



Mental Health Support

Taking a weather check

The weather has certainly been varied and unseasonal these last few days, with hailstones, morning frost and even some snow falling in Wicklow. In general we can find this annoying or undesirable, but tend to adapt to it as something outside ourselves which cannot be controlled. We can learn from this some helpful ways of dealing with our own internal weathers – our moods or feeling tone – in response to the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic. **It is useful to take an interior weather check from time to time – simply asking " what's going on for me, what's my interior weather like today?" This can help in two ways: it allows us to be mindful of our emotions and then reminds us how emotions change, just like the weather.** If we can get a certain space to see that all of the different emotions we may feel in our "inner weather" are normal, and natural, just like moving clouds, passing rain, or the sun shining, we may not identify with them as strongly. In this way we don't make what is passing into the story of our life.



Name it and Get some distance

There is a skill called "psychological distancing" which may be helpful when dealing with difficult emotions or stormy interior weather patterns. It helps us stop identifying too closely with what we feel. There are times that we "feel" annoyed and then we "become" annoyed, or we feel frustrated and then become frustrated. We can get triggered by something we read, or think, or something a person said, and then we withdraw and feel down. When some sort of challenge or hassle occurs, most of us become our emotions. For example, I get a difficult email and feel frustrated so I become frustrated. This is probably a frequent occurrence as we deal with the slowness of the lockdown easing or the vaccine progress. **One skill we can use is to try and step outside ourselves and observe ourselves from a little distance. In this way we get a little space and don't identify with or totally become the feeling.** Then see if you can speak kindly to yourself, in the third person.

Instead of "I am really anxious after that conversation and can't see a way out" try using your name, to reassure and develop strength: "xxx, you are finding this difficult, but you have gotten through challenging times before". This simple move from using the first person, 'I', to using your name, has been found in many different studies to reduce stress and develop resilience. It's like watching the clouds passing from a distance without taking their movement as personal



90 seconds...

This skill of "witnessing" emotions" is not just the same as being able to say we are feeling a certain way. It has a bit more space than that. It's that we can be aware as to how the emotion is being felt in the body, without allowing the mind to get hooked into it. Neuroscientist Jill-Bolte Taylor has said that the normal lifespan of an emotion is 90 seconds: "When a person has a reaction to something in their environment, there's a 90-second chemical process that happens in the body; after that, any remaining emotional response is just the person choosing to stay in that emotional loop." I think most of us would say that often we find that a mood can last much longer and we can be upset over days and even weeks. Its not so easy to let go of feelings of anger, frustration, or associated shame or guilt. "Witnessing" prompts us to step back,. Sure, the physiological feeling doesn't change, but our attachment to it, our interpretation of it, does change. It is often these thoughts and interpretation which we give to feelings in the body that make them persist and grow stronger. **If we can witness the physiological sensations, pause, take some deep breaths and then notice the stories – the thoughts the mind is creating around the event – then we are able to let it all pass through much more quickly.**



Understanding the nervous system when faced with danger

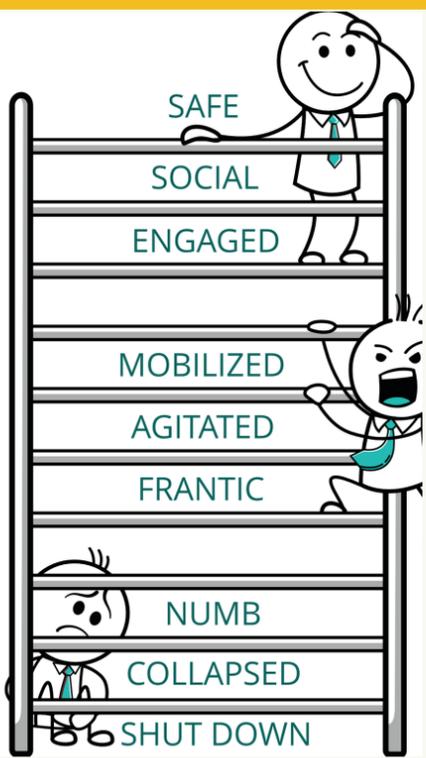
Polyvagal theory is used in the treatment of trauma and the ongoing pandemic and lockdown has been traumatic in many ways for a lot of people,

This theory states that our nervous system has three modes of being in the world :

The first can be called Connection, when we feel safe and we make the social connections which are vital for our mental health. This is our rest-and-digest mode. These connections have been made much more difficult in times of lockdown and the overall period of the pandemic has not made us feel very "safe". When we feel safe and are relaxed, we naturally move towards social connection and communication.

The second is called Mobilisation, when our energy is engaged, normally in response to some threat. This is the well known "fight or flight" reaction and can have a useful purpose of mobilizing our focus and our drive. However, in the pandemic this has become the dominant mode, knocking our whole system out of balance.

The third is known as Immobilisation, when the danger is so overwhelming that the body shuts down, conserving energy for a potential escape. This is the "freeze" reaction seen in some animals who pretend to be dead so that the predator will go away. The length of the pandemic has moved many into a type of this psychological shutting down, where reserves feel very depleted and the energy to escape is being drained. **The extended lockdown has paradoxically removed people from social connection, one of the key ways to maintain health in the face of danger. As a result, we may be feeling things like low mood, a need to conserve energy, some sense of being overwhelmed, and that we can't move forward.**



Feeling Overwhelmed

We need to understand these days that we and others may feel the ongoing effect of the pandemic and lockdown as overwhelming, to some degree. Most of us normally can face stress and eventually return to normal. **But when we feel overwhelmed, we can find that little events, – which we could normally manage – can knock us more than we would have expected.** We can also find that we feel more tired than normal, or that we do not enjoy some things in the way we used to. We may also notice that negative emotions are more likely to come up, such as anger, irritation, annoyance and anxiety. If we notice this, it is important that we extend kindness and compassion towards ourselves and recognize that we may need more rest than normal. Developing skills for relaxation, and using mindfulness or meditation practices, can go a long way in helping us come out of overwhelm and return to a place of calm.