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*Adapting to COVID-19: Mental Wellness in Challenging Times*  
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## Territorial Acknowledgement

Liisa:

Hi, everyone. Welcome. I'm glad you're here. And the next slide is fine, thanks. I'd like to acknowledge that I'm joining you today from the Lekwungen territory. But I am also an employee at Camosun College, and we're on both the Lekwungen and WSANEC territories. It feels super important to me, when we gather to talk about mental health, that we acknowledge that colonization and power and privilege mean that things impact people in different ways. It's extra important when we acknowledge the territories that we acknowledge the history. My family are not original people of these lands, I come from northern Finland, hence the creative spelling of my name, and also Scotland. And I'm a really grateful visitor on these territories. Yeah. The connection to the land for me here is really, really important. I've been so lucky these last couple mornings to see otters down by the water when I've gone for my morning run, and it just feels like a treat from the land when I get greeted by some of the creatures that live here.

## Background

Liisa:

Thanks, next. Who am I? Whenever I go to a webinar I like to know who's talking to me, or when we're in person, even better. I'm a counselor at Camosun, but I also have a pretty rich history in yoga and meditation. And one of the other things, to me, that feels really important is not just the territorial acknowledgement of where we are coming from today, but also the knowledge acknowledgement.

Liisa:

For me, my teachers are in a place called Rishikesh, in northern India. And as much as I would love to say that many, many years in grad school were the primary basis of what I feel like speak from when we talk about coping and how to deal with difficulties in their lives and difficult times. For me, the time on my yoga mat and the time on my meditation cushion is probably more impactful in terms of my real, deep sense of how to cope well with difficult times. So I'm particularly grateful to my teacher, [inaudible 00:02:09], who lives in Rishikesh. And it's with his permission and nudging that I share his knowledge with others when I speak with them as well. I'm a DBT trained therapist as well, so we're going to draw on some dialectical behavioral therapy training pieces today. Yeah, that's probably all I need to say about my background, but certainly if questions come up at the end, please feel free to ask.

## Introduction

Liisa:

Next. We're going to talk today about mental health and COVID. It is mental health week. Happy mental health week. Also, we are in these times that I think when we look back on them are going to be known as the times of COVID, it's such a big impact in our lives, and this is why the folks from BC campus have asked me to come speak to you about wellness in the times of COVID. I just wanted to get a sense from folks who are present, what are some words that come to your mind around mental health and COVID? Just to kind of get a sense of what we're coming into this presentation with what we're thinking about this. [Duane's 00:03:14] going to tell you how you can contribute to this presentation today by sharing some thoughts.

Duane:

Okay. If everybody goes to the top of their screen and clicks on "view options", then scrolls down and click on "annotate", you'll be provided with the opportunity to click anywhere on the screen and add text, or a stamp, or other thoughts.

Liisa:

I'm already seeing some words come up alone. Isolating. Isolation already, a second of that. Anxiety and stress. Needing connection. Yeah, these are really helpful to see. And isn't that interesting that these have very little to do with the actual illness itself, but much more about what is our human experience in this. Confused. Overwhelmed. Great, thank you so much for typing those in. A heart, I love that. It's fun that we can add those in on this. Yeah.

Liisa:

Even just as we sit in this group together, right? We've been able to come together today and here we are feeling some of these things around what COVID's going to mean for mental health. Let's just kind of hold that a little bit tenderly to realize we're all going to be in slightly different places. And as I mentioned in the territorial acknowledgement, we're all in the same boat and we're all impacted differently. The experience of COVID is going to be very, very different depending on what's going on in each person's life and it's probably going to change over the experience of while we're in these times. How we felt in March might be very different than how we feel in October. We just want to leave space for it to change, and part of what I'm really hoping we can do today is breath some other experiences into this, because these words feel pretty heavy. So how do we kind of hold that that's true, and also there may be some other things that are true? Next slide, please.

## Trauma

Liisa:

One of things that I thought about when I was asked to present on this was... This slide is kind of jarring on purpose, because these are three headlines that I pulled when I searched COVID and metal health. You see the word trauma in all three of them. I'll just own my own personal bias is that I've had a little bit of a pet peeve during the last couple months because there have been so many news articles talking about how traumatic this is for everybody, how bad this is going to be for everybody's mental health. And there's no doubt that it is indeed a stressor, right? It is something that's going to impact our lives, but it doesn't necessarily need to result in trauma, and that's something I really want to talk about today is what are our available options in terms of how we move through this in a good way, and if you're leaders on your campus, how you help others also walk through this in a good way.

