

Resilience and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

If you've been worried, depressed, or anxious about the COVID-19 pandemic, you are not alone. It has been a very difficult year. But you can still experience moments of hope, connection, and happiness during these tough times. The fact that you made it through the last fifteen months (or more, depending on when you are reading this) is impressive. It means you have many strengths and skills you probably never knew you had—even in times of uncertainty, frustration, and disappointment. *The Resilient Teen* gives you a framework to practice resilience in your daily life. This supplement will focus on how to apply these skills to the challenges of COVID-19. But before we get into that, let's take a quick look at why the pandemic has been so hard on us—socially, emotionally, and physically.

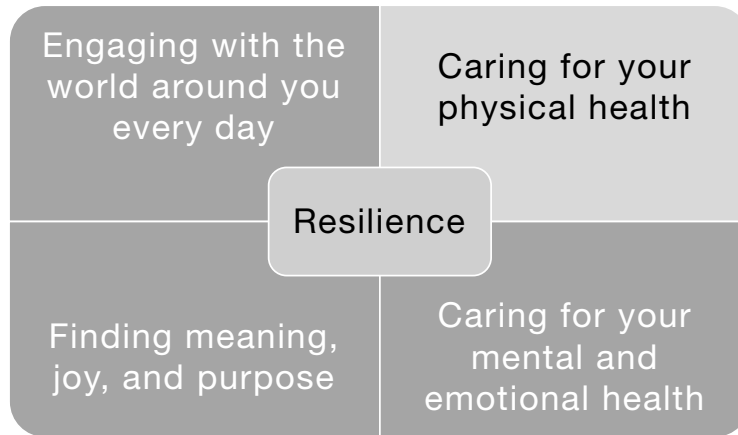
Our minds and bodies respond pretty well to short-term stressors—dealing with a hard class, having a fight with a friend, or getting over a bad breakup. Although these situations are challenging, you usually find ways to cope (for example, making a plan, distracting yourself, thinking about the situation differently, or getting support). The pandemic is different; we call it a *prolonged stressor*, meaning that the stressful situation lasts a long time. In addition, there is deep uncertainty about what will happen next—it feels totally out of our control. Prolonged stressors usually include very difficult situations like abuse, poverty, or discrimination (like racism or homophobia). It's rare for the whole world to be going through a prolonged stressor at the same time. Perhaps the last time was during World War II, when most of the world felt unsafe and uncertain. So, if you are feeling overwhelmed right now, don't be too hard on yourself. You are not alone. This is not easy.

Your reactions to a prolonged stressor have a lot to do with how much support you have and what else is going on in your life. There is a broad range of how people have experienced this pandemic. For example, if you were worried about your health before the pandemic (for example, maybe you have asthma or another health condition), your anxiety may have increased a lot in the last year. If some of your friendships felt shaky before the pandemic, social distancing might feel particularly tough. Likewise, maybe you were already struggling with a hard class, only to feel like the switch to remote or hybrid learning is exhausting. Or, perhaps, the disappointment of missing parties, graduations, and other important milestones has really gotten you down. Lastly, if you or a family member became seriously ill with COVID-19, the last year has probably been extremely difficult. You may be dealing with physical health effects, and feeling depressed, isolated, and traumatized. The resilience skills you learn can be used with a therapist to help you if COVID-19 has impacted you directly.

This supplement will help you apply the skills you've learned in *The Resilient Teen* to the challenges of the pandemic. Each book chapter gives you details about specific skills, but this supplement will help you apply those skills to stressors like social distancing, social isolation, remote learning, family challenges, and health struggles. Remember, you have already been through a lot in the last year—and building on those strengths will be exactly what helps you get through the rest of this pandemic.

The Resilient Teen is divided into four parts and covers a total of ten skills. I recommend you read the whole book first, and then read this supplement.

Part I: Caring for Your Physical Health



There are many things that go into taking care of your physical health. These include finding a routine that works for you, limiting unhealthy coping (for example, substance abuse), making time for diet and exercise, and setting realistic limits on the use of technology. Let's take a look at how these skills apply during COVID-19.

