mother in law. She's had a very interesting life. She grew up in Spain, she's Spanish, and she was caught as a little girl in the Spanish Civil War. Her father was a surgeon for the side that lost the Spanish Civil War, who subsequently spent many years in prison. So she grew up in poverty. At the age of 21, she moved to Barcelona and married my father in law, a marriage that turned out not to be very happy. As a matter of fact, he left soon after his children were born with another woman. This is not an unusual story. It's happened all throughout history. So it's not an uncommon tragedy. But it's a it's a trauma. Nonetheless, it was hard on them. Recently, my my beloved mother in law who's now 92, and I were discussing this and she said, that was the worst time of my life. That she thought about it a little bit, she said, and it was the best time of my life. I said, What are you talking about? How can it be the worst and the best at the same time? She said, Because had it not been for that terrible time, I wouldn't have become the person that I am. You see, after my father in law left and she had to take care of her kids. She had to be resilient. There were choices. She went to college, she became a teacher, she became the person that she turned into somebody fully alive with her own friends with her own life with her own profession. That got me thinking, how often do we leave that kind of value on the table? Shouldn't we thinking more like that? Because it turns out that what my mother in law was talking about is a is a great phenomenon in my field of social science. It's a phenomenon

that we call post traumatic growth. Now you hear all the time about post traumatic stress. We talked about it constantly. And it's no joke. I mean, people suffer when they deal with traumas. But here's the good news. Most of the time, people in the long run experienced something called post traumatic growth, which has amazing benefits. When you deal with pain and sacrifice and you really lean into it and you learn from it, you can expect a number of very tangible benefits. Most people who have post traumatic growth which is more than half of people who suffer from trauma. At the end of the day, they find that their relationships deepen, their friendships are better they, they savor the relationships in their life more than they ever did before. And that lasts for the rest of their lives. They think less they care less about what other people think of them now. That's a superpower. Wouldn't you love to not care what other people think of you? Wouldn't you love to not do things because of what people think of you? I would people experienced that when they get post traumatic growth. They're more resilient to future trauma. Look, you're not gonna go looking for trauma, but trauma is looking for you. It's gonna find you sooner or later. We all suffer from tragedies in our lives that are hard on us that that the throw us out of our emotional equilibrium, don't they? Wouldn't you like to be stronger and more resilient in the future? post traumatic growth, if you can get it. We'll give that to you. And finally, and last but not least, virtually everybody who goes through post traumatic growth becomes more philosophically adroit, more spiritually adept. They understand what is more transcendent to their own narrow existence better than they did before. These are the benefits that we get. That's these are the benefits that my mother in law got. I can think back on my life and the things that really went wrong. These are some of the benefits that I've gotten. So let's think to ourselves, what can we get as we come out of this year along these lines? Now, when we talk about the coronavirus epidemic, it might sound maudlin or grandiose to talk about trauma, but it is no joke. There's an emergence that we're actually seeing and among clinical psychologists have what they are calling COVID anxiety syndrome and that's that's just the natural tendency to put a name on everything. It's a serious business we find people are suffering from clinical anxiety. A syndrome that frequently requires medication that requires treatment and is directly attributable to what people have been experiencing during the coronavirus pandemic. Why? Well, I'll tell you why in a minute. But it actually exists. 43% of adults they they've experienced a lot of loneliness during the lockdowns, loneliness is at epidemic levels, according to our Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. He's written a book on the subject and he says that it is one of the biggest problems psychologically that we have in the United States today. And it has been accelerated exacerbated massively. By the pandemic, depression, clinical depression symptoms have risen by a factor of three over the past year. And aside from everything else, just I'll speak to you frankly, as an economist, if you can stand it. JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association estimates that the economic impact of the emotional problems coming from the Coronavirus, lockdowns, quarantines, loneliness isolation, you name it, is more than a trillion and a half dollars in

medical expenses and lost productivity. This, my friends is trauma. Now, some of you watching this you've lost loved ones. Some of you've gotten sick. Some of you have lost your job. Some of you've lost businesses, that's really tangible, but most of you haven't blessedly, but you've experienced the hardship to fear, disappointment, loneliness, how can we come out of it better than we went in my topic today, I'm going to organize my my thinking on this and the lessons that we can get from COVID-19. And in three parts. If we want post traumatic growth, we need to do three things. Number one, we need to manage our feelings. Now maybe that sounds weird to you? How can I manage my feelings, my feelings or something had happened to me? No, you can. You should. And there's huge promise if you do Second, the solutions that people give to you have for your isolation and loneliness, the commercial solutions and they don't have your best interests at heart. The true solutions come from within. And my third lesson is that when change finds you, you need to lean into it. Because if you don't, you won't get the benefit. But if you do, you're going to love what you find. So let's go through these three lessons from them deeply and find how we can use them. As we, we hope come out of the Coronavirus epidemic into the new phase of our lives a new and better and more beautiful face.