Liisa:

Yes, if trauma shows up, we want to attend to it, and I'm not saying that we don't and that we don't acknowledge that would be true for some people, but we also want to acknowledge that we can move through trauma and not everyone will have that as an experience. Next slide. The definition of trauma that I like the best is a circumstance that overwhelms one's ability to cope. If you think about what trauma could like, when I'm an able bodied woman who speaks... oh, I forgot to say my pronouns are she and her. I also wanted to say that in the introduction. I'm an able bodied woman who uses the pronouns she and her, and I speak the language of the place I am, I have the ability to move around, I

have supportive relationships. There's a lot of things in my life that make it such that it would take quite a bit to overwhelm my ability to cope.

Liisa:

Now certainly, a big illness might do that. A bear shows up in my front yard, I probably don't have all the skills to cope with that, and so I may experience something that feels like trauma. Now, what's interesting is trauma is so highly relative, right? If I am three years old, and I'm in an unfamiliar place without people who are caring for me, then it's going to take something quite small to overwhelm, from the outside view it looks small, to the three year old it looks very large. So what might be not overwhelming to me, as a 44 year old woman, may be very overwhelming to a three year old. We always want to remember that when we're thinking about what is traumatic for people, it's going to be highly relative to your personal circumstance in your life. And very, very different from person to person, and different over periods of time in our life. And that's natural and expected. Next slide, please.

## What is an Important Piece of Knowledge that you Have About Yourself or Your Values?

Liisa:

I wanted you to think about, as we get into this conversation of trauma, I'm going somewhere with this, what's an important piece of knowledge that you know about you or your values? For example, I might say I know I really value the idea of justice. I know I'm really determined, right? Those are things that I feel are true about me, so on this next slide, similar to what Duane explained with the introduction slide, is if you feel comfortable sharing remembering that this is recorded, what's something that you know about you? An important piece of knowledge about yourself? It might be that you're also very determined, you have a strong sense of commitment, you're very musical, there could be anything that you really know about yourself.

Liisa:

"I am chronically optimistic." That's lovely. Family oriented. "I deal with stress through music and exercise." Oh, me too. It's a very important part of my life. I want you to think about these things that you know to be true about yourself, and how did you come to know that? Because my experience, and I think often true in human experience, "I need human connection." Great one. We don't usually learn a lot when we're super comfortable. When life isn't hard, when everything's going our way. I don't know about you folks, but for me, my greatest times of self learning, of growth and development, have always been spurred by hard things. And it's super annoying that that is how humans generally learn, but it is typically true. If you think about how and when you learned these things about yourself, that you need connection, that you're chronically optimistic, I'm going to harbor a guess that very likely it was as a result of something you would not have chosen that created the conditions for you to learn these things. Next slide, please.

## Effects of Trauma

Liisa:

The really great thing, and if I can say this, there is no awesome, great things about trauma, but one of the things it really does is it can shake up our knowledge of self. Whether it's something that we register as traumatic, or whether it's just something that's difficult, what that typically does is kind of, if you look at that circle, it creates a gap in our sense of our self. We usually walk around with these sense of identities of, "I'm this kind of person. I do these things. I like this. I value this." And when something really difficult happens, this kind of cracking of the shell occurs, right? Of, "This is so unfamiliar." I mean, if somebody said they were confused early on, I don't know the things that I thought were true about this world to be true anymore, something's different. And while that cracking is very painful, and we typically fight it, and we don't like it, what that allows us to do is reshape the outer shell. It's like, "Oh, I learned that I'm really optimistic, even in the hardest of circumstances. I maybe didn't know that about myself before."

Liisa:

Something, the person who said, "I'm family oriented." It drew me towards my people in a way that I didn't anticipate, or didn't really know about myself. When we go through these difficult times that are things we would not have chosen, none of us would have picked this, it allows us to learn new things about ourselves. Now maybe begrudgingly. Would I have picked COVID for any of you? No. Would I pick any of the other really challenging things that happen in life to people to be happening? Of course not. We would never choose pain. But what's really interesting to me about COVID is there's many, many people on this planet for whom COVID is one piece of a series of maybe difficult things, unjust things, that have occurred as part of their human experience. And so we want to remember that as we think about as this sort of highly unique circumstance, but also highly familiar for a lot of people. And for folks who maybe haven't had an experience of something really difficult in their lives yet, this may be even more jarring.

