Thoughts about wellbeing as the fall semester approaches

By Michelle Artibee, Director, Workforce Wellbeing, Human Resources

How is it already 2 ½ weeks before fall semester starts? Perhaps it was the relentless July rain? I tend to think we are in a strange time warp, still navigating the pandemic and trying to sustain ourselves and those we care about and work with after what has been the most draining 18 months of our lives. Occasionally I wouldn’t mind a DeLorean and a Cornell protégé of Doc Brown as co-pilot.

Individually we have been through a lot. We have experienced levels of trauma, grief, and stress that were previously unimaginable to most. These emotions and feelings may not magically resolve themselves when the presence of COVID-19 dwindles. In fact, some people will experience a delayed or extended emotional response which may prompt questions like, “Things are so much better… so why do I feel unwell?” Some employees are experiencing heightened anxiety, particularly working parents, as they prepare their children to return to in-person schooling while awaiting the availability of a vaccine.

As a community, we have come together in remarkable ways to care for students, continue teaching and research, care for the campus, and so much more. The innovation and the dedication faculty and staff have toward their work and each other is indescribable and makes me proud to be a Cornellian. It is also important we acknowledge within ourselves and each other that the amount and/or intensity of our work for an extended period without appropriate time for recovery can not only have a negative impact on our wellbeing, but can also hinder our effectiveness.

The duration of the pandemic, managing health and family life stressors, while also juggling work- can create prime conditions for burnout and fatigue. If that’s you, viewing the start of the semester (or K12 year) with bleary eyes is understandable. Taking a week off may not resolve burnout syndrome. I encourage you to read more about burnout here and seek professional help if needed.

We may not be able to simply self-care our way out of a pandemic and breakdowns in social structures or lack of resources, but I do believe small, tangible actions can help us get through difficult times. Here are a few things that work for me.
1. Do what I can, when I can, with the resources I have available. Sometimes this means doing a lot and other times this means doing nothing.
2. Adjust what I expect to get out of “self-care” – whether that is vacation time, sleep, etc. If I don’t feel a large sense of renewal that doesn’t mean it wasn’t important or helpful to do.
3. Get more than one kind of rest.
4. Own the control I have over my time where I can, even when I’m feeling cramped for it.
5. Use wellbeing multipliers – a walk with a friend makes me feel socially connected and physically energized.
6. Talk to my supervisor when I need help figuring out how to prioritize projects.
7. Be careful about pursuing perfection. E.g. I can spend extra time agonizing over wording in this informal piece or I can move on to the next project which needs laser focus.
8. Schedule lunch time and other breaks for the fall semester now.
9. Use short exercises (such as the below) when I feel anxious or stressed out.

What works for you? Share with me at ma64@cornell.edu.

**Grounding Exercise for Anxiety & Stress** (~1-2 min)
This five-step exercise can be very helpful during periods of anxiety or panic by helping to ground you in the present when your mind is bouncing around between various anxious thoughts. Before starting this exercise, pay attention to your breathing. Slow, deep, long breaths can help you maintain a sense of calm or help you return to a calmer state. Once you find your breath, go through the following steps to help ground yourself:

* Acknowledge 5 things that you can see around you
* Acknowledge 4 things you can touch/feel
* Acknowledge 3 things that you can hear
* Acknowledge 2 things that you can smell
* Acknowledge 1 thing that you taste

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation** (~5 min)
One of the ways our bodies respond to anxiety and stress is with muscle tension. This relaxation exercise focusing on each muscle group can help relieve that tension, reduce anxiety, and possibly help us fall asleep. It can be done laying down or while sitting. Muscle groups include hands, wrists/forearms, upper arms, shoulders, forehead, cheeks/jaws, neck, chest, stomach, hips/buttocks, thighs, and lower legs.

* Breathe in and tense a muscle group for 4-10 seconds.
* Breathe out and suddenly and completely relax the muscle group.
* Relax for 10-20 seconds before moving to the next muscle group.

**How to Stick to a New Habit, Even When You’re Not Feeling Motivated**
(Thrive Global)
Atomic Habits author James Clear shared a helpful strategy for making new habits stick. The trick, he says, is to ask yourself: “What can I stick to on even my worst days?” Learn simple microsteps to help you stay consistent on your toughest days.
For NYC Based Employees: Managing the Anxiety of Returning to Onsite Work in NYC
Aug. 12, 10-11am. This webinar presentation will focus on the unique complexities of returning to work in New York City, understanding and effectively managing anxiety relating to the return to the workplace, and community supports for returning.