S support message 09:37

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A Arthur Brooks 11:03

Let's start with feelings. people treat feelings, as I mentioned before is it's just a phenomenon there in the ether they happen to us. And there's a reason that we feel this way. Feelings are processed by a very ancient part of the brain called the limbic system. This was evolved more than a million years ago before before we had our, our conscious

minds the way that we understand them today. See our conscious minds are, are functioning in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the big meaty lobes behind your forehead. The limbic system is much deeper. It's something that exists because we need our feelings to be processed automatically, because they keep us alive. Often. Psychologists will call the social scientists we'll call this the lizard brain because it's primitive. The the great psychologist Daniel Kahneman of Princeton calls this system one. System one is automatic, it's fast, it processes without any thinking at all. Now, this is a wonderful thing because it gives us our basic positive and negative emotions which we we rely on all day our basic positive emotions are our love, and joy. And here's the really wonderful one interest. If you if you're a fan of the Aspen Ideas Festival, it's because watching talks and thinking about ideas and having big conversations, it gives you a good feeling. It gives you pleasure. Why? Because interest is a basic positive emotion processed automatically. If you like what we're talking about here, you're interested in my talk. You have a basic positive emotion that's happening from this that's a wonderful part of being human. There are also basic negative emotions which we don't like but which we need the basic negative emotions or sadness and anger and disgust and fear. We hate them because they feel bad but but but begin thanks for your negative emotions. They are truly what have allowed your ancestor to pass on their genes. Were at not for negative emotions threat would hunt us down. threat is actually something that gives us negative emotions and allows us to to avoid the sources of threat. These are your forcefield your shield your defenses against bad things that could hurt you. They keep us alive. They make us miserable. That's the paradox, isn't it? We need to learn to manage our negative emotions, not to get rid of them. Look, there's a real problem. I believe in our society today. If you go back to I don't know the Woodstock generation they'll say if it feels good, do it. Well, today we have kind of the opposite Woodstock which is if it feels bad, get rid of it. That's a mistake. You need all of your emotions, but you need to learn to manage them. Case in point. What's happened during the Coronavirus, lockdowns during the pandemic, during all of the things that we've experienced. This is a case study and emotional management, get this right, we will have learned from this experience. And we will benefit from that. So how do we do it? How do you manage your feelings? How do you manage any feelings problem? It's a three step process. Here's what we want to do. When your feelings are happening to you. They're existing in the limbic system of the brain, that deep part of the brain, you can't manage something that's automatic, obviously, to manage your thoughts. You need to move them to your prefrontal cortex where your executive function is happening. You need to move feeling from one part of your brain to another. Yeah, there are lots of ways to think about this. The ancient Buddhist idea of of observing your feelings is doing exactly this. Once you get away from your feelings happening to you say, I'm going to treat these feelings like they were happening to somebody else. How interesting. I'm feeling angry right now. I realized I'm feeling sad. What you've just done is to make your feelings metacognitive they're no longer happening to you. They're