Skill 1: Finding a Routine: Sleep, Diet, Exercise, and Technology

It's pretty likely that the pandemic has totally disrupted your routine, especially during the first few months of social distancing and remote learning. You may have found yourself going to sleep late, having trouble getting up, and being on your screen all the time. If you were an athlete, the lack of daily exercise and team spirit may have really gotten you down. If you aren't an athlete, maybe you counted on your walk to school or bike rides for exercise, and suddenly, you weren't able to do those things. When we thought the pandemic was a short-term stressor, it was easy to slide into unhealthy habits. Many of us told ourselves that the pandemic would only last a few weeks, only to find that our daily snacks kept going on for months...and months.

Pandemic Tip: Self-monitoring the habits you are concerned about (keeping a daily log of your diet, sleep, exercise, or technology use) is actually a great way to improve your behavior. Sometimes you don't even have to set a goal. Just writing things down and looking at your behavior honestly can give you the motivation to change your habits. This tip is really useful a year into the pandemic, when some of our sleep, eating, exercise, or technology habits are not as healthy as they could be. Check out chapter 1 for more tips on establishing a healthy routine.

Skill 2: Face Unhealthy Habits

Before the pandemic, your life probably had some kind of routine. During the pandemic, many teens—and adults—are dealing with long stretches of unplanned time and social isolation. When you are faced with less structure, you may find yourself experimenting with drugs and alcohol to relieve boredom, or to reduce emotions like anxiety, sadness, or disappointment. It's important to be honest with yourself about these habits to see if you need more help.

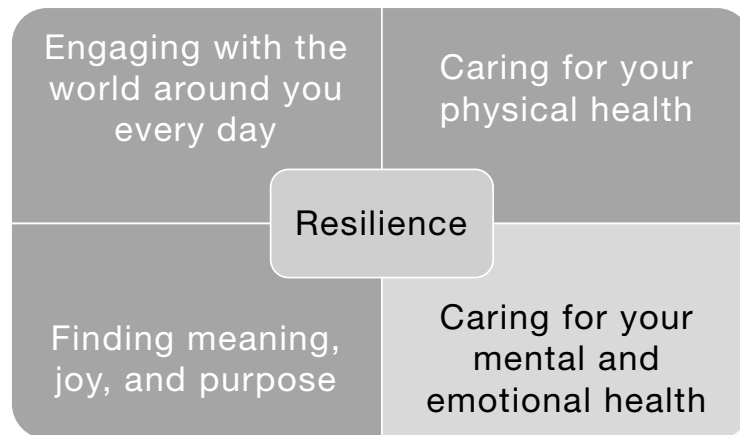
Pandemic Tip: One way you can tell if substance use is a problem in your life is by looking at the bigger picture. Ask yourself, how are my grades compared to last year? Have I lost touch with my friends? Have I lost interest in things I enjoy? Is my energy level really low? If you are using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs (prescription or nonprescription) and you feel your

relationships or school work have suffered in the last year, please get more help. Chapter 2 has suggestions for how to approach this. Remember that learning where the line is between substance use and abuse, and getting help if you need it, is an important resilience skill.

Sarah’s Story: Sarah was an above-average student before the pandemic. She ran on the track team and was involved in the Spanish club. When her high school switched to remote learning, she really hated it. She stayed up late and dreaded facing hours of online instruction each day. She missed her friends and activities. When COVID-19 restrictions relaxed in her state, she began socializing with her friends—outdoors. Although Sarah had smoked marijuana prior to the pandemic, she began to smoke more with her friends once the pandemic began. At first, it helped ease her anxiety, but after a while she began feeling more depressed and had a lot of difficulty concentrating on her school work.

At times Sarah even had thoughts about ending her life. Her teacher noticed that she never turned her camera on and emailed her to see how she was doing. After talking to her teachers a few times, Sarah reluctantly agreed to talk to the school counselor to create a healthier routine. Her counselor encouraged her to reconnect with a few friends from the track team. They agreed to set goals for outdoor running and started sharing encouraging texts to keep each other active. The girls were hopeful they would be able to resume their group outdoor training regimen in a few weeks. Sarah found that her marijuana use reduced once she started trying to establish a new routine. Although she still feels down about the pandemic, starting to run again has given her a renewed sense of hope and connection to her friends.

Part II: Caring for Your Mental and Emotional Health



Being resilient involves caring for your mind as well as your body. Mindfulness, which is the ability to focus on what is happening in the present moment—rather than being overly focused on the past or the future—is an important resilience skill. It’s important to figure out when to tolerate your difficult emotions and when to get more help. Part of caring for yourself involves learning from your past mistakes. Let’s explore how to apply these skills to your life during the pandemic.

