



Making Meaning

It can be very difficult to process, let alone make meaning, of a situation while you are still in it. As the coronavirus pandemic continues, it may be some time before we are able to fully understand and reconcile the impacts it has had on our lives. But as the spring semester comes to an end, we want to take this opportunity to look back with you and reflect on the changes and experiences you have had during that time.

Why is it important to make meaning? According to psychiatrist, neurologist, and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, suffering without meaning can isolate and tear us down. He coined the term “Sunday neuroses,” which is that empty feeling when the busy pace of life slows down and we become aware of an absence of meaning. Have you experienced this during any downtime this semester?

Frankl understood that suffering is a part of life and that it’s okay to feel hurt by it, saying: “But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer.” In this way, he underscored that making meaning should not skip or erase our pain.

Frankl believed that rather than denying suffering, making meaning has the power to transform it. He proposed that we make meaning by: 1) authentically experiencing ourselves and our environments; 2) changing our attitudes when we cannot change our circumstances; and 3) sharing our creative expressions with the world.

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If you feel ready to start this process, try writing your answers to these questions:

- *If you could pick up to three words to describe this semester, what would they be?*
- *How has your day-to-day life changed this semester as a result of COVID-19? How has it stayed the same?*
- *What are some ways that you have suffered this semester?*
- *What made you happy this semester? Sad? Angry? Afraid?*
- *What has surprised you about this semester? Was anything harder than you thought it would be? What was better than you anticipated?*
- *What choices did you have to make this semester? How do you feel about them?*
- *Have your values changed this semester?*
- *How have your identities shaped your experience of this semester?*
- *How might your suffering be viewed through the lens of your spirituality (if applicable)?*
- *Would you change the way you responded to life this semester? Would a different attitude have been helpful?*
- *What have you learned about yourself and the world around you under the conditions of this semester? What do you know that you need to survive? To thrive?*
- *What have you learned about your role in your relationships and in your community this semester?*
- *What will you do with what you have learned this semester?*

We hope that our final issue of Spring 2020 helps you to reflect on the past, to be mindful of how you feel in the present, and to accept the uncertainty of what the future may hold. You may notice that one or more of these need more attention than others right now, and we hope you can honor and validate the process you need. You have worked so hard this semester, in so many ways, and we are so, so proud of you. ❖

An Uncertain Future

One of the few things that is certain about the coronavirus pandemic is just how uncertain it makes the future look. While the next few weeks may be somewhat more predictable given the stay-at-home order, you may be facing uncertainty about the summer, fall, or even next year. You may also be anticipating a loss of structure with the end of the spring semester, which can add to feelings of instability. These experiences can be difficult to tolerate when so much still feels urgent to act on and figure out, and you may feel anxious to learn more information from the institutions in your life so that you can plan your course of action.

We understand that the unique uncertainty you face in your life right now may be impacting you in a number of different ways. Here are some ideas for how to be with your uncertainty that may resonate with you.

Normalize worry. People are hard-wired to worry – being able to predict and avoid unsavory outcomes is key to our survival. Try not to judge yourself if you are worried about the future – it’s only human.

Set a worry threshold. Worry can be helpful – it helps us to become aware of what we need to do in order to be safe and successful. However, this is generally only true up to a point, after which worry can become unproductive. The next time you feel worried, check in with yourself about whether it helps to continue to worry or whether you have done enough worrying about that for now.

Just because you fear something does not mean it will come true. Our fears can be so convincing at times that we feel as if they will certainly come true; this can be further exacerbated by absorbing panic from others. A helpful mantra could be “my fear is real, but it may not be TRUE that ___ is going to happen.” This helps us acknowledge our feelings while providing room for other interpretations of that experience.

If worry for the future becomes unbearable, come back to the present. It’s okay if you need to take a break from thoughts about the future – you’re not there yet! While long-term avoidance of what feels scary or uncertain about the future might not be the most adaptive, you can step back by checking in with your 5 senses or taking some deep, [diaphragmatic breaths](#) to remind yourself where you are. We will review more ways to stay present in the next section.

Stay connected to your stability anchors. Whether these are the facts you know to be true, your daily routine, or reliable loved ones in your life, know what the anchors are for your own sense of stability. Come back to them if uncertainty becomes overwhelming.

Use the tools in your toolkit. You have probably coped with uncertainty of some kind before, so you may be more prepared than you think. If you find yourself turning to unhelpful coping strategies, like increased substance use, stress eating, or not leaving your bed, gently remind yourself of what has helped you in the past. Good [self-care](#), journaling, talking with a friend, finding a way to laugh, focusing on what you can control, [practicing mindfulness](#), engaging in activities that make you feel happy and competent, [listing things you are grateful for](#), and drawing from positive family or cultural practices can help you cope.

Practice tolerating uncertainty. For some future goals, you can create a backup plan – a way to reschedule or an alternative way to achieve that goal. For others, that is simply not possible. If you find yourself stuck in a cycle of clamoring for information that isn’t yet available, or if a “backup plan” does not apply, practice saying, “I don’t know yet, and I can accept that.” Try sitting with this thought for 10 seconds before moving on; next time for 30; the next time for one minute. Tolerating distress is like a muscle, and the more we exercise it, the more resilient we become to stressors like uncertainty.