happening alongside of your conscious brain. And you've moved the idea, these feelings from the limbic system to the prefrontal cortex, observe a feeling metacognition, there are a lot of different names for it. But you get the idea, you know what I'm talking about, we are moving the feeling from the limbic system to the prefrontal cortex right can be managed. Now, here's where the fun begins. Step two, you go from metacognition to analysis, now that you're able to observe your feelings, you can analyze what's really going on, consider why a feeling exists. Why am I feeling sad? Why am I feeling angry? Or disgusted? Why am I afraid? That's an analysis as if you were an outside observer, oh, what a miracle to be a human, there is no other animal on the planet, no species that's ever existed that we know of. Where we can actually observe ourselves, we can be aware of being aware, we can be aware of being aware of being aware. It's really amazing. And finally, and this is really where it becomes practical, and good for us. We manage the emotions actively how we accept our feelings, we resolve not to them bind our actions in an inappropriate or destructive way. We turn them into an opportunity. This is the three step process where you manage you. So now let's do it. In the case of something we might have been suffering, something and I've been suffering that you have to what is it? It's uncertainty. Uncertainty is a big problem for us, or it certainly has been over the past 16 months. You've asked yourself, probably my gonna get sick, maybe you were really, really afraid of it. Maybe you weren't, but it had to cross your mind. You asked yourself, why lose somebody that I love? When I lose my job or lose my business? The stock market go crazy. And well, I lose my retirement, I realized that some of these questions are, seem kind of selfish, but let's not lie to ourselves. This kind of uncertainty has been a real problem for us. Will life return to normal, these catastrophic ideas that we've had that you know, we've all had these ideas? I'll never go back to the university, I'll never go back to the office, I'll never see other human beings, you know, we have a tendency to catastrophize everything. Why? Because uncertainty does that to us? Well, what is uncertainty? uncertainty is nothing more than fear. It's a form of fear. Fear of all the seven basic emotions I told you about a minute ago is the master emotion. Fear clears the decks and thank God for that. So and then lots of examples of this in your life, you go out to dinner with your friends, and you're having a great time and you're laughing, and there's so much love and, and then you walk out on the street, in the city, wherever you are, and somebody robs you of your wallet. I know it sounds ridiculous, but you know, could happen. You'd be afraid you'd be really stirred up. And that's all you would remember from the night. Why? Because fear is the master emotion. And it must be if you feel fear, it better clear the decks from everything else. If you're having a great time as a caveman smelling the flowers, eating the berries, and... ..you don't pay attention to the saber toothed tigers sneaking up behind you, you will be lunch, you won't pass on your genes, thank goodness for fear. And it does all sorts of amazing things that that saves our lives today. It's so incredible how it works. As a matter of fact, let me give you a quick synopsis of what fear does to us physiologically, let's say that you're walking across the street in New York City

or wherever you live. And this has happened to all of us, you're in the crosswalk, but you almost get hit by a car. Well, what happens in that moment, the the the visual stimulus of the car coming towards you is processed in your visual cortex at the back of your brain. It sends a signal to the amygdala, which is part of the limbic system. The amygdala sends out an immediate signal through the hypothalamus to the pituitary gland, which signals to the adrenal glands to pump out cortisol and epinephrine, aka adrenaline. This happens in 74 milliseconds 74 one hundredths of a second, this is three or four seconds. Before you know what's going on with your prefrontal cortex. You've jumped out of the way and your heart's pounding like crazy, and you're a little bit angry, and you're sweating, and you probably already flipped the guy off, before you even know what's going on. Fear saved your life. Be grateful for fear, but manage it. See, fear is a response to threat. Uncertainty stimulates constant mild nine Fear not No, no physiologically, let's remember what this is doing. If you have a lot of uncertainty in your life, what's going on? ordinarily, it means there's a bunch of unknown outcomes with probabilities that you don't know either. And therefore contingencies that you can't manage what is this all about? This is basically a Phantasm behind you a fear of us threat behind you. That's small. And it's kind of hunting you all the time. That's how uncertainty works. You know that feeling where I know something's bothering me, I can't remember what it is right now. But I know something is ruining my day. It's almost always uncertainty. And this is what people have been been suffering. And the result is kind of a little drip of stress hormones, a little drip of cortisol drip, drip, drip, adrenaline, drip, drip, drip, making it hard to concentrate, making it hard to sleep for a lot of people. Cortisol, by the way, is the the hormone that wakes you up in the morning. If you've got too much of it at night, you can't get to sleep. If it happens during the middle of the night, you wake up too early, is that been happening to you during the pandemic? It's been happening to me. That's because of cortisol, which is because of uncertainty, which tracks back to fear. How do we manage it, let's get back to our three step process and see if we can do something about this. Before we get to our three step solution process. Let's talk about the mistakes that we make. When my kids were little, my middle son, his name is Carlos, and he's always been a pretty good eater. He's always been kind of an athletic kid, big and strong. And one day he comes home from school when he's six years old. He says he announces he wasn't gonna eat anything except peanut butter sandwiches. Like, what's that all about? to begin with? That's a pretty disgusting thing. But But I didn't understand what the problem was. It was I was kind of at wit's end, because it never happened before. So I was out talking to my neighbor. Now my neighbor has 10 kids, I have 30% as many kids as might as my neighbor, my neighbor has got a whole school house full of kids. He's an expert. And he asked me this question. He said, Well, did Carlos get a new teacher in school or something? And I said, Yeah. How did you know? He said, because it's always the same with kids, when they lose control in one area, when there have a high degree of ambiguity, uncertainty in one area of their lives, and actually pops up in excess control in another area of their lives. like myself, that's a