Skill 3: Mindfulness: Calming Your Mind and Body

Mindfulness involves many techniques to connect yourself to the present moment. You may be asking yourself, *Why would I want to focus even more on being in this pandemic?* Actually, mindfulness is a great skill in times of uncertainty. Often, we worry about what is going to happen tomorrow, or we get upset about what happened yesterday. *When is life ever going to be normal again? Why didn’t*

we get to have our graduation? Sadly, we don't have the answers to those questions. But we do have the ability to enjoy or appreciate something in this moment, even small things (a funny meme, the feel of sunshine on your arm, the smell of your favorite soap). When you are feeling overwhelmed with uncertainty, finding ways to remind yourself that you are safe in this particular moment can give you a lot of comfort. Mindfulness exercises can help you feel less anxious, and sometimes, they can increase your sense of happiness.

Pandemic Tip: Try some mindful eating. The next time you eat a snack or a meal, transform it into a mindfulness exercise. Take a look at what you are eating, and remember where it comes from, all the people and places it took to get that food to your plate. For example, as you look at the bread of your sandwich, think about the sun and water that helped the grains to grow in the field, the farmer who harvested the grain, the machines and millworkers that make the flour, the factory workers who made the bread, the truck driver who brings the groceries to your store, and the essential workers who stocked the store shelves. Think about the person in your family who purchased the bread...after such a long line of effort in producing that little slice of bread. As you eat the sandwich, be aware of the taste and smell. Try to create a strong sense of connection and gratitude for all that goes into creating this meal. Even when there is uncertainty, there are also moments of order and beauty, even in a little sandwich. Chapter 3 has many more examples of mindfulness exercises that can help you cope with pandemic-related stress, and anytime.

Skill 4: Tolerating Difficult Emotions Without Becoming Overwhelmed

You may find yourself wanting to distract yourself from difficult emotions. That is understandable, and sometimes it's ok to feel bad for a few hours, or even a whole day. The problem is those times that you can't outrun or distract yourself from what is bothering you. That's particularly true during a pandemic. Maybe you have days where you really dislike hybrid learning. Maybe there are times that you feel down about not being able to see your friends. It seems strange, but giving yourself permission to experience negative emotions can actually be a great coping skill. You might find that your emotions aren't as intense or overwhelming as you feared they would be. You might find that bad moods actually go away sooner when you allow them some space. (If you find yourself overwhelmed for days at a time, chapter 6 will give you some suggestions for managing depression and anxiety, and getting more help).

Pandemic Tip: The next time you feel a difficult emotion (for example, worry about the future of the virus, disappointment about the past, or sadness over social distancing) raise your hand in the air. If the emotion feels intense, keep your hand raised. If you start to get distracted, notice if your emotion changes a little bit. Maybe it feels a little less intense. Lower your hand a little as your emotion decreases. You might notice that the intensity of your emotion decreases after a few minutes. Maybe—even after the emotion has reduced a bit—you are still feeling a little bit worried or down. Try telling yourself, *It's ok for me to have a bad day once in a while. It doesn't mean I'm weak—we are dealing with a pandemic and it's not easy.* Chapter 4 has more examples of how to apply emotional tolerance to your everyday life.

Skill 5: Learning from the Past by Transforming Shame

Mistakes are a part of life. The pandemic has been filled with uncertainty, and you've probably been in many situations in the last year where you had to make difficult choices. *Do you really need to socially distance from your friends? Is it ok to cheat on the test you are taking remotely?* When you look back on decisions you made this year, maybe you have regrets. Instead of beating yourself up about these situations, it's important to think about what you can learn from them.

Pandemic Tip: Think about your challenges in the past year and write down a few situations where you think you made the wrong choice. (Examples: You didn't help out a friend when they really needed you. You didn't pay attention during remote learning and got a bad grade. You went to an indoor party that ended up spreading COVID-19 to several friends.) Look at some of your major regrets this year and try writing down the lessons you learned from them. Use chapter 5 to help you transform the shame-inducing thoughts (that are about you as a person) to guilt (which focuses more on what you can do differently in the future). At the end of your list, try to write down something positive about yourself. (Examples: I have been honest about the mistakes I made during the pandemic. I was trying to do my best during some very challenging times, even though I made mistakes. I learned a lot about myself in the last year.)