Liisa:

It's like, "Oh, my gosh, I had a really fixed view that the world was kind of safe place, or that this couldn't happen, but for other folks that may not be true, that this might actually feel like, "Oh, this is kind of familiar territory for me." What we know for folks who do experience something traumatic, and again, I'm not necessarily coming from the view that COVID is going to land that way for everybody, about two thirds of folks who experience something that feels like trauma, have what we call post traumatic growth. You've probably heard the term post traumatic stress disorder, right? All that means is after the trauma the stress is disordered. It's normal when a trauma occurs, and if you go back to the definitely of trauma being anything that overwhelms the ability to cope, it's normal to experience a trauma at some point in your life. I don't think I know anybody who hasn't had something of that variety. But trauma, typically, we can integrate through talking with people, snuggling with pets, all these things that help regulate our nervous system.

Liisa:

If we have the time and space to heal well, we can integrate the stress in a good way. What happens sometimes when we don't have support and resources, or the world isn't continually safe around us, that things continue to be very difficult, then we see the post traumatic stress becomes disordered. But what we're learning about now, and you'll see the references of the folks who are doing a lot of the

leading research around this right now, is that also there's the opportunity for post traumatic growth. And this is that kind of cracking of the shell that allows things to reorganize in a new way.

Liisa:

I'm not suggesting we're going to come out of today feeling optimistic about COVID, but we can hold more than one experience at a time. This is the beauty of many of the arts and sciences that I study, and it's that they're asking us to kind of hold, yeah, it's very, very difficult. And what else is true? Any of you who are also yoga practitioners in the group, you're being a warrior too. It's hard. The thigh muscle is working. If you stayed there for a long time you're going to feel some sensation. But what else is true? Is the breath moving? Can the neck relax? So we start to get this sense of effort and ease, more than one experience at a time. Next slide, please.

## Resilience

Liisa:

These are two different definitions of resilience, and I want to name two that for a lot of folks, especially in the counseling and mental health world, resilience can get a bad rap, because it can suggest that we don't acknowledge what has happened that's difficult in people's lives. I want to be really clear I'm not saying that we don't acknowledge what is true, and in particular when injustice and oppression occurs, it's very important that we acknowledge. I think it's pretty essential that we acknowledge it. And the other experience next to that is how do we move through it? If it's true that this has occurred, how do we move through it? And if you look at these two definitions of resilience, the one at the top suggests that we return to our original shape. We cope with something, and we come back to our original shape. The second one in the black box says, oh, we emerge stronger, wiser, and more able. And that's the kind of resilience that I really like. It's like, oh yeah, this is that cracking, this growth, who am I after this? What do I know about myself that I didn't know before? Next slide, please.

## Self Compassion

Liisa:

One concept, this is kind of a long quote, but there no part of it that I felt I could really cut out, so I encourage you to go back and look at it later, but the crux of this is I wanted to introduce Kristin Neff's concept around self compassion, because I think her work is some of the most important that we can use as we move through difficult times. She talks about the difference between compassion and pity, as long as we get fearful if we're too kind to ourselves, we won't keep moving through difficult things, and what her research tells us, actually, is that kindness is the bomb to the wound that actually helps us continue to move through things. But the kind of balm that we want to apply to the wound is really, really important. When we get into pity, it's kind of isolationist. "It's only me." It's, "Why is this happening? I don't like it." Versus compassion says, compassion is to feel with. Oh my gosh, look at all of us who have gone through this experience.

Liisa:

When I think of things like oppression, there was a time in my life that I experienced a quite sexist incident. And one of the things that was very healing for me was to realize, oh my gosh, I am in good company. I have so many folks who have experienced something like this in their lives. Did I want to

experience it? No. Would I choose it? Of course not. But, if I'm there, if it's true, how do I connect with the lineage of women who have also experienced something like this? And that it allows me to be in this more connected, more humane, more healing oriented space, than the "why me?" space. Next slide, please.

Liisa:

It felt really important to have a good fist of social justice on this slide, in particular as we're in these times of Black Lives Matter, of raising awareness in this world. We can't separate that out from this experience of COVID and this experience of mental health week, and so it is this idea of all of us versus "why me?" that is going to allow us, like anybody who follows Vikki Reynolds' work, I just love her stuff and she talks about how solidarity is really the antidote to oppression. That if we can find some connection, and some way to be with other folks, we tend to be able to weather storms a little bit better. I'm thinking back to that first slide where folks were saying, "Isolated." "Alone." "Confused." So how wonderful that we're able to come together today and be in this together, this felt sense.