pretty interesting thing. I wonder if that's a robust finding in social science. That's how I think. And so I went to the literature and sure enough, when people are suffering from a lot of uncertainty, that's when they're most exposed to eating disorders. anorexia, bulimia, that's not what my son was suffering, but it was related kind of behavioral phenomenon. This is the problem when we try to sublimate the uncertainty in our lives. The discomfort that we feel will make the our behavior change the the uncertainty will pop out in some area of our life, which will clamp down in terms of what we try to manage. Don't avoid uncertainty. Don't ignore uncertainty. Don't try to block it out. Because you'll get unintended secondary consequences. Well, there's another behavior that we engage in when we're suffering a lot from uncertainty which is information bingeing. How many of you at the beginning of the Coronavirus epidemic spent tons of time on the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus website, clicking how many people have it? How much is it spreading, you know, how many people are dying or the New York Times of the Atlantic where I write we all had these services to let people find out what was going on. And we found that people were bingeing on this information. Why? Because we wanted to do is we wanted to take the uncertainty and turn it into risk. This sounds like a trivial distinction, but it's not. When we have uncertainty, there's unknown outcomes, unknown probabilities, unmanaged contingencies, which is why we have fear risk, on the other hand, has known outcomes, estimated probabilities, and therefore managed contingencies. That's the reason that insurance exists. Insurance is literally a happiness business, because it converts uncertainty to risk. How do we try to do that in our ordinary lives? If I can get enough information, then I'm going to know the possible outcomes. I can estimate the probabilities and I can take action. Well, guess what? When there's something that's as uncertain as the pandemic was, you can't do that. You're going to spend all day long trying to do and I'm going to watch three hours of CNN and hope that there's a new, Dr. Anthony Fauci appearance for I'm suddenly going to get the breakthrough information that's going to make everything clear. And it never happened and just made you worse off. avoidance information. benching, these are bad strategies. What's the right strategy? It goes back to our three step process. Here your uncertainty action steps, let's call this the uncertainty management steps. Number one, is metacognition. Remember, observe your feeling. I'm experiencing fear from uncertainty. As you experience ongoing uncertainty from this start here. Learn to do this because again, what is our purpose today? It's using the Coronavirus epidemic discomfort, trauma, such that we can be better in the future. Step two is analysis. I can't avoid this uncertainty. I can't convert it into risk. So I need to manage it. How do I manage it? I got a great suggestion on this from a friend of mine who's an oncologist, he, a cancer doctor, he specializes in late stage cancer diagnoses. He's the guy who says, I just got your tests, you need to come into my office. Nothing good has ever happened after a doctor says this. He has to give people really, really hard news. He says the first thing that they do when they find to have a late stage cancer diagnosis all the times they go home, and they Google their disease. And they look on the page for

prognosis. Why? Because they're trying to turn uncertainty into risk. But he says it's an exercise in futility. And it makes you miserable. So he says, Don't do that. Practically don't do that. Tomorrow morning, when you wake up is the first thing you're gonna think about, oh, that conversation I had with my doctor. But the next thing you should think about is to say, I don't know what's going to happen today. I don't know what's gonna happen next week or next month, and I shared on what's gonna happen next year. But I'm alive and well right now. I'm not going to waste this moment. This is how all of us should deal with traumas and pain and sacrifice and trouble, small and large. As we should start every day by neutralizing the uncertainty managing our feelings by saying, I don't know what's gonna happen this week or next week or next year, over the next 10 years. I don't know it's uncertain. But one thing I truly know is that I am alive and well, this day, this day is a gift. I will not waste the gift that is this day. I've been lonely over the past 16 months. Part of the problem is that I'm at the 96th percentile and extraversion. One of the reasons I know that is because I'm a social scientist for a living. I teach a class at the Harvard Business School called leadership and happiness. And I make my students take a battery of happiness and personality and disposition tests so they can map out their true psyche. But I got to take the test to fair's fair, I think of every year and I keep finding the same thing over and over and over again when it comes to my personality. And I'm not proud of this, but to be at the 96th percentile and extraversion exceptionally high in openness, which what social scientists also called neo philia a love of new things. means you're going to suffer during the Coronavirus. lockdowns I didn't see in nuff people for a living. I do 175 speeches a year. I wasn't doing it except staring into a camera on zoom, which I'm doing now and I think I'm getting better at you'll be the judge. But it isn't the same. I love people. I love you. I want to see you. And I've been really lonely. Maybe you have to early on. I noticed after a couple of months of lockdowns, it's great being with my family, don't get me wrong, but the lack of contact with new people, new conversations, even strangers, it made me feel almost physically uncomfortable. Like there was a pane of glass between me and the outside world. What was going on? Well, here's what was going on. I was lacking a key neurotransmitter and neuro peptide that functions as a hormone if you're keeping track of the technical parts, called oxytocin. This is in the vernacular known as the love molecule. Why is produced by the human brain in response to two things, eye contact, and touch. You crave it, it is intensely pleasurable. And it's a wonderful part of human evolution actually, because it bonds us to other people in ways that make us as far as we're concerned. For the human, you get the biggest burst of oxytocin when when you lay eyes for the first time on your newborn child. I remember this my first newborn son was born and I had been reading about oxytocin. I'm a social scientist, I have got the information, it won't happen to me. But they, they they let me help deliver him which is not true. I mean, they say, sir, do you want to help deliver your child and that just means you know, keeping you far enough out of the way that when you faint, you don't faint on on the mother. But I, I cut the cord. It was meaningful. And they put my little son in my in my arms, he looked