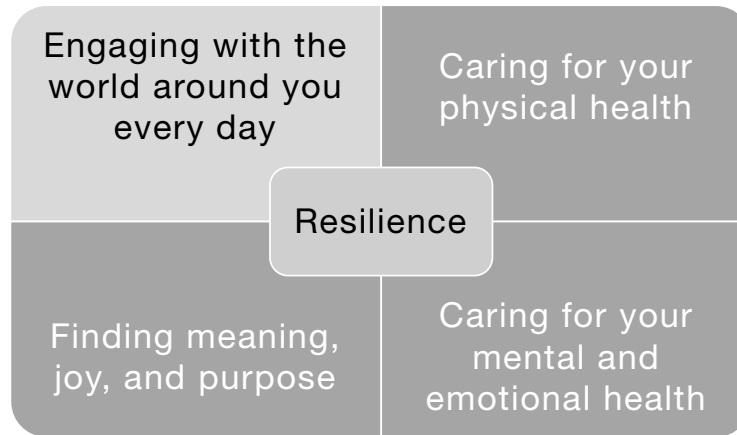
Skill 6: Managing Depression and Anxiety

Many young people are struggling with periods of depression and anxiety right now. Maybe you were doing ok before the pandemic, but the social isolation and uncertainty has been tough for you. If you were struggling with your mood, previous trauma, or chronic illness before the pandemic, you may have felt an increase in your symptoms in the last year.

Pandemic Tip: This is not the time to struggle alone. Please review chapter 6 and reach out for more help if you are experiencing any of the following: withdrawing from your friends; harming yourself; feelings of anxiety, anger, or sadness that last for more than a week or interfere with your school, work, or friendships; difficulty concentrating, and appetite or sleep changes. Even in times of social distancing, there is still help for you. Remember that getting help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Ben's Story: When the pandemic began, Ben was hopeful that it would only last a few weeks. He is in his freshman year, and although he was disappointed that he wasn't starting high school in the building, he tried to do his best to concentrate on his classes and play games with his two younger brothers. After a few months, Ben began to feel really bored and depressed. Some of his friends from middle school realized that because of social distancing, they could easily steal chips and candy bars from the local grocery store. Ben started to steal along with his friends, but never felt good about going along with it. He worried about being caught and what his little brothers would think about him. One day Ben noticed that his school was having an optional virtual meeting on "Mental Health and Wellness in the Pandemic." Normally, Ben would not have been interested in mental health support, but he reminded himself that the pandemic was definitely not a normal time. Ben started to attend the online meetings regularly and, eventually, decided to stop stealing. He hasn't talked to his friends directly about the shoplifting, although he feels less close to them. He is thinking about asking his mom for advice about how to handle the situation.

Part III: Engaging with the World Around You Every Day



Having a strong support system and finding ways to take healthy chances are a huge part of growing up, enjoying life, and building resilience. The past year has probably affected your friendships and challenged your ideas about risk. Let's take a look at how you can build relationships and take healthy risks in the pandemic.

Skill 7: Creating Safe Connections

The pandemic has probably had a huge impact on your relationships. Maybe you miss your friends and don't know how to keep in touch with them. Maybe some of your friends drifted away because they didn't make an effort to stay in touch outside of school. You might fight with your parents or siblings all the time—because it's not easy being in the same space with people for so long. Perhaps you are anxious about how to talk to people, because over the past year you got a lot less practice interacting with others than you're used to. Maybe your friends are taking risks that you are not comfortable with. Because the pandemic is a prolonged stressor, it's important to figure out how you are going to get enough support. No one can get through this alone.

Pandemic Tip: Make sure you take a look at your support circles. Who listens to you and supports you emotionally? Who helps you out when you need it? Who do you have fun with? It's ok if those circles are smaller than usual right now, but, ideally, there should be at least one person in each circle. Maybe your best friend is a great listener, does things to help, and is also hilarious—that's great. Or maybe your mom is pretty supportive and your brother is a lot of fun, but you don't know anyone in your classes well enough to find partners for a group project. This is a great time to use the skills in chapter 7 to gently expand your network, if you need to. Remember to keep your expectations reasonable. Maybe texting one person from your class might lead to some conversation? Maybe turning your camera on in a virtual break out room will help you connect with someone? Take small steps and remember that it's ok if your support network is small right now. To get through this, all you need is a few people you can count on.

