



Smiling into the storm

*When the world throws a year of chaos at me,
how will I smile in the storm?*

In an open letter to MDANZ members, David Sanders, a well-being manager at EAPworks, looks at how to cope with life when it's difficult, or just plain overwhelming. He offers tips on how to be positive, see beauty in the mess and encourages us to be the person who breathes hope and laughter in the midst of it all.

Hi everyone,

Well, I don't know about you, but this year has certainly confronted me and my friends with a life we never expected.

Over the last year or two, we have been so caught up worrying about the big issues in our world, like global warming, terrorist attacks, earthquakes, volcanoes, the economy and more, that none of us expected our world to be derailed so powerfully, by an insignificant, tiny, unseen virus.

The fallout of this virus, (known as Covid-19) has impacted us in multiple areas of our lives, from work issues, to personal relationships, to finances, mortgages, rent, buying groceries, self-care, personal hygiene and, of course, forced isolation.

The impact of lockdown in itself, has also compounded many of these issues leaving many of you feeling vulnerable, alone and, at times, frightened.

These are just a few of the issues forced upon us all and I just want to acknowledge them. I know my list isn't exhaustive and for many of you reading this, it doesn't even begin to cover all the stressors you've encountered, both minimal and huge, perhaps even life threatening.

It's been hugely challenging for some and downright frustrating and exhausting for others.

Many of us would consider ourselves robust or resilient at the best of times. People who don't easily buckle under strain and yet, because of the number of issues that have been washing over us continually for eight months, we have found our resilience challenged, our coping skills questioned and our vulnerabilities exposed as we have battled with exhaustion, uncertainties, and other anxieties and fears.

So, if you're reading this today feeling like you are "over this" and wondering when it will all cease, then I sympathise with you.

You are normal. You are allowed to feel tired and overwhelmed from it all. Why? Because we all are. We have been facing unprecedented stressors not seen before in our country since the last great war.

Rachel Remen, author and teacher of integrative medicine, once said: "The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through the water without getting wet."

How true that is. However, it doesn't really solve our problem does it?

How to cope with life when it's difficult, or just plain overwhelming? How to be positive, see beauty in the mess and feel positive about our situations?

I hope this sounds respectful, as I don't mean to take away from the seriousness of your lives. However, in my work as a health worker, I've realised certain things.

1. We either let our circumstances dictate to us, and our well-being, or we dictate back to our circumstances.
2. We become what we focus on.
3. Only I can breathe life into my day. It's all about my focus, my attitudes and my coping skills.
4. When the world throws a year of chaos at me, how will I smile in the storm? What will be my focus and how will that focus allow me to laugh and smile and see beauty in the middle of my difficulties? This is my challenge.

So here are a few tips to help you smile in the storm and re-centre your focus over Christmas and well, who knows how long? These aren't rocket science, but they are powerful and true.

Gratefulness, appreciation and laughter

Pain always demands to be noticed and unless you challenge its "talk", you will focus in on it. You will become what you focus on! You may even find yourself buying into its anxieties and fears. So... choose who you want to be for you and your family.

I encourage you to be the person who breathes hope and laughter in the midst of pain.

So on that note, I'm going to encourage you to redirect

You are allowed to feel tired and overwhelmed from it all. Why? Because we all are. We have been facing unprecedented stressors not seen before in our country since the last great war.

your focus to **gratefulness, appreciation and laughter.**

These three things have huge medical and psychological benefits during times of stress.

They release wonderful endorphins that build disease-fighting chemicals and hormones such as DHEA. It's a natural pain killer and reduces cellular decay – it releases tension and helps to build strong immune systems and changes the way we see our environment. See www.askthescientists.com/laughter-immunity/ and www.usa.edu/blog/how-laughter-can-relieve-stress/

Do you all remember Dr Patch Adams? He was so convinced of its impact medically and psychologically, that he devoted his hospital to encouraging everyone, (especially staff) to practice these three important tools for health.

Psychologically, the three of them build resilience, take away the power of our anxieties and soothe our fears.

They change our perspective and make us more attractive to others. They help our children and grandchildren to view pain without fear. Now that's huge.

"There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour." – Charles Dickens.

"I have seen what a laugh can do. It can transform almost unbearable tears into something bearable, even hopeful." – Bob Hope.

Self-care

Over 36 years in my work I've discovered that every human being is unique in discovering what breathes life into them during stressful times and it's important to embrace



*Panic breeds panic, but a smile
and... a reassurance breeds
safety. Rob the situation of
its potential power.*

your particular way of re-energising yourself.

So, take time right now to stop and ask yourself: "What re-energises me? What breathes life into me? What allows me to smile in the storm and say, I will be okay because..."

Here's a good site to go to, that gives lots of self-care tips www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/click-here-happiness/201812/self-care-12-ways-take-better-care-yourself.

However, if you are lost for ideas, here's a few to get you started. Don't ignore the power of breathing life into your day.

- Talk with a positive trusted friend.
- Exercise.
- Eat the right foods.
- Engage in a hobby.
- Look after your spiritual and cultural needs.
- Debrief/offload with a caregiver, professional.
- Watch a funny video.
- Write, sing, create, explore, pray, laugh, love life.

Managing anxiety for families

And lastly, I've had a lot of requests from families wanting tips on how to manage anxiety for themselves and their children. There is no way I can fit all this in here, but here are some simple tips to help bring those anxious thoughts under control.

- Daily routine is important in calming through change. Keep it up.
- Limit social media at night and unnecessary info during the day.
- Family culture is paramount. Reinforce it regularly.
- (You become what you focus on.) Channel the focus.
- Use stories from your own life as examples, rather than information, facts and lectures.
- Always place "okay-ness" into your worries and anxieties. Model courage.
- Use the Covid situation to engage in laughter and fun. (Remember: Either your circumstances will dictate to you, or you will dictate to your circumstances.)
- Keep your emotional reactions to unforeseen situations calm. Use a reassuring and safe voice. Panic breeds panic, but a smile and an okay reassurance breeds safety. Rob the situation of its potential power.
- Don't verbalise your fears, rather verbalise that you're the master of those fears and we will be okay.
- Set expectations and boundaries on attitudes, hysteria, devices, respect and kindness.
- Encourage family members to express their fears and questions. Just don't react to them. Show confidence and support. Teach them to find their strength in the storm.
- Don't be a helicopter parent that rescues. Rescuers create victims and victims get angry. Be a helper, that teaches coping skills.

It's been a pleasure chatting to you all. Merry Christmas.

David is an EAPworks Well-Being Manager. He has been with EAPworks for 18 months and has 34-years experience in the mental health field. His background and specialities are in terminal illness, depression, suicide, critical incident and mental well-being. David lives in a little settlement called Puhoi, just north of Auckland. He has three adult children and in his spare time paints, loves art and fishing.