up. He seemed like he was looking up but we made eye contact and something exploded in my brain. It was oxytocin. Now, evolutionary biologists will say Well, that's a very that's a very handy thing, isn't it? So you don't you know, leave The baby on the bus or something like that. But no, no, it's more than that. It's a miracle. It's the it's the neuropeptide of love. And love is happiness. You know, it's true. So, what's the problem where you don't get enough of it, you feel uncomfortable, you feel restless, it can be almost physically painful. And that's A lot of people have experienced why not enough eye contact? Not enough touch. So what do we do? What do we do? Well, the world has got solutions to this, the world has got commercial solutions to make you feel better. What do they look like? They look like this. staring into a computer screen, making eye contact. So it seems at least making social contact with other people. There's been a huge explosion in the use of social media, or the past 16 months and not just among people in their in their teens and 20s. And contrary people my age to have gone from minutes to eight hours a day on Facebook and Twitter and even Instagram, can you imagine I'm 57 years old, you know, scrolling through Instagram. Why? It's because this promises us more social contact, which is implicitly promising us, the oxytocin that we crave so badly to feel fully human. Here's the problem. It doesn't work, no eye contact, no touch, it promises everything it delivers next to nothing. There's a wonderful body of research that's largely spearheaded by Gene 20, who's a social social psychologist at San Diego State University that shows that anything more than about an hour a day of social media across all platforms, you'll get lonely or the longer you're on it. That make sense lonely, or the longer you're on social media, how can it be? Think about it this way? Social media functions as the junk food of social contact. You know, if you are really hungry, and you always satisfy your hunger with burgers and fries and milkshakes, you can literally become both malnourished and obese simultaneously, how can I be malnourished and obese? Because your calories to nutrients are all messed up. Now, this is not a nutrition lecture. But the metaphor is apt isn't it? You know that the way for you to be healthy is to get not enough calories, but enough nutrients. And that's what you need socially as well. When you're looking at social media all day, which is the natural tendency which the commercial world is pushing at you, luring you, it's saying this is where you'll get what you need. This is the flashing fast food sign. And all that'll happen is too many calories and not enough nutrients, you will get lonelier while you're actually consuming too much. So what do we need to do instead? How do we protect ourselves from this loneliness from this social junk food? The answer comes, always does from within. This doesn't cost money. This doesn't require you turning on your computer. This takes no tech at all. This requires that to be to feel fully human, we have to act fully human here, reliable oxytocin boosters that are free, because they come from within number one is more eye contact. Now one of the interesting behavioral phenomenon that we see during the Coronavirus, lockdowns is and pandemic during the isolation just kind of living in our little bubble. Most of us some people are living alone, but most people are not. Most people over the past 16

