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Tricia Johnson:

It's Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. We're living in a tumultuous and unprecedented time. The pandemic is causing loss, disruption, illness, grief, anxiety, and uncertainty. The killings of George Floyd and many others have fueled pain and anger around racial injustice. Psychologist Guy Winch says our emotional health is under assault.

Guy Winch:

We have all lost our fundamental way of life, to some degree or another. We are all dealing with massive uncertainty. We are all dealing with certain degrees of anxiety. Our emotional health is being impacted significantly.

Tricia Johnson:

Today, he offers advice on how to deal with these shocks to the system. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute, which drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve our greatest challenges. Today's discussion is from the Murdock Mind, Body, Spirit series held by Aspen Community Programs.

Tricia Johnson:

This difficult time may have some of us experiencing diagnosable conditions like depression and anxiety. Others may be dealing with loneliness and grief, which aren't diagnosable. These conditions fit into what Guy Winch calls emotional health. How can we use the pandemic and social unrest to develop emotional resilience? When everything's so uncertain, what can we count on? How can we find useful coping mechanisms that address this unusual time? Winch speaks with Pam Belluck, who writes about health and science for the New York Times. They spoke on July 30th. Here's Belluck.

Pam Belluck:

So, it's really hard to think of a time that has been more challenging to our emotional health than this one. That's why I think it's really wonderful that we get to talk to you, Dr. Guy Winch, today. I know, Guy, you've been very busy during this time, seeing patients virtually, consulting with companies and medical professionals, producing a podcast called Dear Therapists.

Pam Belluck:

So, we're going to talk about how to address issues with emotional health during this very challenging time. I thought I would start off with just give us a little bit of a definition of what you think emotional health is, and how to distinguish that from what people think of as mental health.

Guy Winch:

I consider emotional health to be the non-diagnosable stuff, the aspects of emotional well-being that doesn't fall into the category of psychopathology. So, for example, clinical depression is a mental health issue. An anxiety disorder is a mental health issue, but plenty of us experience depression that doesn't rise to the level of a diagnosable clinical depression. Plenty of us experience anxiety that's intermittent or fleeting, it doesn't rise to that level of a clinical diagnosis.

Guy Winch:

That also includes things like loneliness, which is not diagnosable as a pathology at all, experiences of failure, of rejection, of grief and loss that are not compounded. So, there are many experiences we have on the day-to-day that impact our emotional health, our functioning, our productivity, how we feel, and our physical health impact, that don't rise to the level of actual diagnosis that you'll get in a physician's office. That's my distinction, emotional health is about the non-diagnosable stuff, mental health is about the diagnosable stuff.

Pam Belluck:

So, how would you characterize what is happening just on a societal level, and then we can go into some individual examples, but to our society's emotional health right now?

Guy Winch:

It is really interesting because I think that the percentage of people are going to be physically impacted by COVID-19, for example. That's one of the things that's going on in society, but the percentage of people are going to have a physical impact. They're going to be many of them, but it's going to be a small percentage of society. Practically, all of society, practically 100% of us, have been and will be impacted in terms of our emotional health. So, it is something that is incredibly broad at the moment. It is something we are all experiencing.

Guy Winch:

We have all lost our fundamental way of life, to some degree or another. We are all dealing with massive uncertainty. We are all dealing with certain degrees of anxiety. We're all dealing with social distancing and quarantine. So, loneliness has risen significantly. We are all being impacted by... Our emotional health is being impacted significantly by these events.

Guy Winch:

When we add in the social justice movement and things like that, which are actually really, really important, so that's a movement that's actually extremely important. I hope it goes on for a very long time. The only issue with it is that it's very difficult, especially for people of color, to be engaged in that movement without it reactivating all the wounds that justify the presence of the movement in the first place. So, it's a very necessary, yet terribly painful process for many people of color and for people who are not, but certainly for people of color. There's no other way to do that except to experience that pain as you do. Again, emotional health right now is a bit under assault all over the place.

Pam Belluck:

I want to unpack a lot of different aspects of that, but one thing that struck me about what you were saying is that... One thing that I think is so unusual about this time is that all of those different kinds of insults and shocks to the system are interacting with each other. So, if you have a grief experience,

you've lost a family member or a loved one, then that's a really serious situation for you, but you may be able to continue on with other aspects of your life and stay grounded, or take solace from other things in your life that are going well.

Pam Belluck:

What we're having right now is that people are undergoing that grief and loss at the same time that they are having to navigate staying at home, not seeing their friends, maybe they're having to take care of kids at home and juggle their jobs at the same time. Maybe they've lost their jobs. And then, of course, there's just all of this uncertainty in the world, and in the country, that's overlaying all of this. So, are you hearing from people that they are finding this perfect storm of all of these different things at once?

Guy Winch:

It is a perfect storm in many ways, because so many of our natural or traditional coping mechanisms have been taken away. One of those, for example, is social support. Yes, we can get it over Zoom. It's not the same as getting an actual hug from someone when you're in distress, when you're grieving. Almost all cultures have rituals of grieving that involve community support, because that is so important. Now most of that is virtual.

