A message from Dr. Peter Yellowlees, Chief Wellness Officer

Post-traumatic growth and the new normal

Life has seemed brighter over the past few weeks. Spanish lavender, golden poppies and azaleas have brought spring into full bloom in our neighborhoods. Sacramento, labeled as “The City of Trees” since the 1800s, is showing off its canopies of tree-lined streets with a noticeable change this year – we are out enjoying our walks again.

As more of us have been vaccinated we can see smiles on unmasked faces as we pass each other along the pathways. Somehow it brings a sense of hopefulness just to be outside again. Families and friends are re-connecting – in person. Fans are returning to sports and cultural events. Dining out in a favorite restaurant is happening. Grandparents are hugging their grandchildren. There is a sense of optimism, a new beginning.

The rapid rollout of vaccinations has meant our communities are being set free. This is a big change, and we are all adjusting once again. Most of us are going through the experience of post-traumatic growth as we emerge as a society from necessary pandemic-related public health measures and start re-living life as it used to be. Maybe for some, life is more appreciated. Memorial Day weekend ushered in summer with people planning vacations and weekend BBQs. This year it seemed even more important and less taken for granted. We are also planning for a future in a changed world affected by post-traumatic growth. So what is post-traumatic growth, and why should we be thinking of it?

Wikipedia defines post-traumatic growth as the positive psychological change experienced as a result of adversity, which enables us to rise to a higher level of functioning. It involves the
transformative power of suffering leading to meaningful psychological shifts in thinking and relating that contribute to a personal or group process of change.

Many religions and philosophies encompass the transformative power of suffering, which in most people can lead to a greater appreciation of life; a changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships; a greater sense of personal strength; and recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life and spiritual development.

Those among us who are extravert and who are generally optimistic and who have supportive relationships are better able to change in a positive sense. They find it easier to develop useful narratives of trauma and survival that are the foundations of thriving following a traumatic experience or event.

I can think of numerous such stories.

I remember well the sense of excitement I had going to Costco for the first time in months of shutdown, despite the still-required mask. I hasten to add that shopping is at the bottom of my list of enjoyable activities. I can remember driving to the store with a sense of real anticipation, and then taking a little more time to actually look at items along each aisle, relieved that our shops were able to get us through this past year without running out of milk or bread. I was masked and socially distancing, but also smiling at everyone behind my mask, as if we were a band of brothers on a victory lap.

And I have changed. Now I no longer feel impatient as my wife carefully scans the wine section for the right bottle. Pairing the right wine with a special dinner matters to her and I finally get it. It’s hard to admit this but shopping at Costco has become sort of an outing. Something that we can enjoy together. I have also become a much better chef this past year and as such we look forward to entertaining family and friends with more digestible meals going forward. The BBQ has become my close ally and I’ve discovered that blackened does not mean burnt. We have planted a vegetable garden and are in serious competition with our son to see whose tomatoes are the first and most productive. It’s different this year. Small things in life matter more.

I encourage you to send your own stories to “Good Stuff.” I expect many of you will have much more exciting stories than my Costco experience!

What other changes can we make as a result of post-traumatic growth?

**Here is a brief list of suggestions:**

1. **Self-care.** Look after yourselves and your loved ones better, and especially pay attention to your mental health. Manage stresses and live life in a more balanced manner. Focus on your relationships. Keep physically fit – this is good for your mental health – and eat and sleep well. Take breaks and say “no.” Stay in control of your commitments and take pride in your accomplishments. Bubble baths and chocolate treats in moderation are good.

2. **Gratitude.** Say “thank you” to everyone. Give and be altruistic. Be grateful for your own good fortune. Focus on other people. Help others, especially those who are less fortunate than us. Those who are still unemployed or impoverished, those in other countries, those without our
inherent advantages.

3. Be adaptable. If nothing else, the pandemic has taught us this. Keep up many of the new ways of living you have learned. Video visits and Zooming; less traveling and time away from home for business; running, biking and walking; and learning lots of new skills.

4. Keep your family close. And if you can, continue to work in a flexible way. Spending time with your family is a huge gift for you, and them, and if you can re-arrange your family interactions to include more time together, try to do so. For those friends and family who are far away, keep up the online and Zoom contact.

5. Save the planet. Change your lifestyle, at home and work, to use less carbon. Fly and drive less. Make less waste and eat less red meat. Our air quality improved last year but is rapidly getting worse again. We cannot let that happen.

I look forward to your post-pandemic stories and your suggestions for improvements.

Same Day Surgery Center
"The entire team was wonderful & made the experience much easier through their compassion & kindness/patience."

Emergency Pavilion
"I felt my experience was great honestly! I was pretty scared and both nurses and doctors were able to keep me calm & were all very respectful & patient."

T2 Surgical ICU
"The food was wonderful and tasty. The food servers were very kind and considerate."

T3 Women’s Health Pavilion
"The special couples dinner was so nice. We haven’t had a date since the pandemic started and it was like a nice couple’s moment after the birth of our second baby. So lovely."

UC Davis Medical Group Folsom Sports Medicine
"The staff helped me make sure everything was ready for my appointment. Great contact and updates."