

Going Gently into June

Do you know that it only takes 21 days of doing something every day to form a new habit? I found this to be oh so true when I drank just one can of ice cold Coca-Cola Zero whilst on a month long retreat in a boiling hot Thailand many years ago. When I got home, I found that I had a serious coke habit - which I still have to this day.

Recently, we have been doing the same thing every day not just for 21 days, but for well over 400 days! What have we been doing? Well to a greater or lesser degree, we have all been in retreat from the wider world. We have all been shielding ourselves from a life-threatening danger that we were told was lurking everywhere around us – on the surface of our shopping, inside shops and cafes, and definitely on the breath of other people passing us by in the street. Some of us did not even go outdoors for several months in a row. Others of us went out for walks throughout the lockdowns, but we certainly did not meet up with friends or go to out to our usual classes, jobs, parties, holidays etc.

Moreover, it now turns out that throughout this period, our government was using fear to control us. UK politicians were advised to exaggerate the threat to our health if we so much as poked our nose outside our front door. Behavioural scientists actually told our politicians that this was the most effective way to stop us behaving 'recklessly'. Small children were even told that they could 'kill Granny' if they tried to give her a hug. No one at the time seemed to take into account the damaging long-term effects such scare-mongering might have on our mental health or our ability to go back to normal once the real threat of the pandemic receded.

So, no wonder many of us are now slightly, or more than slightly, wary of resuming group activities that once seemed perfectly safe to us. For example, I was on the tram into central Manchester the other day and I noticed a group of school children sitting near me not wearing their masks. I even looked around to see if I could move a bit further away from them. But then, I reminded myself that this twinge of anxiety was irrational given the very low rates of Covid in Manchester in May. So I decided to stay put and to send a silent blessing to the school children chatting merrily and masklessly away to each other.

The key point I would like to make here is that I think that we are all going to have to make a real effort in the next few months to override our fears about the wider world and all the wonderful people in it. We are going to have to push ourselves a little, or in some cases a lot, to resume activities that we did a year or so ago without a second thought. We are going to have to mindfully notice when a pretty irrational fear of being in the wider world is rearing its ugly head.

Now the macho way to face any fear is to 'feel the fear and do it anyway.' It is certainly true that if we courageously push through our fears, we usually soon realise that we are much safer doing what frightened us than we ever imagined. So for example, if we have a fear of

flying, we can go on a course to help us conquer it and then discover that each time we fly we feel less anxious, until flying becomes almost a stress-free activity –although maybe not at the moment when there are still so many complex hoops to go through before we even get off the ground!

Pushing through our fears by doing those activities that scare us is certainly one way to broaden our horizons. I do think that some of us may currently need a little push in that direction. But at the same time, I would like to suggest that we also make sure that we are extra kind and compassionate to ourselves as we make a pretty big adjustment to our daily routines.

We should certainly not underestimate the challenges we all now face as our bodies, minds and hearts adapt to a different way of living in the world than the one we have all become used to in the last year or so. We should definitely keep gently and lovingly reassuring ourselves that feeling tired or stressed as we meet up with more and more other people is perfectly normal. We may also need to slow down from time to time and even retreat again from the world for a short while until we adjust to this new/old pace of life.

For example this week, Gloria taught four Tai Chi classes for the first time in ages. Then on Friday, she woke up at 3.30 am and spent the whole day buzzing with so much energy that she could not get to sleep until 12.30 am on Saturday morning. She was just like a toy bunny running and running on new Duracell batteries! I finally realised that she had accidentally filled herself up with too much Chi. Her system was no longer used to so much energy and so she felt really high and could not rest properly. No big deal, but a good example of how what used to be perfectly normal activities may have a strange effect on us for a while.

The key to making any major adjustment in life is to be super mindful of how we are feeling day to day or even moment to moment. Then, we need to pause and make sure that we reassure ourselves – just as we would reassure a dear friend who was going through a major change in their life. Whenever I am feeling a little down or anxious, I now try to remember to place a soothing hand over my heart and to say lovingly to the scared or depressed little girl within, 'It's OK. This too will pass! Or 'Don't worry, you can get through this!' Then if I still feel pretty bad, I might ask Gloria for a comforting hug or I might just tell her how I am feeling because I know that a trouble shared is a trouble halved.

So I would like to suggest that throughout the month of June, you do not simply put up with any anxiety you may currently be feeling, because constantly dwelling in a state of fear or anxiety is extremely bad for our health on so many levels.

The really good news is that the energy of love always wins over the energy of fear. So each time you mindfully notice that you are anxious and then pause to send yourself some well-deserved waves of loving kindness or compassion, you are doing something wonderful for your long-term health and well-being. In fact, the health giving powers of love energy are far

greater than any assumed health benefits there may be in wearing a mask in a shop or swerving nervously around other lovely people in the supermarket! So please, please, please do everything in your power to connect to the infinitely protective and healing energy of loving kindness and compassion this month. Then, go bravely out into that amazing big, wide world and really enjoy some fun activities with your friends and loved ones! (Remember how wonderful that can feel??)

Peggy Foster
June 2021