Guy Winch:

When people are bonding together, it's often virtual. So, in protests, for example, people are meeting in the streets and they're protesting for that purpose, and they're usually wearing masks because we're not seeing a lot of outbreaks among protestors, which is wonderful and amazing. But when you go home and when you see your neighbors, and when you just... I was talking to someone the other day that you often... Even in your office, you would go and walk somewhere, and somebody would come up and they would shake your hand. They would rub your shoulder. They might give you a little pat on the back. All those small little touchpoints, literal touch points, aren't there anymore.

Guy Winch:

We also use entertainment as distraction. We can't go to movies, we can't go to shows. We can go to some restaurants, but there's anxiety associated even with that. We can't travel, we can't plan to. Certain kinds of travel are difficult to do. So, anything we would do like, "Oh, this is a difficult period, but I'm looking forward to blank happening in the future," kind of hard to look forward to blank happening... Blank actually is what we see in the future when we look. We just don't know what it's going to be.

Guy Winch:

So, not only we're under all these stresses, but our coping mechanisms, the traditional ones, many of them have been stripped away. That leaves us then with the need to come up with other coping mechanisms, or to use ones we're typically not that reliant on, or to really dig deep and look for emotional resilience within ourselves to manage within ourselves. There's times we might not have had to do that before.

Pam Belluck:

So, give us some examples of some coping mechanisms that apply that we can grasp onto and use during this time. What are you telling your patients and the people who you're consulting with about the coping mechanisms that they can use?

Guy Winch:

I'm a silver lining kind of person, I'll admit that. I'm an optimist, and I see silver linings. So, for example, the fact that we can't distract ourselves by doing stuff, we can't go to the movies, we can't go to a show, we can't go to a concert, we're forced to talk. In fact, while that one aspect is taken away, we are actually connecting more. Many people are finding they're having deeper conversations and turning to people for support, indeed, via phone or video, but they have the time to have these conversations, which they might not have had before.

Guy Winch:

So, in some ways, the ability to get physical comfort has been taken away, but we are actually connecting emotionally, sometimes more deeply with people because we can actually call them. If there was a wake, or a shiver, or something where 30 people would come and now they cannot, that's 30 phone calls people are making that they're having these touch points, and it's actually going deeper for some people. So, that's something to really consider, that it's a time that we can really connect with one another emotionally.

Guy Winch:

It's also a time that we need to think of, "Well, okay, there's so much instability, what can we count on?" We can count on the relationships we have. We can count on the values we have. I'll just say this, the social justice movement, why I'm heartened is that the conversations I'm having with people are very different than the conversations I had five, six years ago, four or five years ago when Ferguson was happening, for example. Because then, people were talking about that as news. Now, almost everyone I'm speaking with is saying, "I've actually had to do some thinking. I've actually had to look deep within. I've actually had to really think about this issue."

Guy Winch:

As we know, it's not just about not being racist, not being anti-racist, it's about... People are going deeper with this, which is making me more hopeful that, okay, maybe things will stick this time. Maybe there'll actually be some movement because people are actually taking it seriously enough. They're stuck at home. They have the time, and they're doing the right thing by really asking themselves tough questions rather than just externalizing that.

Pam Belluck:

I was thinking exactly that this morning, actually, as I was watching part of John Lewis's funeral, that one source of... I consider myself an optimist as well, I guess a sort of optimistic realist. I think one source of hope that I see not just what you're talking about on a personal level, but the sense that so many people in society are coming out publicly, either at protests or making public statements, and really joining together across racial lines and class lines to say, "This is an issue that really needs to be addressed, and we all need to address it, and we need to take responsibility for our failings in this area."

Pam Belluck:

To me, I was reading... Just to speak again of John Lewis, he wrote an essay that he asked my employer, the New York Times, to publish today, the day of his funeral. It's beautiful, everybody should read it. But one of the things that he says is that he was inspired in his last days by just that, just that people were,

millions of people, coming together out of simple compassion and a desire for equality and dignity for everyone. So, yeah, to me, that's something I think people can draw on.

Guy Winch:

I'm going to add to that. I work with a lot of different companies. In one week, I speak with three different CEOs, and each one of them says to me, "We're trying to figure out what to do systemically here. We don't just want to do something that will check the box. We're literally trying to understand where the issues are and what systems we could put in place that will last past my role here. Once I leave, I want things to be in place that will last." All three of these people were white. That's where their thoughts were.

Guy Winch:

That's what heartens me. I'm not saying that's everyone. It's, unfortunately, not yet everyone, but hopefully, there are enough that traction will really be made.

Pam Belluck:

What do you advise people who say they want to do something concrete like that? Maybe you can connect it to the sense of emotional purpose, and resilience, and the desire to make positive change.

Guy Winch:

First of all, so for people who recognize, and I hope that's most people, that indeed we have a problem with systemic racism... That's, again, by definition, systemic. So, it's not about just an external thing. We have to go deep into these systems. If you connect to that, and if you can really find that, then you ask yourself, "Okay, what can I do in my own personal life, in terms of my influence, in terms of my allying, in any kind of way?" Then, you can take action. There should be some real, A, satisfaction and sense of purpose in what you're doing.