Skill 8: Active Coping for Taking Healthy Chances

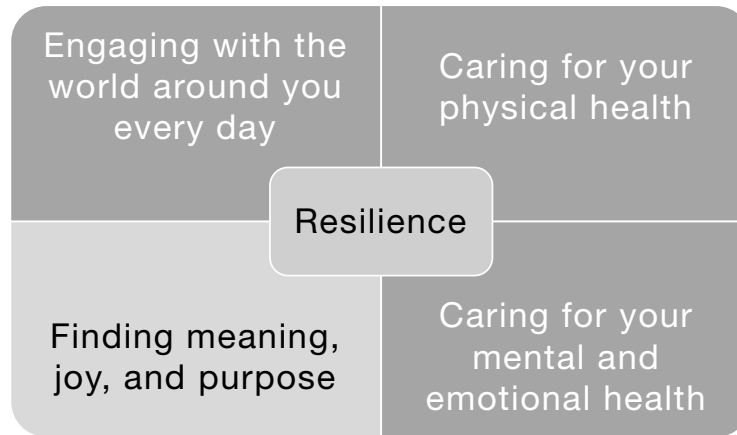
The pandemic has completely changed our normal routines. Suddenly, regular activities—like parties with your friends, having an unmasked friend visit you, hugging your grandma, eating at a restaurant—can be a threat to your health. Your mind might feel exhausted with all of the little decisions you are making. How close do you stand to your friend? Is your mask sealed up tight? Is it safe to go indoors? What do you do if you have to sneeze? You can see that every detail gets overwhelming. The amount of

information your brain is processing at one time is called your *cognitive load*. As you can imagine, when the load gets too heavy, you stop making good decisions. When you feel really overwhelmed, your mind may decide to minimize the threat and pretend nothing has happened. For example, you may be telling yourself that COVID-19 is no big deal, or that you don't have to do anything to protect yourself. Obviously, getting worried about every decision can feel overwhelming, while not worrying at all can put you at risk for getting sick. As things improve in the months ahead—and hopefully by the time you read this—our normal routines may start to feel more safe. In the meantime, you can do some planning to take healthier chances.

Pandemic Tip: One way to prevent a cognitive overload (too many decisions in a small amount of time) is to think about a situation in advance and decide what chances you are willing to take. Set a time limit on this exercise (about five minutes) so you don't get more anxious and over-think your options. For example, let's say you agree to hang out with four of your friends at a local park. Close your eyes and think about all the small decisions you have to make. What will you say if someone sits right next to you without wearing a mask? Are you comfortable with this risk? Practice how exactly you will set boundaries. (For example, "I just have to make sure I'm distancing to keep my dad from getting sick—since he's got health issues.") What if someone asks you to come to their house for a large gathering? Are you comfortable? Is your mask on or off? How long do you stay? Take one minute to write down your basic plan and try to stick to it. Chapter 8 has strategies to help you figure out how to take healthy chances, which has become one of the most important resilience skills in this pandemic.

Asha's Story: Asha is a seventeen-year-old senior in high school who has gotten tired of studying, applying for college, and social distancing. She's always been a hard worker who tries to get along with everyone and follow the rules. But after a year of the pandemic, Asha has days where she feels exhausted. Most of her friends are back to having parties and sleepovers. Many of them have had COVID-19, and almost all of them are ok. On some days, Asha feels like she is the only person her age who is still social distancing. Lately, she has started attending some indoor parties with her friends. She figures that she is missing out on a big graduation party, and it doesn't really feel fair. When Asha gets a call that she has tested positive for COVID-19, she's not really surprised. She is feeling fine, but she's worried that she's put her younger brother (who has asthma) at risk. Asha starts to feel guilty and anxious. She realizes that although her friends are fun, she needs to find a few people to talk to about the pressures of graduating and starting college in a pandemic. She also realizes that she needs to plan ahead for party situations—to keep herself and her family as safe as possible. She knows that when she's in college, her parents won't be around to help her make every choice, so she needs to start practicing some of these skills now.

Part IV: Finding Meaning, Joy, and Purpose.



We cannot get through the pandemic without hope. Realistic optimism can help you find a way to get through disappointments, and humor, community service, and activism can help you find meaning in difficult times. Let's see how these skills apply to the pandemic.