Liisa:

And I know it's a little bit trickier through the screen, and I don't get to make eye contact with all of you, but I really encourage you to continue to make these opportunities to be able to connect with people about this. Because if we sit at home by ourselves and we feel this all alone, what we do is get a little stuck with it sometimes. So to connect with another person, what's interesting is that we can also connect with humanity alone, which is sort of a funny thing and I'll talk a little bit more about that when we get into mindfulness. Next slide, please.

## CBT vs. DBT

Liisa:

Before we get into the mindfulness piece, I want to talk a little bit about, I'm going to go into some philosophical piece just for a minute before we get back into some of the specific experience of COVID. No offense to anybody who's listening today who is a strong cognitive behavioral therapist, the CBT, but I want to talk a little bit about the difference between CBT and DBT when we're looking at an experience of something that is outside our control. Cognitive behavioral therapy tends to work a lot with thinking. It looks at what are the ways in which our brain is attempting to make sense of what's happening to us. If I use the example of a car accident, if someone has a car accident and they have trauma as a result of it, back to that definition of it overwhelms your ability to cope, it's a scary situation. You have this experience of fear in the body.

Liisa:

And that sense of fear in the body may get a little bit stuck, so someone might come see a counselor, or talk to a friend about, "Oh my gosh, every time I get in the car, I notice that I'm really, really stressed." What cognitive behavioral therapy would ask you to do is to look at are you making errors in thinking. It would say things like are you getting into black and white thinking? Either I'm totally safe, or I'm not safe. Or catastrophic thinking, this is going to happen, and then this is going to happen, and it's going to be terrible, and it sort of gets into that vortex. What CBT would ask you to do is spot the error in that thinking and say, "Well, the odds of me getting into another car accident today are very, very slim. So I can relax because I know that even though I have had this experience before, the odds of it happening now are low, so I can calm down in my vehicle."

Liisa:

Now that's, it's a decent way of working, I'm not meaning to totally trash CBT, but I might be trashing it a little bit in the sense that what I love about DBT, and what I love about other therapies like acceptance, it's commitment therapy if anybody works from that modality as well, is that it says, yeah, hard things do happen. What I love about dialectical behavioral therapy it says, yes, difficult things happen in the world, often we can not avoid them, sometimes we can, but often we can not. So if you got in that second car accident, right? Let's say you deal with the trauma of the first one and it just is like the worst fluke that somebody hits you the next time you go out. What DBT would say is, could you handle it anyways? Acceptance commitment therapy would say something similar or, can we accept that really difficult things happen, and can we commit to living the living the life that we want to live?

Liisa:

What I really love about DBT, and for anybody else who's studied it, dialectical behavioral therapy really came out of an attempt to provide some assistance to people who were in some of the darkest places that humans can be. Really designed to work with people who were deeply struggling, often experiencing suicidal feelings and it's about how do we have a more skillful life that leads to actually a life worth living? DBT would say we don't just do the skills so that we don't feel suicidal anymore, or don't feel a really dark mood anymore, we do them in order to have a life worth living, which is a really good reason to put some work into this. It's one of the reasons I am just loving the work of DBT these days.

Liisa:

The other thing I love about it is, the first word I referenced on the slide there is dialectical. And that is really this holding of two experiences at the same time. This can be true, and also this can be true. COVID can be scary, and what else is true? What else is true is I saw otters yesterday morning. Those two things don't cancel each other out. I might have some joy next to some fear. So we just ask ourselves to be able to start to tolerate some of that. I want to talk a little bit about mindfulness. Actually, we can go to the next slide for this, to talk a little bit more about mindfulness.

## Mindfulness

Liisa:

Mindfulness, I think, gets a little bit overused in our culture. I think it tends to be sort of thrown around as though it's just sort of sitting still for a few moments, or that all meditation is mindfulness. That's not necessarily true. In the DBT world in particular, which I'm going to draw from today, mindfulness is really about noticing without judgment, really deeply paying attention to what's occurring. The reason we do that is not to become a great meditator, we do it in order to become more skillful at life and that is a really important thing. Sometimes people sit and they go, "Oh my gosh, I'm terrible at meditation." When I talk to students about meditation they often say, "I can't sit still. I can't quiet my mind." What I'll often say is, "That's fine." The goal is not to become the best meditator. Now is it lovely if we sit and experience peace? Absolutely. I'm not saying we should avoid that. But what we're really looking for is how do we notice our anxiety in that moment? How do we notice our restlessness? How do we notice that we're preparing for an argument that may never occur.