Guy Winch:

This is about... We all would like... Not everyone, but there are plenty of people who say, "Oh, I want to leave the world a better place." Really? Here's how. Here's something you can actually do that will actually give you that feeling that you get to feel good about. I'm not saying do it to feel good, but if you can do it to do good... Usually, doing good does make us feel good. It's a psychological benefit we tend to overlook that when we have an act of kindness, it's the person who does the act of kindness that benefits often more than the person toward whom that act was directed.

Guy Winch:

So, here, really start thinking. I'm just going to give one example. I have a friend who's a neuroscientist, and he said to me... He's a person of color, but he's not black. He said to me, "I do not have one... I run a lab. There's not one black person in my lab." And I, an editor of a journal, there's not one black person on the editorial board. The problem is, there are just very few black people in neuroscience. You go to conferences, they're just not there.

Guy Winch:

So, when he and his team was sitting around thinking, "What do we do?" What they realized was, well, if there are not enough black people in neuroscience, that's what we should do. So, they started a

mentoring program for undergraduates to find students of color and black students, perhaps, especially, and to help mentor them so that there was, over time... and this is not going to happen tomorrow. This is undergraduates. They're going to have to go get mentored and want to get PhDs, and then get them and only them.

Guy Winch:

But that's what systemic means, that you started from a root, so that it grows in a way that really takes time, but benefits and changes the actual issue at the core, which in this case was just not enough people. So, you have to be creative, and you have to be... The most important thing is, don't get tired of this, because this is something people have been living for hundreds of years. They don't have the privilege of getting tired of it. So, we shouldn't either.

Pam Belluck:

Do you have suggestions for how people can keep themselves focused on it and keep themselves from not getting tired as you say? I think you're right that with many, many movements, social justice movements, one of the things that can be a stumbling block is people lose interest. This doesn't seem to be happening so far with the racial justice movement, which is one of the very, very heartening things. But I wonder if you have suggestions for people who find themselves turning away or losing energy, perhaps because they're focused on their own very real personal issues, especially at this time.

Guy Winch:

So, in times of loss and grief, which is what we're experiencing, one of the things which are most curative for experiences of loss and grief is to find meaning in what's happening. Because the way we are wired, if we can understand and bestow meaning on an event that is difficult and stressful, tragic, terrible even, then we come out of it, more resilient. We come out of it in a better place. That ability to put it in a context so that when we think of our lives and the narrative of our lives, it is woven in as a pivotal point that taught us something, that gave us something. We are all going through, as I said earlier, significant amounts of stress. We're all dealing with losses as loss of our basic way of life, loss of certain freedoms, all of that.

Guy Winch:

So, it actually would be a benefit to us if we can feel like, "Yes, COVID was terrible. It went on for however long. We don't know how long, but in that time, I devoted myself to a cause and to a purpose that I felt really moved forward." Then, in five years time, or in 10 years time, when we look back, this will not be the time of oh, that terrible quarantine time of COVID. This will be that time that we made that incredible change happen. Our whole perspective of this period, and it's going to be a long period, will shift from one of hardship to one of achievement and triumph. That is what we can benefit from if we connect it with a sense of purpose and keep at it.

Pam Belluck:

It strikes me that that is a very important thing also to convey to our children who are experiencing this kind of disruption for the first time. This is just transformative for the world. That they knew they can't be in school, they can't go out. All of their activities are circumscribed. There's a lot of anxiety and worry around them. Are you talking to people either... I don't know if you're counseling children themselves, or are you talking to people who have children about how to help their children navigate all of this?

Guy Winch:

Yeah. Look, talk about a teaching moment, right? So, here's why this is a teaching moment for parents, because this is happening to everyone, and the kids are highly aware that this is happening to everyone, and to them, and to their parents. They are looking then to their parents to see how does one deal with this kind of thing. The teaching moment of the parents here is that you have an opportunity. It's not a moment, actually. It would be nice, but the teaching period we're in is that you have an opportunity to model for your child how one deals with hardship, how one deals with uncertainty.

Guy Winch:

That doesn't mean that you have to have no feelings about it. The opposite is true. You have to have all the feelings you have, but you have to be able to talk about them and share them with your children in, again, the right doses based on the age of the child. But to validate for your children, for example, that it's okay to feel uncertain and to feel anxious when there's something uncertain and anxiety-provoking happening.

Guy Winch:

It's a good teaching to say to kids, "Yes, I know you're sad that you can't see your friends, it's actually okay to feel sad. Why don't we just sit with that sadness? Because I feel sad I can't see mine. Let's sit together with the sadness. We don't have to run away from it. We can learn to tolerate it because life is full of sad moments, just as it's full of happy ones. We don't have to be fearful of the sad moments. We just have to teach ourselves that as unpleasant as they might be, we can tolerate them, and they will pass." Then, you demonstrate that for your children.

Guy Winch:

So, to validate that difficult emotions, that sad emotions, painful emotions are not things we should shy away from because we cannot. You can't switch off a feeling. That would be nice, we cannot. So, it's not something to shy away from, but something to learn that you can manage it. It's not fun, but you can manage it. Knowing that is the definition, really, of what builds resilience.