Examine your expectations about productivity. Many students socialized in the US educational system may resonate with cultural norms related to constantly achieving, competing and building the resume. Being forced to pause during times of uncertainty can be an invitation to examine how chasing productivity has both served you positively and how it may have facilitated avoidance of difficult things. If you don’t have something scheduled today – notice how this feels, judgments you may be telling yourself (“I’m lazy”), and try to challenge the notion that productivity is equated with value/worth.

Accept that there may be loss. In our issue about [grief and loss](#), we addressed some ways to cope with the many types of losses people are enduring as a result of COVID-19. Denial is a common part of the grief/anticipatory grief process, but when you are ready, you may benefit from exploring what it would mean to you if the opportunity you are hoping for does not come to fruition because of the pandemic. This does not mean you need to abandon hope, but it may be helpful to anticipate how you could take care of yourself if you experience this loss.

Trust yourself. Few of us could have predicted how the coronavirus pandemic would spread to our communities. This can not only make the future feel scary, but it can also impact our ability to trust ourselves: “What else could happen that I can’t predict?” Be compassionate with yourself and try to restore your relationship with your awareness and your intuition. Know that you are doing your best with the information you have.

STAYING PRESENT

Though it is generally beneficial to reflect on our past and prepare for the future, it is all too easy to get stuck in those thoughts and lose the present moment. These few weeks after finals tend to be an especially important time to be present and recharge from a stressful semester. Mindfulness, which originated from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, can be a helpful tool for improving our contact with the present. If you could use some help being more present, try some of these mindfulness tips.

Do what you're doing. Mindfulness could be described not as thinking about what you're doing, but rather *doing* what you're doing. The next time you need to wash your hands, do just that – wash your hands. Don't think about what you are going to do next or carry on a conversation at the same time. Just feel the water rushing over your hands, notice the smell of your soap, feel the texture of the towel. Pick one or two activities like this (e.g., [mindful eating](#)) to get started

Be open to what the day brings. Often, it's when we are extremely busy, avoiding something, or getting stuck in our thoughts that we struggle to be present. Set an intention when you wake each morning to allow yourself to experience all parts of the day – the downtime, the unpleasant things, and the natural flow of our thoughts and feelings.

Pick a time or times each day to check in with yourself. You can set an alarm a few times per day or use some other stimulus as a reminder (e.g., every time you glance at the clock). Ask yourself at those times: How does your body feel? What emotions do you feel? What kind of thoughts have been on our mind today? Where are you in life right now?

Give yourself transition time. Often, we are already doing the next thing before we're finished with what we were doing to begin with. Give yourself at least a few minutes between different activities; you can further maximize the benefit of this by avoiding your phone during that time and taking some deep breaths.

Savor the moment. Meaningful things, positive, negative, big and small, can still happen in quarantine. Try to be mindful of these things and pause to remember what is happening and how it feels. You can extend this feeling by sharing it later with others.

As you read this week's issue, what stands out to you – past, present, or future – that could use your attention right now? In the spirit of mindfulness, focus on one at a time.

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS/EVENTS

MANAGING YOUR MOOD DURING A PANDEMIC WORKSHOP SERIES

TUESDAYS FROM 4-5:30PM, STARTING MAY 5TH. Join us online for a 4-week structured dialectical behavioral therapy skills workshop! We will be offering this workshop two more times this summer - [click here](#) to stay updated.

MIDDAY MOVEMENT AND MEDITATION WORKSHOP

FRIDAY, MAY 8TH FROM NOON-1PM

This online workshop will begin by leading students through a gentle mindful movement sequence followed by a guided meditation. [Click here](#) for more information and to register!

UNITED PEER SUPPORT NETWORK GROUPS

MEETING WEEKLY THIS SUMMER AT TWO DIFFERENT TIMES!

Looking to feel more connected during this time of isolation? Our peer-led support groups are now meeting online and are open to any student! [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

KORU MINDFULNESS WORKSHOPS

SUMMER DATES TBD!

Interested in learning mindfulness and meditation skills this summer? [Click here](#) to stay up to date on our online Koru Mindfulness workshop offerings and for some mindfulness videos!

SELF-COMPASSION WORKSHOPS

NEXT WORKSHOP COMING LATE JUNE

Do you struggle with self-criticism? This workshop will teach practical ways to be mindful of when you are struggling and how to respond to yourself with kindness and caring. [Click here](#) to add yourself to our contact list for the next online workshop and for some self-compassion videos!

Tools for Making Meaning

[The Search for Acceptance and Meaning in COVID-19](#)
[How to Find Meaning in Suffering](#)
[Suffering, Meaning, Hope](#)
[Road to Resilience](#)

Tools for Staying Present

[Koru Mindfulness Meditations](#)
[Mindful.org COVID Resources](#)
[Learn How to Savor the Moment](#)
[Headspace](#)

Tools for an Uncertain Future

[Coping with Stress Related to COVID-19](#)
[Coping with Uncertainty during COVID-19](#)
[Dealing with the Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing with the Stress of Uncertainty](#)

UIC Summer Resources

[UIC Summer College Programming](#)
[UIC Calendar of Events](#)