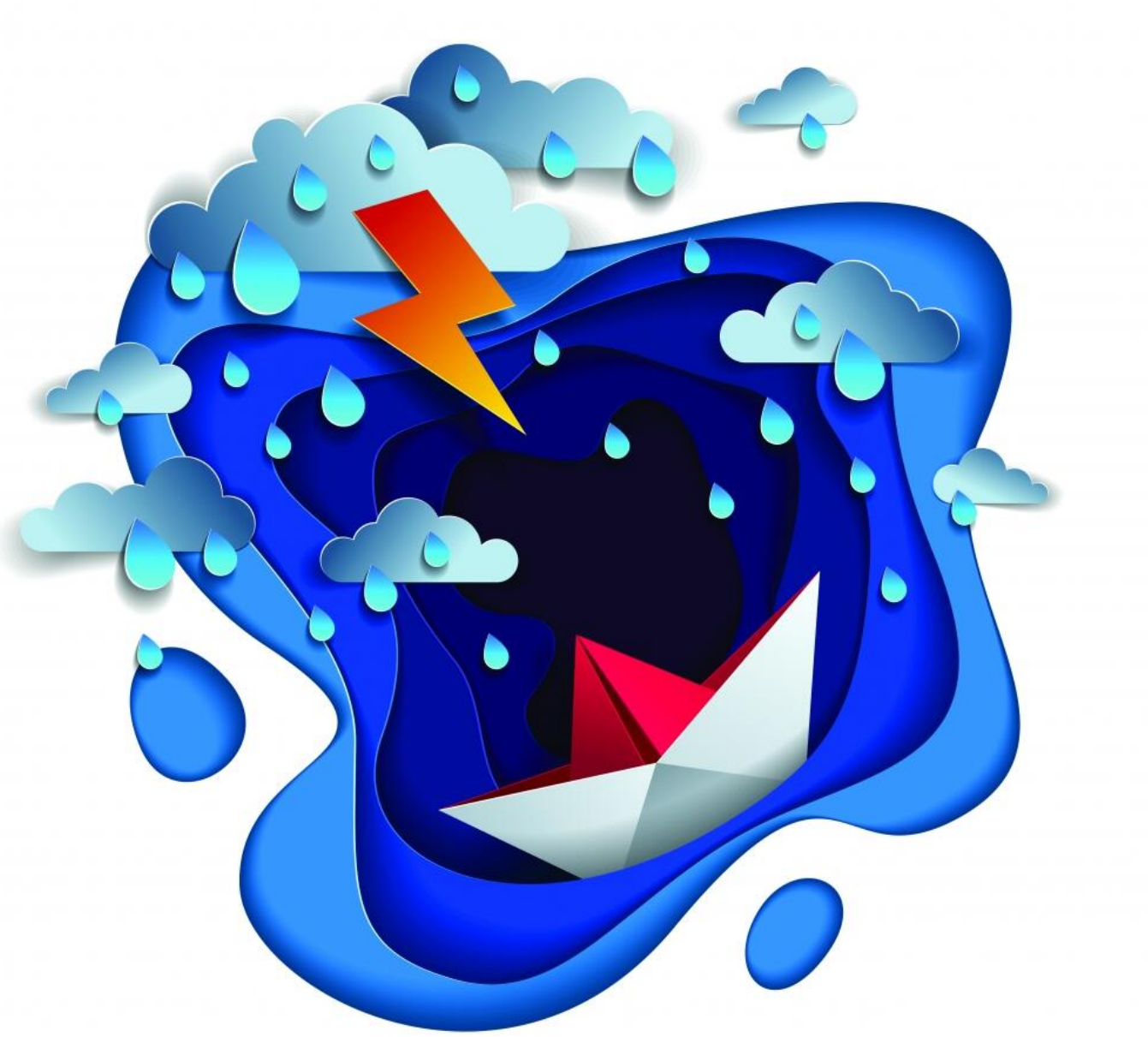
Staying well in the storm



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Jo Maughan asks how we can look after our emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 lockdown

Key Points

What is the issue?

Are feelings of guilt, loneliness and anxiety stopping you working from home productively?

What does it mean to me?

How well you look after your emotional wellbeing is important so you can provide brilliant tax advice.

What can I take away?

Practical techniques to build your resilience in these challenging times.

In 1977, I was in isolation in hospital. Aged seven, I had severe eczema. For six weeks, I lived in a single room with three glass walls, and one of brick. I only saw the world through my closed window. My mum and dad gowned up to visit me. My uncle waved through the window.

I remember feeling scared, confused, angry, sad and lonely. I also felt happy – when nurse Sally came in. I felt proud when I'd finished a drawing. I was bossy with my imaginary class of children. So many emotions came and went, and they seemed more acute because my world had become smaller.

That's how it is now. Emotions seem to be magnified. I felt genuinely scared when I heard the prime minister had gone into Intensive Care. Sarah is anxious about her daughter's mental health while she's off school. David is worried about the drop in his income. How are you feeling?

However you're feeling, it's normal to feel as you do. Your usual way of living has been up-ended by a new virus. Whereas your mind may tell you that you SHOULD be feeling a certain way, the fact is you feel as you feel.