Pam Belluck:

Just to pivot almost from the opposite end of sadness, anybody who's watched some of your videos can tell that you have a good sense of humor. I wonder how you feel that humor and a recognition, perhaps, of the absurdity of things can be used as a therapeutic tool, as a tool toward resiliency. Do you have examples of that, of encouraging people to laugh when they can, or to find humor in things when they can?

Guy Winch:

I'll use an example from my own life. When the pandemic started, I decided to leave my home in Manhattan and visit with my identical twin brother. The idea of not being able to get to him and not being able to see him if something happened was not acceptable to me. Into quarantine, I went. I'm coming from New York city, it was, at the time, the epicenter. So, I'm in quarantine for 14 days. It was a stressful time. It was a difficult time, and you're truly just in a room. You're isolated. The whole goal is to keep you away from people.

Guy Winch:

My brother and I, and our family, we tend to cope with humor. So, by the fifth day, I went to shower and I came back, and there was a customer service questionnaire on my pillow that my brother wrote, which I actually posted on my Instagram account, evaluating the quarantine services that they were providing. Because when you're in quarantine, if people aren't clear, you can't go to the kitchen. You have to ask for everything, even if it's a glass of water. You feel terrible. You're making people run around and get you food and water because you can't do it yourself when you're quarantined among other people.

Guy Winch:

It was asking about the services, and it was asking... Just it was a very funny questionnaire, and it just really lightened the mood. I think that humor has a real place. Just to get technical for a minute, it's about emotional distancing. When we are able to laugh about something, it creates a distance from it. Psychologically and emotionally, that gives us a little bit of buffer. So, the thing is, you have to be careful about the humor being appropriate because in difficult times, there's a lot of feelings that can be hurt if the humor is known.

Guy Winch:

But the benefit of it, especially if you're in an environment where you know the people and you know what will fly and what won't, is that if you can laugh, if you can joke about things every once in a while, that doesn't mean you're not taking them seriously, it means you are breaking the tension. Laughter, in terms of evolution, used to be a way to signify that the emergency or the alarm is over. It's the release of that tension that causes the expression physically of laughter.

Guy Winch:

So, you see an old lady trip and about to fall down, but the minute she stabilizes herself, it's like then you can laugh about it because she's okay. If she weren't, it wouldn't be funny at all. So, humor is something we should deploy because it actually gives us emotional distance. If we can, it gives us that buffer. It reminds us also that even amongst the most terrible situations, there's still room, it's part of our humanity to laugh. It's part of what makes us people because it's a social construct. It's a good reminder of that. So, when you can, I'm all for it.

Pam Belluck:

I wonder if during this time there has been... You've worked with lots of different people with lots of different problems over the years. You've been doing this for a long time. But I wonder if during this moment that we're in, if you've had any patients coming to you with problems that you couldn't solve, or that you found particularly challenging, and that you had to do something different or learn something different so that you could help them effectively.

Guy Winch:

Remember a few minutes ago when I said that we need to be able to teach our children to sit with difficult feelings? That's an experience I've had, because I have had patients who live alone in Manhattan. I practice in Manhattan, so most of my people are there, not all, who are high risk groups, who have been isolated in their homes, in their small apartments sometimes for now four months. They haven't seen a friend, they haven't touched another human being, and they are going out of their minds. They are so lonely and so distraught, and they don't see an end in sight. They're in high risk groups, even their doctors are saying, "Even with masks, don't right now because you're really in a high risk group." They are in such a difficult place.



Guy Winch:

What is the help I can give them? Yes, I can allow them to vent, and I can be supportive, and I can validate, and I can try and help them figure out some alternatives that might do a little bit of something. But truly, they're just in very, very difficult situations, or they've lost their jobs, or they've lost a loved one and they can't even go see them.

Guy Winch:

In one case, it's a single mother who had a baby. She's by herself with a baby. She can't take the baby to show her family. It's so, so difficult. So, I have had to learn to sit with feelings sometimes. As a therapist, I'm not familiar with feeling truly helpless sometimes, and truly like what I'm offering doesn't seem like enough. It's not a feeling I'm that used to, but I've had to get used to just to get in the reality that I just truly don't know what more I can offer.

Guy Winch:

I speak to a lot about the therapists, we are in the same boat. There are just objective limitations. They're not that many, and there are [inaudible 00:30:10] now. So, some people can venture out, some people still cannot, and we don't know for how much longer. I feel absolutely horrible for some people. These are people who can afford to see a therapist, so they're in better shape than most. I then feel even worse for so many millions of others who are in such a difficult place at the moment.

Pam Belluck:

Yeah. I can see where that would be a real challenge. For those people, are you seeing them more, or are you... I don't know if it makes sense to encourage them to connect with others in their situation. Are you doing groups? What is the...

Guy Winch:

Groups on Zoom. It's a heavy lift. I'm not sure that's the most... Look, they get Zoom fatigue, some of them, because they're working. But I am encouraging them to connect with friends and do something like put on a TV show on each of the households and just watch it. You don't have to talk to each other, but if you keep the video screen on so that you can see it as you're watching the show, and once in a while you can make comments to one another. Or cook together. You're each cooking, but share a recipe. There are all kinds of creative solutions people have come up with to feel connected without just talking.