months have lived with other people. The problem is that their behavior hasn't changed from before the pandemic. If you live with somebody that you see every day, your spouse or your children, you can be like ships passing in the night, you're not propulsively making eye contact with somebody, you talk to somebody while you're looking at your phone or to book or whatever. And that's a missed opportunity. You're not getting enough eye contact and you're not doing what you need with the people around you to get sufficient eye contact. That means you have to do it on purpose. Remember metacognition analysis, management, you need to go from I'm experiencing loneliness to taking it into your own hands by changing your behavior on purpose, make more eye contact, when you talk to somebody, talk to them while looking them in the eyes. Some for some people that's uncomfortable. It doesn't matter make a sacrifice. The second is his touch. We have casual touch all day long with a lot of people. But once again, with the people that we're living with that really the only people that we see during the circumstances that we've had over the past year and a half. There's not that much out of the ordinary and are touching and it all adds up to not enough. My friend Paul Zack, who's an economist at Claremont Graduate University in Southern California. He's the world's leading expert in maximizing blood oxytocin levels. He's a wonderful research on this. For example, He has a funny paper where he talks about what happens when you make eye contact with your dog. It turns out that canines and humans have an homosapiens have we've evolved in parallel to complement each other no All sorts of wonderful ways. You ever feel like your dog loves you, your dog loves you. Biologically your dog loves you because when you make eye contact with in touch your dog, your dog gets a 56% boost in blood oxytocin levels, which is equivalent to being madly in love with somebody and staring into their eyes. If you're wondering if you have a cat, your cat gets a 12% boost in oxytocin levels, which, you know, once again, social science proves basic common sense. Your dog loves you, your cat tolerates you. This is kind of Paul Zacks, bailiwick, and he's great in this work. And one of the things that he's estimated is how to maximize blood oxytocin levels, such that you can get the highest level of impact of benefit from oxytocin, especially when you need it. And the answer is 22 seconds of contact a 22. Second embrace. Yeah, that's what I'm saying. You need a 22 second hug and you need to therapeutically, every two hours from the people that you live with, from the people around you. You need to do this now. 20 seconds. It's a long time, it might feel uncomfortable in some situations, do not use this in appropriately, folks. But it's gonna feel really good. And it's gonna help you relationships, a lot of other cases. Now, sometimes you can't, you know, I'm my, my wife and I, we have one child left at home, my daughter who's 18 I say it to my 18 year old daughter, give me a 22nd hug. She'll be like, no, I hate you get away from me, I get it. But there are people, you can do this. It's gonna transform your personality. It's gonna do amazing things to you. And as important as anything else, this is your reliable interior self management solution. Beware the outside commercial world, embrace the internal you. That gives the truth. lesson three, at the beginning of their Coronavirus epidemic, it was

just gonna be a few weeks, to three weeks, four weeks, maybe a couple of months on the outside, right. And then two months became three months, and then things started to cancel. And then it turned into six months, and then a year. And then it kind of dawned on us. This was supposed to be a disruption. It's actually a transition. Life is changing. Maybe certain things won't go back to the way that they were. What part of my work in my life is going to be zoom forever. Some people cheered. I didn't like it. I want the human contact. I described that before. Will I ever hug my friends again? is shaking hands the thing of the past? What are we losing? It's interesting that in the Boston metro area there 62 there were 62 colleges and universities. There are now fewer than 60. And it's going down fast. Why? Because certain institutions can't survive. Maybe there are institutions that are near and dear to you. Look, you all know what I'm talking about disruption to transition is a source of loss and in grieving and, and maybe even trauma. Now, the reason for this is that we hate transition. But transition is a normal part of life. One of the things that I point out to my students at Harvard is that if they're 31 years old, which a lot of my graduate students are, I say that you were born during the fall of the Soviet Union, which was a tectonically important transition in world affairs and geopolitics. It was never supposed to happen. foreign policy has never been the same. Okay, that's not a trauma. Unless you you know, and you're the Soviet Union, perhaps 10 years later, was 911. That was a trauma that really changed American life in a big way and the way that we live, but the way that we understand ourselves the way that we understand the world that happened during your lifetime to and then a decade later, we had the financial crisis of 2008 2009. And you lived through that. You saw the the not just the financial system change, but your vision of what the economy could and should be the stability, that stimulated uncertainty in your life that hasn't gone away. And we social scientists, we have all kinds of evidence on how that's really what's driving populist politics, and the culture of grievance still today. That was a big transition. Fast forward. 10 more years I got the Coronavirus. You understand what I'm saying here? Every 10 years, there's a massive unwelcome collective transition. And this is interspersed with your private transitions according to the data. Every 18 months or so there's going to be a transition in your life usually involuntary and therefore unwelcome transition is part of life change is part of life. But we don't like it. Oh, by the way, one more thing. 10 years from now, it's gonna be something else. Are you ready? Did you learn something from the financial crisis? Did you learn something from the Coronavirus epidemic? Are you ready for the next thing you don't know what it is? Maybe it's a war it's, we always look in the past and say, well, we're ready for the next financial crisis and then it's pestilence. Well ready for the next pandemic and is something else? How can we be more resilient for the next time? Again, this is one of the promises across dramatic growth, if we can get to the root of our discomfort now with this transition, we're positioned for all kinds of good things going forward. Well, let's do a little bit of the analysis. Look, we're observing our discomfort. That's metacognition. Now let's go to analysis. Why do we hate change? So much change finds us constantly. And yet we hate