When I asked myself what can I write about in our new COVID-19 world, I thought emotions, especially the ones we might term as 'negative' or 'difficult'. How can we all experience our feelings with understanding and kindness and at the same time do what we need to do? Answer: build our resilience.

When we’re caught up in an emotion, it’s easy to think we’ll feel that way for ever. Not true. Even when we’re feeling lonely, there’ll be moments of happiness; e.g. you get a text from a friend. A useful exercise therefore is to spend five minutes at lunch and five minutes in the evening naming and listing down the emotions you’ve felt that morning or day. I’m always surprised by how many emotions come and go. As the adage says: This too
will pass.

Coping with guilt

I’ve noticed there’s a lot of guilt around at the moment. Carla feels guilty she’s not supervising her kids’ schoolwork enough. Ian feels guilty each time he pops down to the kitchen when working from home. Julie feels guilty she’s actually enjoying working from home. Which is you?

Well, know this: Research consistently finds that we humans can only focus on a task for about 25 mins at a time before we lose concentration. Therefore, the optimum way to work productively is in bursts of 25 mins, then take a five to ten minute break (known as the Pomodoro Technique).

Still feeling guilty? Consider how much work you actually do when you’re in the office. Remember, the chats before the meeting gets going; the interruptions from colleagues; getting up to fill your water bottle; chatting at the coffee machine; sorting out your lost Amazon packet? You’re not actually doing as many hours work as you think. Maybe four out of eight?

Guilt makes us feel yukky. It pops up because we think we shouldn’t be thinking or doing what we are actually thinking or doing. We believe we’ve fallen short of the ridiculously high standards we hold ourselves to. I bet there’s a voice in your head telling you SHOULD do this, or SHOULDN’T do that? Yes? This is your critical inner voice.

Your critical inner voice will also be there if you’re feeling any other ‘difficult’ emotion such as loneliness, boredom or anxiety. Quieten your critical inner voice and you’ll reduce the ‘difficult’ feelings, while at the same time giving yourself space to feel ‘positive’ emotions again. Here are some tactics.

1. Ask yourself Socratic questions zzWhat are the advantages of having this thought?

- What are the disadvantages of having this thought?
- What would I advise a friend if they were having this thought?
- What is the evidence for and against what I'm thinking?
- So what? (This is my favourite.)

2. Apply the Facts, Opinions, Guesses test

Tune into your thoughts and write them down. For example, 'I shouldn't be having a break already. I should be getting that report done. My boss will see I'm off-line. I'll get into trouble. I should have more stamina.' Next: apply the Facts, Opinions, Guesses test to each thought. Be like a tax lawyer when you do this. Very literally challenge and dissect each thought. Ask: Is it a fact, a guess or an opinion? Is it actually true? For example, is it actually true that you SHOULDN'T be having a break? Who says? Who makes the rules?No, it's not a fact. You think you shouldn't be having a break yet, which is an opinion. Is it true your boss will see you're off-line (and by implication not like it)? No, it's a guess because you're predicting the future and you're not a mind reader. Get the idea? By challenging your thoughts in this way, you'll start to see them for what they are: just thoughts. Not facts. And if they're not facts, you can choose not to believe them.

3. Practise mindfulness

I do five to ten minutes of mindful breathing each morning. It helps me let go of negative feelings and thoughts. It also helps me magnify positive feelings. Have you tried it? Perhaps you're thinking you don't know how to and don't have time to learn? Well, here's the thing: you don't need to go on a course and there's no 'proper' way to do it. I define mindfulness as being with yourself with kindness.

Here's a short mindfulness exercise to try:

- sit quietly and close your eyes;
- breath in and out, being aware of each breath;
- go 'inside' yourself and notice how you're feeling, what you're thinking; just notice and 'be with' yourself however you are;
- continue to be with yourself in this quiet way; breathing; if you notice yourself getting distracted by thoughts, say to yourself, 'there's a thought. I can let it pass', and refocus your attention on your breath;

- just before you’re ready to finish, make a choice about what you’ll choose to do or how you’ll choose to be in the next moments of your day; e.g. I choose to stop worrying about what I can’t control;
- open your eyes, and implement your choice.

4. Be kind to yourself

Do more of what nourishes you, and what makes you feel safe and secure. I like to have a chocolate with my coffee as a small treat when working from home. I take time to make myself a tasty lunch such as roasted vegetable salad with tahini dressing. Then I sit down and really enjoy eating it. When I feel lonely, I cosy up on the sofa under a soft blanket to watch 20 minutes of Downton Abbey; I put my arms around myself and give myself a hug. All these little things, done for myself with kindness, help me generate ‘positive’ emotions.

5. Practise gratitude

I have an orange notebook in which I write three things I’m grateful for each morning, such as: my health, my cosy home, and the blackbirds living in my garden. I take a few minutes to ‘be present’ while I write down my three things, breathe consciously, so I really appreciate them. (This practice is not just writing a list.) I re-read them and smile to myself. You’ll find your ‘difficult’ emotions will reduce because when you’re feeling grateful, your mind isn’t able to think about anything else.

It’s my hope that this article will be useful for you when normality returns. After all, being emotionally resilient is a professional skill in itself.