Guy Winch:

Because it's the talking that's very tiring. If you spent your entire day doing it and you're calling a friend, you feel, "I have to have some two hours of material to talk about if I'm going to hang out with them." No, you don't. Just watch a show, cook. Sometimes just have it on and go about your business, clean the place if you want. But you will feel when you look over and they're saying, "Oh, I didn't notice you had a new rug over there," it will feel a little bit more like a visit.

Guy Winch:

So, there's all these creative ways that the minute I hear it from one person, I can offer it to others. There are all kinds of ideas that people are having about how to feel a little less disconnected. I just want to say one thing quickly about that loneliness. The issue with it is that it's extraordinarily

dangerous. What people don't realize is that the chronic loneliness raises our risk of an early death by anywhere from 26 to 30 something percent, depending on the study. It is the equivalent, damage-wise, to our health of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Guy Winch:

In other words, loneliness will kill you in the longterm. It's a very, very dangerous thing for us, physically because it really does a number on our immune system and our cardiovascular system. It has a ton of damage. Most people don't realize that. They think it's just emotionally painful and difficult, which it is, but it's also physically very, very dangerous. So, this is a tricky time because so many people are experiencing surges in loneliness in ways they never did before, because they're truly, truly isolated.

Guy Winch:

So, to the extent that you can just find even if it's an acquaintance and find a night where you can just turn on the TV, or watch John Lewis's funeral and just watch that, cry together. Just do something that feels connective. It's a very, very important thing to do. Even if it doesn't feel like enough, but something to mitigate the true feelings of disconnection. These are the actions that are very important to take.

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Pam Belluck:

For as many people probably who are facing challenges with loneliness, there are probably many others who are facing challenges with togetherness, right? A lot of people are with their families or in close quarters 24/7. I know that you have written about relationship issues. I wonder what you're hearing from people who are navigating their marriages or their family relationships during this time, and how you're advising them.

Guy Winch:

Well, relationships are very strange when you're in a house with people. It's nice to visit your family, but if you're stuck there for four months... Couples who used to go to work for eight, 10 hours a day, and now seeing each other 24/7, it's going to put a strain on a lot of relationships. Here's what you need to do truly. First of all, and I'm going to use this term lightly, but I mean overcommunicate. By

overcommunicate, I mean, do it beyond the point you actually think is necessary because it's actually necessary to do a lot.

Guy Winch:

We tend to have a feeling that the more we know someone, the less we have to ask them what they're thinking, because we can guess. We know them well enough, and they should be able to tell what I'm thinking. It's an assumption that we see with couples who have been together for a very long time. It's called perspective-taking, taking the other person's perspective, getting an idea of where they're at. Couples who were together for a very long time are very bad at this. For one reason, they don't think it's necessary to actually think through, "How is he feeling? What does he want? Because I know how she's feeling. She said it five years ago, I recall still."

Guy Winch:

That doesn't allow a lot of room to change, or for growth, or for... you might feel differently day-to-day or in a situation that we're in. So, by overcommunicating, I mean, ask a lot of questions, have a lot of family meetings, even if it's just two of you, to talk about how is this going? Do we need more space for one another? Who needs the privacy of the room today? With this many people, maybe we can rotate so at least one person gets a couple of hours of privacy a day to talk to some friends in private, or to do certain things in private.

Guy Winch:

If you have teenagers, that's probably especially important for them because they love to be independent. If they're not able to go out in some places, it's going to be very, very difficult. For couples, the division of labor is something that needs to be an ongoing discussion because conditions change, and requirements change, and demands change. So, you can't just go with old agreements in new circumstance. It requires communication. So, I'm saying overcommunicate because most people feel like, "We're probably doing enough of it." Feel like you're doing a little too much of it, and then you're probably on target. So, that's one thing that you have to do.

Guy Winch:

The other thing I just... it's a very simple thing, but let people in your household know when you're in a bad place. If you come up in the morning and go, "Hey, look, just to let you know, I'm just in a really bad mood today. I just wanted you to know. I'll try and step out of it, but just know. I'm just feeling really irritable, just to let you know." Then, the next time you say something sharp or you have a certain expression, they won't think, "Is it me? What's wrong with them? What's wrong with me?" They'll, "Okay, now they're in a bad mood."

Guy Winch:

Then, you can say, if somebody says that you, "Do you need space, or would it be helpful if we actually hung out? You tell me what's best for you right now." Ask questions. So, that's the overcommunicating, to disclose more problem, solve more. Bring it to a forum, even if it's just two people, but certainly if there's a family, then to everyone, "Here are the issues, let's put our heads together and figure out what's the best we can do. We're not going to resolve them because they're just issues, but what's the best we can do."

Pam Belluck:

That sounds like really good advice. I know some people who are also trying to create new rituals for themselves or new activities that they can do together. Doing puzzles when they never did puzzles before, or binge watching something when they never had time to watch anything together before, that kind of thing. Is that something that you'd advise as well?