Skill 9: Cognitive Flexibility and Realistic Optimism

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to look at a situation from multiple viewpoints, and not get overly fixed on one perspective. Realistic optimism is the ability to look at a difficult situation and still find hope. The pandemic gives you opportunities to practice these skills every day. It's easy to look at a news report and feel hopeless. It's tempting to judge everyone else's decisions about social distancing and mask wearing. Of course, there are public health guidelines that will help us end this pandemic—from a medical perspective. But within those guidelines, there are a lot of decisions that everyone has to make for themselves. Practicing cognitive flexibility and realistic optimism can help you feel less hopeless and angry—and you may even end up being a role model for others who are struggling.

Pandemic Tip: Challenge your thinking. If you catch yourself falling into the trap that there is a “perfect” way to cope with a pandemic, try to look at this thought differently. On difficult days, it's ok to make your goals smaller. Maybe you focus on how to get through the next day, or the next hour as best as you can. Try to remember that other people are also facing challenges, and that no one's life is perfect right now. Finally, challenge yourself to find something positive in relation to the pandemic. Remember, this isn't the same as being happy about the pandemic; it just means finding small (or large) things to feel grateful for. For example, a vaccine center being opened means we can be grateful to the medical professionals who are working tirelessly, your school being hybrid means that technology—however imperfect—has helped us survive this year, or your friendship group changing means you have learned more about who will support you in times of stress. Realistic optimism and cognitive flexibility take a lot of practice, so don't give up—you can do it. Chapter 9 has more guidance about how to develop this important skill.

Skill 10: Finding Meaning and Purpose

For many young people, the pandemic has been an extremely emotionally, socially, and physically challenging time. At the same time, it's also helped a lot of young people think about the issues they care about—it's been an unexpected way to find joy, meaning,

and purpose. In addition to feeling stressed, you may find you have some of your hidden talents. Maybe you make people laugh when they feel overwhelmed. Maybe you helped sew masks, or tutored your neighbor's kids in English. Maybe you started working part-time to help your family with bills. Maybe you raised money for lunches for first responders. Maybe you wrote postcards to campaign for your favorite political candidate. Or maybe you helped your grandmother find an appointment for the vaccine. There are so many ways that teenagers have found their voices and their strengths in this pandemic. If you haven't found these yet, that's totally ok. Just start paying attention to what makes you happy, what problems you think are important, and who inspires you. You have plenty of time to explore this process, and your interests always change with time.

Pandemic Tip: Right now, focus on small ways to get involved and give back. Don't force yourself to become involved in activism or community service on a large scale if it feels overwhelming. Remember, we are still getting through the actual pandemic. Now is the time to stay safe, get support, and to take care of those we love. When you see people doing things that inspire you, just write them down. Maybe it's kids who are cleaning up neighborhood parks, or a family that volunteers at a local food bank. When you are ready, take a look at your notes and see if they inspire you to do something small in your family or community. Chapter 10 has other suggestions about the role of humor, purpose, service, and activism.

Cassie's story: Cassie is a junior in high school who has experienced significant mental health struggles in the past year. She has had thoughts of suicide and has struggled with self-harm. A few months ago, she was hospitalized for two weeks. When she was discharged, she was motivated to raise awareness about depression. She suddenly became aware of the stigma associated with depression and really felt motivated to educate people about self-care. Cassie told her therapist about her goals, and they came up with a realistic plan that fits Cassie's personality. She approached her school counselor and volunteered to help create mental health fact sheets that will be distributed to her grade level. If and when she feels ready, Cassie might share her personal story of dealing with depression. Right now, she's trying to find the right balance between educating others and taking care of herself, and she's given herself plenty of time to walk this journey.

Conclusion

I hope the skills in *The Resilient Teen* will help you survive, thrive, and even find moments of joy during this difficult time. You survived this past year. This means you already have the skills needed to live through adversity; your resilience journey has already begun. You've started a lifelong process—identifying and refining your coping skills, letting go of things that don't work for you, getting support, and finding greater joy and purpose.

A Final Pandemic Tip: Try to find inspiration and joy wherever you can. Remember that human beings have an incredible capacity to overcome adversity. People who have survived wars and other epidemics have taught us a lot about how people can heal. People who have lived through eras of violence and discrimination can teach us about how to overcome struggle. Everyone around us has a story, and often, we have no idea what it is. When friends, family, or teachers start talking about their lives, listen carefully for the lessons. Because often, there are hidden moments of resilience, little pieces of joy—even in moments of stress and struggle. And someday, people will be looking to you for that same inspiration because you are living through history.