A message from Dr. Peter Yellowlees, Chief Wellness Officer

How to overcome our anxiety as we reopen

Have you noticed that just now there are more people on trails, bicycling and walking their dogs than ever – while physically distancing?

Most of us are past that awkward feeling of wearing a mask while shopping for groceries. In general, we know we have done really well as a community focused on following the rules to get us through the shock of COVID-19. Now as we embark toward reopening our state and getting back to our workplaces, many express both anticipation and some level of anxiety. These feelings are to be accepted. It's natural to have mixed feelings about adjustments that we will continue to make on our path to the “new normal.” One thing we have learned is that we have proven to be resilient despite the challenges thus far and can be confident that as a UC Davis community we will carry on and do our best.

I like this quote from Jamias Cascio: “Resilience is all about being able to overcome the unexpected. Sustainability is about survival. The goal of resilience is to thrive.”

So, let’s thrive.

Most people I speak to are pleased and proud of what they have achieved and are keen to “reopen” after so many weeks of being cooped up at home, or otherwise restricted socially and professionally. But many are still uncertain and anxious about the future and wondering how they can cope with yet more changes. Certainly, at UC Davis we should all be very proud of what we have done and how we are already getting back hard at work, increasing our
outpatient consultations, surgery numbers and inpatient census as we start focusing on the backlog of patients who need health care. Our patients are glad to see us and are returning for the excellent health care UC Davis is known to provide.

I thought now would be a good time to explore our anxiety and examine it in the light of what we know are normal human responses to any major disaster for which we have some warning. Many of you will have seen a variation of the chart below. It was presented by Dr. Josh Morganstein at a National Academy of Medicine Meeting about clinician well-being on May 7.

The chart describes the typical pattern seen in most people of their emotional responses to pandemics, from lows to highs, over the first year. It describes six phases: Pre-disaster, Impact, Heroic, Honeymoon, Disillusionment and Reconstruction. As you can see, we are now at post honeymoon stage. With COVID this is made more complicated by the predictions of a possible second wave of infections in the fall and the added uncertainty and need for extra pre-disaster planning that this brings to everyone.

There are many ways that we can manage our quite natural anxiety at this situation. I want to focus on just one in this message, because it is one that we can all use both in the short and long term, and maybe turn into a permanent change in our habits, giving yet another silver lining to the pandemic. And that one change is increasing our physical exercise and fitness.

People are literally emerging from their homes all over California. Spring has sprung. Suddenly the streets are full of pedestrians. We all seem to be emerging from hibernation. This has been obvious in the past week. Look at the amazing number of people out walking. Bike sales have increased dramatically. Runners abound, and for those who have been close to the sea, surfers are out in droves, as are golfers and others playing allowable ball games, now somewhat altered by social distancing rules. And the air is cleaner than previously, with less pollution as cars remain garaged.

Inside many have kept up or even started exercising at home but in a new way. This has been
a big change. Gym, dance, yoga, pilates and private trainers have all gone online, and many of them will stay there in the future as we have found how convenient many of these practices can be in the comfort of our homes. No need to worry about how you look in your workout gear – just sweat away and feel better the more you do it. For people missing the social aspect of connecting with others in their gym, hang in there and look forward to a time when you can exercise at the gym and at home.

So, let’s make increased exercise a permanent part of our lives. While this will be good for our bodies, it will be particularly good for our mental health.

There is very substantial evidence linking physical and mental health and well-being, and a strong evidence base showing that improved physical health helps us better manage stress from any cause, as well as cope with anxiety and depression. But perhaps more importantly, being physically fit helps our memory and thinking, improves our sleep and energy levels, and gives us more resilience to handle challenges, as well as improving our confidence and self-esteem.

So, let’s see if we can all focus on physical exercise as one way of helping manage the tensions associated with reopening and continuing to live in the era of COVID. I hope that an increased level of physical exercise will be one long-term adjustment we can all make in our lives in the “new normal” time that we are beginning to experience. If Jane Fonda at 82 years of age can continue her decades-old exercise routines on TikTok, we can all do it!

Enjoy whatever exercise suits you best. Live longer. Feel better. Improve your resilience. And let’s all get something really positive out of this pandemic.

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**Emergency Pavilion**

“I just wanted to say how great each and every nurse was to me when I was brought in. I don't think I ever have been treated so well. I was so scared I had been attacked by a pitbull and was terrified and the doctors and nurses were great.”
**T6 Acute Care Unit**
“Good experience asking questions; they got answered.”

**D7 Pediatrics**
“I will ALWAYS recommend UC Davis! Our stay was beyond phenomenal & staff went above & beyond to make sure my child had a good experience, given the circumstances.”

**UC Davis Medical Group Davis Clinic**
“I've worked in the health care field and UC Davis has the best care around, with knowledge, professionalism and their wide range of resources and research they are the best health care organization!”

**UC Davis Medical Group Elk Grove Clinic**
“I feel very lucky to have chosen my doctor and her medical staff at UC Davis. I'm very much alive because of the care and help all have given me.”