Guy Winch:

So, first of all, if you have the time, then yes, absolutely. Because look, for some of us, this has given us a lot of time. I'm not one of those people. There's some lessons to that, and there's sometimes when I look around and I go, "I'm actually very jealous that I don't get to have my project for Corona." But there are a lot of people who if they're not working, or whatever it is, that they actually have a lot of time. It's an opportunity here. Because once this is over, and it's going probably be a while, but once it is and life resumes in full swing, you're going to look back and then go like, "I had all that time, why didn't I do something with it?"

Guy Winch:

So, there are two types of people. There are people who thrive on being productive, and who don't do well when they're not. There are people who, when they force themselves to be too productive, get overwhelmed and stressed. You need to know what type you are, because if you do better when you're productive, you should be, and you should find the projects, and find ways, and find collaborations. If you're the type that gets overwhelmed if there's too much going on, then binge away and enjoy yourself.

Guy Winch:

I think that necessity is the mother of invention. I think that I'm eager to see how many inventions, how many contractions, how many advances will come out of this period. I'll give you one example. Right now, my laptop is in a box. Because if it's on the desk where my keyboard is, I'll be doing this all day, and that's not good for my neck. Right now, that's my solution. I'm assuming that there'll be some generations of computers coming down the line soon that have some solution for people who are doing mostly video conversations. There'll be some technological advances there. There'll be ways for people to connect via video in ways that are not built into the software right now, which is a software made for business.

Guy Winch:

So, there are going to be all kinds of interesting inventions people come up with and interesting ideas, interesting social and parties, and different things that will come out of this. It'll be interesting to see what those are.

Pam Belluck:

Well, that is a really optimistic note, and comes at a very good time because we are about to go to our audience questions. Just before we do, is there anything else that you would like to add or-

Guy Winch:

Yes, one thing I would like to add. This is to people who really are experiencing a lot of hardship emotionally in this time, and people are experiencing emotional hardship unrelated to whatever physical, financial, or other kinds of hardship they might be having. Know this, that once we get through

this, what will surprise you when you look back is how resilient you actually were, because resilience is built by hardship, by overcoming it, by getting through it. Even if it's not gracefully, but getting through it builds resilience.

Guy Winch:

That is something that we are all doing, whether we plan to or not. So, comfort yourself by knowing that however hard it is, if you just get through, you will be stronger at the end of it, by definition, than you are now. That should be some comfort.

Tricia Johnson:

Cristal Logan, vice president of Community Programs and Engagement at the Aspen Institute, reads questions from the online audience.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you both so much. This is really, really helpful, and really, really great conversation. We do have a lot of questions from the audience. The first one is, what do you offer as a practice or response to black pain related to the micro and macro-aggressions we are facing daily?

Guy Winch:

What do I offer to people who are experiencing that?

Cristal Logan:

Yes.

Guy Winch:

I said this a little bit earlier, that there is no way for a social justice movement to not speak about the injustice, to not activate the feelings people have about all the injustice that has happened. It's this dual-edged sword, that to make that progress, you have to experience and live through the pain that it has caused. That without this movement, you maybe could push aside and not experience as acutely all the time, and now you're probably experiencing it as acutely all the time. You're so sensitized to the microaggressions, especially the larger ones, but even to the macro-aggressions, because this time sensitizes us even more and sensitizes you... I'm not a person of color... sensitizes you even more to those things.

Guy Winch:

So, it's very unfortunate, there's no way to get through that gauntlet without that pain, because it's all around us. The only comfort then that I can offer is that we are going towards something as a true feeling, I hope, that this is different, and that the pain that you're feeling now... It's a terrible burden, and it's so wrong that after everything, now you actually have to feel this pain to fix something that you've been pained about for so long in the first place. It's truly terrible.

Guy Winch:

Try and comfort yourselves with the idea that there is a true movement now behind you that is much more expansive, much deeper, and hopefully, much, much more impactful that something will in fact come out of it. So, at least your pain will be able to start diminishing at some point. That it won't be that

soon, I'm afraid even, but it will at some point. That your children and grandchildren will be in a better world, hopefully. That's the best comfort I can offer. I understand that it feels outrageous to have to experience the pain, and then to fix it, you have to go through it so acutely.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you. Our next question is, can you address the emotion of anger during this extremely stressful time? Where's the line between normal anger and anger as a more pathological symptom of a mental disorder?

Guy Winch:

That's a loaded question. So, here's the thing about anger. Our experience of it is separate from our expression of it. In other words, you might experience a lot of anger. People might experience... Two people might experience the same depth of outrage and anger, but express it or react to it very, very differently. The pathology comes in in terms of the reaction, not in terms of the experience. Because some people have a threshold that's lower and can react overtly in a pathological way to anger, but it's a lesser experience of anger than somebody who's experiencing more of it, but containing it in a certain way.

Guy Winch:

So, just to be clear, the pathology comes in the expression of the anger, the inability to contain it. Somebody who has an issue with anger, there are things you can do to contain it because it is not pleasant for the person who's angry either. It's certainly less pleasant for the people around them, if they're expressing that behaviorally in unproductive or pathological ways. So, if there's somebody listening to this who feels that they're not in control of their anger, then seek help while the consequences of that are not extreme before you react in a way that's going to be problematic.