Coping with Intensity
Aug. 10, 12-1pm. We’ll go over some of the best practices of how to manage when work and life situations may not temporarily be ideal. Keri Johnson, Cornell Wellness and Fitness Specialist will share resource information that can be helpful during challenging times.

PODCAST: Cultivating Your Purpose (Hidden Brain)
Having a sense of purpose can be a buffer against the challenges we all face at various stages of life. Purpose can also boost our health and longevity. Cornell psychologist Anthony Burrow explains why purpose isn’t something to be found — it’s something we can develop from within.

Women’s Health Screenings Checklist (Weill Cornell Medicine)
Women have unique health needs at each stage of their lives. With that comes different check-ups and examinations every couple years.

Tompkins County – Pop up COVID-19 vaccine clinics and recording of 8/5/21 Health Forum
Aug. 13: Conifer-Ellis Hollow Rd. Apartments (ages 18+)
Aug. 14: Southside Community Center (ages 18+)

Down Dog - Meditation and Yoga – Free
Down Dog is providing free access (website and App) to anyone who signs up with a .edu email address now through January 1, 2022. Customizable options include level of skill, mobility, body area of focus, duration, sound preferences and more.

In-home Vaccination for New York residents
New York State, in partnership with counties, established local points of contact to expand access to vaccines through an in-home vaccination program for those who are homebound due to physical limitations, cognitive impairment, other chronic conditions, a lack of transportation, and/or visual impairments, and who do not have access to supports that may help them physically go to an existing vaccination provider.

Staff Appreciation Street Fair 2021
Join us on Aug. 10 from 12:30-3pm at the Arts Quad for free food, games, and a good time! Visit the webpage for details or if you’re interested in volunteering.
**Faculty & Staff Town Hall: Planning for the Fall Semester**
Aug. 11, 12-1pm. All faculty and staff are invited to participate in a town hall webinar on Wednesday, Cornell leaders will answer questions about plans and expectations for the fall semester.

**CULTURAL**

**Mind, Body & Soul:**  
**A Community Health Event**  
Aug. 14, 5:30-8pm at Southside Community Center, 305 S. Plain St. Ithaca. Learn about health and stress management coaching, nutrition, diabetes point of care testing, cancer prevention, women's health, and so much more! Call 607-273-4190 with questions.

**FINANCIAL**

**Federal Student Loan Payments remain on pause through January 31, 2022**  
Last week the U.S. Department of Education announced that federal student loan payments will remain on pause through the end of January. Loan payments, interest accruals and collections of defaulted federal student loans have all been on hold since the start of the pandemic. Prior to this updated announcement, payments were set to resume October 2021.

**RELATIONSHIPS**

**PODCAST: Helping Grandma and Grandpa Get Back Into the Groove** (CNN)  
CNN Chief Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta speaks with gerontologist and Cornell faculty Karl Pillemer about the ways older adults can teach the rest of us about living through difficult times.

**PODCAST: Managing Back to School Anxiety During COVID-19** (Weill Cornell Medicine)  
Sherry Huang M.D. discusses how to manage children’s feelings and anxiety about going back to in-person school. She offers advice on what parents can do to ease their children’s back-to-school anxiety and prepare for classes in the fall. She shares red flags for when parents should involve the care of pediatrician or mental health professionals.

**Ensuring a Successful Return To Work & K12 School** (Care.com)  
Aug. 11, 12-1pm. This year, the return to work and school is going to look — and feel — different than in years past. Avni Patel Thompson, will share a framework for how to think about this new reality, including planning tips and strategies for dividing household duties so the mental load feels equitable and manageable.

**HELPING OTHERS**

**Fall 2021 Move-In Volunteer Sign-up**  
Cornell is need of volunteers to assist with welcoming our students to campus for the fall 2021 semester! Every volunteer will receive a Cornell Move-In t-shirt and a hat. Those who volunteer for two
back-to-back shifts will receive a meal from Cornell Dining, a light breakfast with coffee, and bottled water.

**Inspirational read:** [ILR professor gets new kidney – from his colleague](https://cornellchronicle.com) (Cornell Chronicle)

**FOR MANAGERS**

**Cornell Manager Chat**  
Aug. 12, 1-2pm. Please review the email sent to managers on August 6th from the Division of Human Resources for the registration link and details. The Manager Chats are a forum to help managers connect, share concerns and approaches, learn about resources, and offer peer to peer support.

**About the Wellbeing Update:**  
Information provided by Cornell Work/Life, Cornell Wellness, and the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program about campus and community resources, programs, and events. Explore [past editions](https://wellbeing.cornell.edu) or email wellbeing@cornell.edu to ask questions or suggest a resource. Published roughly every other week. Information shared does not indicate Cornell endorsement.