it, why? It goes back to evolution. Once again, negativity bias is what we call it, when you're seeing a transition in your life, you always look for the bad parts of it. Why? Because you must be attuned to threat. If when, when circumstances are changing, if you're not paying attention to the threats, that are part of this, those threats can be lethal to you. So it makes perfect sense. One of the reasons that you survived is because of the negativity bias that surrounds transitions and changes in your life. Now, that is attenuated. If you're if you have high degrees of openness, remember, I introduced the concept of neo philia. If your love change loving kind of person, you're not going to have as much negativity bias. But we all have it things are changing. It's not voluntary. I hate it. Here's the good news. Here's the good news. There are benefits that come when you wait. This is what's related to post traumatic growth. Sort of the reason why if you wait long enough, and you embrace change, as aka you don't resist change, you get a different kind of bias, negativity bias goes away, and you get something else called fading effect bias. What's that? fading effect bias means you forget the little discomforts, you forget the threats, you start to embrace the benefits that came to you from the learning that came during the change during the transition. Maybe during the pain and sacrifice, maybe during the trauma itself. Now, the period of transition is uncomfortable. But the learning comes because of what we call liminality. liminality is the space between two equilibria in your life. And what we find is that this is the period of most intense creativity and growth. Think about it in your own life. Think about it when you were going from college to your first job. And that period. That was you were learning about yourself and you disliked it. But But you think back on it now and how it made you who you are, you understood yourself better. That was because of the intense creativity and growth. It's interesting, I saw a study that showed that when you're going between professions between jobs, it can be it can lead you to process of grief if you change jobs, professions and locations all at one time. It is the same dislocating emotional impact of losing a member of your immediate family to death. And yet, that's the time when people find that they understand themselves the best when they form their own characters. You know, we we can miss this however, we can miss this creativity, we can miss this change. lately. Just as an aside, I went from running a large organization in Washington DC a think tank called the American Enterprise Institute for almost 11 years to becoming a professor and it was a real change in my career. And I remember the year and a half between which also contained the Coronavirus epidemic. So this was complicated things. I remember that my my signature changed, like go to the bank and sign something it'd be like that doesn't look like a signature. This is what liminality does to a person. This is how liminality changes a person and you want to resist that. Don't resist. If you resist, you won't get fading effect bias you won't get post traumatic growth you won't get the benefits from this change should be a signal to you. I'll be an uncomfortable one. That adventures await. Let's talk about this specifically in the case of a transition that has been the Coronavirus epidemic. When I talk to people there about the epidemic that the

conversations always that was key in on two topics, about pre pandemic, all the stuff that they liked and they miss. And there's data on this or survey data on this. As you can imagine 24% of people saying the thing they miss the most is travel. 19% of people say it's relationships, friends and family. Those are number one and two things that they miss. And then they talk about the things that they don't like during the pandemic, the disappointment, the miss things, the graduations, the weddings, maybe the funerals that people missed, the fear, the loneliness, the uncertainty, but that's a missed opportunity to get the benefits from the liminality that this experience is bringing us now think about it. You're looking at this graphic that I have you the pre pandemic conversations about the things you'd like to missed the pandemic conversations about the things that you dislike and won't miss. But those are the two wrong quadrants if you want to be in in beneficial transition. Here are the right quadrants. Fill in the other ones, talk about their pre pandemic experiences, and relationships, and general phenomenon your life that you disliked. And you want to leave behind and make a strategy to leave them behind. What about the daily hassles? What about things that your job or maybe your job itself, or the place where you live that didn't fulfill you? What about the unproductive or toxic relationships that you need to leave behind? This is your chance? Look, it's hard to say goodbye to people who belittle you or put you down or bring out the worst in you or make you gossip. Yeah, I know that under ordinary circumstances. But what if you have a 16 month pause in that relationship? Don't call back. This is your opportunity. This is exciting. This is so good, isn't it. And now make a list of the things. By the way, make a list of the things that you don't want to go back to. And make a second list now of the things that you like from the pandemic. I know. NET NET, you prefer not to have the pandemic, I got it, me too. But make a list of the things that you will miss that after dinner walk that time in your garden that you know, coffee with your spouse, somebody that you love in the middle of the afternoon that you never would have gotten before. Make a list of those things and make a strategy to keep them. If you really want to grow and change. And you want it to be good for you. You want post traumatic growth, then you need a strategy and metacognitive strategy to do so. And that requires these lists. What will I leave behind that I don't miss. What will I keep that I actually liked. Here's the image I want to leave you with on this. I was a kid I grew up in the Pacific Northwest. I grew up in Seattle, Washington. And I was crazy about fishing. Well, you know, fishing, rivers and lakes. And somebody said all the best fishing is in the ocean. Now I would go down in the summertime to the Oregon coast for my aunt. She worked as a receptionist at a hotel she had she lives in a trailer on the beach. It was the most exciting thing. And I would go there every summer and I decided one summer I'm going to learn how to fish in the ocean. So I got my little fishing pole and I was doing it the same way that I always did. First time. Now this picture that you're looking at here is actually a little casual sketch of watercolor, that my mother of the day I tried to learn how to fish in the ocean. I was 11 years old. And my mother was an artist of some minor renown the Pacific Northwest and this was just one of