Guy Winch:

Because in times of stress, which we're in, our thresholds drop. So, what we could contain before, we're now a little less able to contain, and it might erupt externally in a way that's problematic. So, seek help if you need.

Cristal Logan:

Wow, that was a great answer, really clear. Thank you for that. Our next question is, this person asks, I was wondering what advice you would give for those of us who are struggling with letting go of situations we cannot control. Obviously, COVID is a situation we are unable to control, but do you have techniques that can be used in day-to-day life experiences?

Guy Winch:

Yeah. This issue of control is actually a really important issue because it is something... The less control we feel we have, the more anxious we're likely to feel, the more helpless we're likely to feel. So, actually, finding ways to assert control when we don't feel we have enough of it is a very important thing to do. I'm glad this person asked that question.

Guy Winch:

It doesn't have to be apples to apples. In other words, we don't have control over COVID, but if you can focus, for example, on the things you do have control over or things you think you might not, but you could assert control over, that can help mitigate that. So, one thing I would suggest is, just very practically, make a list of all the things in your life over which you still do have control. A, just as a reminder, "Look, here's all the things that I can control in my day-to-day." Then, make a list of the things you don't have control over that are actually relevant to your day-to-day life.

Guy Winch:

So, COVID, writ large, is relevant, but what does that actually mean? You don't have control over if you have to get into the elevator, perhaps with someone, you take the stairs. I don't have control over somebody will walk across to me without a mask, cross the street if you see someone.

Guy Winch:

In other words, there are a lot of situations in which we think, "I don't really have control," but we could assert some. Even that some will help comfort us and will help mitigate and buffer us a bit in the face of things like anxiety or helplessness, and other kinds of feelings that could come when we don't feel we have enough control.

Cristal Logan:

Our next question is, knowing there's a lot we can do at home to promote emotional wellness, such as connecting to a virtual exercise class, what advice do you have to muster the motivation?

Guy Winch:

Here's a thing about motivation. The person who asked that question clearly has the motivation. It's the follow-through that we usually lack. We tend to put that down to willpower or motivation, but often, it's about habit, and often it's about distraction.

Guy Winch:

So, one of the things that I say to people... Again, it's going to sound really ridiculous, but trust me, this is important... is, "Okay, you have an online exercise class. Did you clear space in your calendar for it? Did you actually put it in your calendar as, 'Here's what I'm doing from nine to 10, I'm taking this class?' Or was it just aspirational, like 'I'll take it sometime?'" That's not how habits get formed. Habits get formed by very ritualistic, consistent feedback and reinforcement. So, if you take that class Monday, and Wednesdays, and Fridays at the same time, and you get up in the morning, and the first thing you do is you put on your sneakers. Because you know you're going to take that class, so don't say, "Oh, no, I have to go put on my sneakers." Nope, they're on. You're good to go.

Guy Winch:

In other words, you try and remove all the speed bumps in your way. Two quick things. There are people who get motivated by looking at how far they've come, and there are people who get motivated by looking at how far they've yet to go. You need to know which one you are. So, if you're the person who gets motivated because you've already accomplished a lot, then do the exercise in the morning. If you're somebody who does it better at night, because then you've freed yourself and now you can devote to it, do that. If you don't know who you are, try to narrow it for you. Try one system for one week, another for the other week, see which was more productive and easier for you.

Cristal Logan:

Our next question is, mindful meditation is increasingly being recommended to me by psychologists to counteract the stress of COVID. What do you think? Is this more of a longterm tool, or could it be helpful in small doses?

Guy Winch:

First of all, yes. It should be a daily practice, longterm, unrelated to COVID. It's just useful. It is a way of quieting the mind. It is a way of training. It's like training a muscle. It's training your mind to be free of distraction. You keep bringing your mind back by paying attention to your breathing. That's just one form of meditation. There are other forms of meditation. But that's what they do, they bring the attention back.

Guy Winch:

Mindfulness meditation also has this feature of being non-evaluative. So, if you have a thought, like you have thought something that angered you, you just say to yourself, "I have an angry thought about my ex." You let it go, and you come back to your breathing. What that does is literally trains your physiological responses to be a little less active, and to be a little less sensitive. So, it helps with concentration, with attention. There's a whole load of benefits associated with mindfulness meditation. That's why all the psychologists are saying, "Yes, you should do it," because now there's a lot of research behind it. So, yes, you should do it.

Cristal Logan:

Great. Our next question is, a friend of mine has written a book about writing as therapy in hard times. What role do you think writing can play in coping with difficult times?

Guy Winch:

It's called bibliotherapy. Your friend wrote a book, that's terrific. There are quite a few books out there, and they all are based on this principle, that writing is a form of expression that's different from verbal, and it comes from different areas in our brain. So, you're actually... There's some people, for example, who are great writers, but verbal expression is not their strong suit. They can articulate something in writing in a much better way, much clearer way than they can in a spoken way.

Guy Winch:

So, actually journaling about your thoughts and your feelings allows you... If you do it with the purpose of not just vomiting onto the page, but trying to understand them, trying to make order with them, trying to gain perspective or insight from them, it's a wonderfully useful tool. It's very, very cheap, and it's something that you can do in great privacy. So, I'm all for it.

Cristal Logan:

Great. Our next question is, now that many of us are working from home, can you talk about some things we can do to separate time working and ruminating about work and personal time?

Guy Winch:

I'm going to suspect this is somebody who's seen my most recent Ted Talk, which is about how not to ruminate about work when you're home. If not, good for you, but I beat you to it because I already did



that talk. But the idea is that when we don't have a physical barrier between work and home, we have to create a psychological one. That means that we really have to be super clear about when our day ends. There's some people that say, "Well, I can't really because I'm on call, or that email might arrive, perhaps." But you can stop working at a certain hour, designate an hour once a night to check emails 15 minutes and respond to them, and that's it.

Guy Winch:

Maybe some people can't, but that's a small, small minority. Most of us can have a stop time, and must. In that stop time, you have to ritualize the transition. I announce it to the household. That's our tradition here. When you're done, we announce, "I'm done," and somebody else would go, "Shh, I'm on a call." Fine. But we say, "I'm done." It's an announcement to ourselves more than to the other people.

Guy Winch:

I have a patient who literally leaves his home, drives around the block just a minute they're coming back home. The kids are bored by it. But at first, they were thrilled like, "Dad is home," and they would run, but it's more like, "You just left, we're not going to do that every night." But for him, it's very useful.

Guy Winch:

I advocate changing clothes at the end of the workday, changing the lighting, putting on music, changing the vibe of it. To understand that rumination, like just the hamster wheel of thinking of stuff, the stealing and obsessing about work in the non-work hours literally prevents you from recovering and recharging from work, which is an essential thing. People who ruminate about work too much have sleep problems, eat unhealthy foods, are more at risk for cardiovascular disease. It's really important we take seriously our downtime and allow ourselves time to have it.

Cristal Logan:

Two last questions. You mentioned some of the creative ways that people can connect virtually, like sharing a recipe and watching TV together. Are there good resources out there that have compiled these creative ways to connect virtually?

Guy Winch:

I'm sure there are. I can't point to one specifically, but I'm absolutely certain there are. In our home, somebody had idea of let's do a murder mystery kind of thing. They found something that was, I think, posted in 2003, how to have a murder mystery dinner kind of thing. It was great. It was like a three-hour thing. It was all well-produced, and it was simple. Just printing out stuff and reading directions. There's a lot of resources online. It's much easier for you if you look for them based on what interests you, what your passions, and hobbies, and mutual interests are, because that will direct you to activities in that domain.

Cristal Logan:

Our last question is, I'm currently pregnant and have also suffered the loss of a loved one. Do you have any tips for making time to both celebrate joy and finding time to grieve?

Guy Winch:

Yes. So, first of all, I'm very sorry for your loss, and I'm excited for your arrival, when that happens. I think that question was beautifully phrased because it is about finding time to do both, and to do that discreetly. We are in a time of ritual. So, I believe that if it's about grief, then ritualizing is a good way to do it. I'm not sure how fresh that grief is, but if it hasn't been done fully and of the reminders, if it's a year of firsts that you're going through. So, reach out to friends and say, "Hey, we're coming up on the month mark, I'd like to do a Zoom call in which we all reminisce about this." Have some kind of ritual because this person that you lost loved blank, so you're going to ask people to write about, or to send in, or to donate something, or to... whatever that blank is.

Guy Winch:

Find ways to ritualize that are discrete. In other words, not discrete like on the down-low, discreet like specific so that there is a start and end time to that. So, that the grieving is contained within a certain window insofar as ritual is. Obviously, the grief itself is not, but insofar as the ritual. Then, you can transition from grief to the joy and to the anticipation. It's important for the people around you, because they might be... if they know that about you, they're like, "How do we talk with her about that without the other? How do we talk about the grief without the pregnancy, about the pregnancy without the grief?" They are probably looking for guidance from you in terms of doing that.

Guy Winch:

So, you by having those kinds of rituals or by letting people know, "Today, it's all about the pregnancy. Tomorrow, I want to talk about this. So, yesterday I was really... Today, I'm really upset, [inaudible 00:58:56] be upset, but tomorrow is going to be all about decorating the baby room." If you let people know, it'll be really helpful because when people don't know how to approach, they don't approach. Then you feel like, "Wow, they don't care." They just don't know. So, if you let them know, it might actually enhance the support on both fronts.

Cristal Logan:

Well, thank you so much. This has been such a fantastic conversation, and again, so helpful and meaningful. So, thanks so much.

Tricia Johnson:

Guy Winch is a licensed psychologist and the author of several books, including *How to Fix a Broken Heart*. His new podcast is *Dear Therapists*. Pam Belluck is a health and science writer for the *New York Times*. She and her colleagues won a Pulitzer Prize in 2015 for their work on Ebola. Their conversation, part of the *Murdock Mind, Body, Spirit* series at the Aspen Institute was held July 30th.

Tricia Johnson:

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