the easy sketches that she did of that day. And it looks so pastoral and so beautiful and so fun. I was miserable when she took this picture because I was catching nothing. Well along the way after I've been doing this for two hours fruitlessly I remember this day, not because the picture it burned into my brain. This old wizard and local Mariner comes out of nowhere seemingly comes up to me as a kid catching something. I said no, nothing is getting any bites said no bites, says because you're doing it wrong. We're talking about I'm doing it wrong. He says you're not fishing during the falling tide. Now, for those of you who don't live on the ocean, the falling tide is when the when the tide is going out, especially quickly. That's a falling tide. And it wasn't a falling tide because doesn't make sense. You're not going to catch fish during a falling tide. Everything's going out to sea. I said Why? He said because during a falling tide, it looks like there's nothing that's going to stay. It's stirring up the plankton and bait fish and the game fish are going berserk. You'll see though half an hour go by. He says now now falling tide we throw our lines in he had a fishing pole too. And we're pulling them out one after another. I mean it's like it's great. We've half an hour we're pulling out fish after fish. And afterward we're kind of tired was sitting on the rocks and sitting with his old guy. I'd never met him before he lights up a cigarette. He's kind of pensive. And he says you know you know kid, there's only one mistake you can make during a falling tide. And I said what he said not having your line in the water. You understand what I'm saying here? The Coronavirus epidemic or for that matter any any unwelcome change in your life. It feels like loss. It's really just the falling tide of life. Don't interpret that as sheer loss to resist to wait out. That's the time when the bait fish are stirred up. Get your line into the water. Get it into the water right now. Here's my bottom line. How do you want to come out of the Coronavirus epidemic better than you went in? Do you want to say oh 16 months I waited it out a gritted my teeth. You know I closed my eyes and thought of England. You want to make progress because you're a human being because you're an entrepreneur in the startup of your life. How are you going to do that? You can To manage your bad feelings, because you're going to get more of them, manage them now. Enjoy that later. You're going to beware the world's wily and external commercial solutions and look within And finally, lean in to the changes that are hunting you. Because those are the things that you really need the most. I didn't choose Coronavirus. You didn't either. It chose us. My only choice is not whether I suffer from the Coronavirus epidemic. It's how I choose to react to it. This is an opportunity for me to grow to become stronger to become a better happier person and you to you and I, we can look back on this together. Now, next year, maybe we'll be together here in the wonderful Aspen Ideas Festival. Or maybe you'll be watching it online again. But we can look back on this time together as we emerge from the pandemic, as a sacred time as a sanctified time as a beautiful time because it helps us understand who we are and most importantly, who we can be. I hope that you're happy. I hope that you're well with your family and your loved ones. I hope that these ideas have helped you. And I'm looking forward to sharing more ideas with you in the future. Thank you.



Tricia Johnson 51:22

Arthur Brooks is a professor of the practice of public leadership at Harvard Kennedy School, and a professor of management practice at Harvard Business School. Previously he was president of the think tank the American Enterprise Institute. You can watch an excerpt of his talk at [aspenideas.org](https://www.aspenideas.org). He spoke at the Aspen Ideas Festival in June. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to go wherever you listen to podcast. Follow us on social media @aspenideas. Listen on our website [aspenideas.org](https://www.aspenideas.org) and sign up for our newsletter. Today's show was produced by the Aspen Ideas Festival team Kitty Boone, Killeen Brettmann, Katie Cassetta, Christen Cromer, Libby Franklin, Ava Hartmann, Marci Krivonen, Jonathan Melgaard, Azalea Millan and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.



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This podcast is supported by the Walton Family Foundation. The Walton Family Foundation is at its core, a family led foundation, working to create access to opportunity for people and communities. The Foundation partners with others to make a difference in K 12, education, the environment and its home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas Mississippi Delta. Learn more at [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org).