Liisa:

Do ever have battles with people in your head that are never going to happen? What mindfulness allows us to do is that it allows us to see clearly what's happening around us. If I go back to that analogy of being in warrior pose in yoga, if all I can feel is the stress of my quad muscle working hard, and then I start to get mad at the teacher because why did she put me in this pose? Then I think I'm terrible because I'm not that strong, and look at the person next to me who's really strong, and I start to spin, and I can't see myself doing it. Then we start to get into that vortex. But what mindfulness when practiced regularly does, is it allows us to go, "Oh, look, my quad is tired." "Oh, I'm comparing myself to my neighbor." And then we might still judge, we might layer it and go, "Isn't that terrible that I'm paying attention to my neighbor." And then we can go, "Oh, look, now I'm judging myself for judging myself." Which humans do, we can layer about 57 different kinds of judgment really, really quickly.

Liisa:

Mindfulness allows us to spot it at the earliest opportunity. I work in this field and I have moments where my brain runs amok and I have to kind of go, "Oh, I missed seven opportunities to intercede in that thought pattern, but look, here I am on the eighth noticing. Okay. Let that be how it is today." And that's okay. What we use mindfulness for, and I love that part of the BC campus project is that there are these mindful moments happening on Mondays throughout the fall, and I'll be back for one of them later on in the season, is that it helps get us in the practice of working from that mindful point of view so that we're able to spot what's happening for us. One of the other things that I want to talk a little bit about is that stress, and in particular trauma, but all stress when it's chronic and kind of high, can pull us out of the ability to see things clearly.

Liisa:

When the brain stem, and I won't go too far into the science today, but anybody else who's working in this field knows, when the amygdala is firing and the brain stem is saying "danger, danger" the prefrontal cortex is kind of offline, and the way that impacts us as humans is problem solving drops, creativity drops, and the ability to be really reflective and see ourselves clearly, to have this sense of abstract thought, to see myself in the world, if I can't do that well, then it's very hard for me to respond in a skillful way. That's why, with DBT in particular, mindfulness is the core skill that underlies everything else because it is very difficult to do the other skills if we can't see ourselves clearly. If I'm busy hating my yoga teacher because she put in a hard pose instead of seeing clearly that, oh, I'm having a reaction when I don't feel like I can do something well, then we can't engage in a good way. We have the problem located in the wrong place.

Liisa:

As humans we do that, but we want to be able to more often, more skillfully, see things clearly. I really think the biggest skill, and it's annoying because it means you have to commit regularly and you have to actually work at it, the biggest skill that I would say is the underpinning to all of this is, in fact, mindfulness, to be able to see ourselves clearly. A regular practice, I'm not going to be on my soap box too long about this, but a regular practice is more important than a fancy practice. The more you can just start sitting every day to have that sense of watching the mind and noticing what's happening without judgment, the stronger all of these other skills are going to be. Any questions coming up? I just want to check. I realize I'm talking a lot. I don't think I see any questions.

Duane:

No questions yet.

Liisa:

Nothing yet. Okay, perfect. If there is something that's coming up while I'm talking, please feel free to type it in and Duane will flag me down and let me know that there's something that folks are wondering about. Next slide, please. And water for me.

## DBT Skill: Radical Acceptance

Liisa:

One of the other DBT skills that I love, that is also borrowed from yoga, borrowed from meditation and Buddhism is the idea of radical acceptance. Radical acceptance means accepting what is true, right? Which also means letting go of illusion that we can control things, and my goodness, is COVID ever the teacher for us on this. It's like none of us could have controlled this. We did not know this was coming. Many, many people, as I mentioned before, already knew that life was out of their control, but some of us were walking around with the illusion that we could control things. I often tell people with grief too, that grief is one of those things where we think, we operate as humans as though the people around us aren't going to go anywhere. What grief does is it brings the truth really close to the surface. It says actually this human experience is very fragile and quite fallible. That's uncomfortable for us as humans, and so what happens sometimes is that we want to forget that.

Liisa:

Radical acceptance says I'm going to accept that life doesn't happen on the things that I understand. It doesn't happen on my terms. And can I be okay with that anyways? The radical part is really important because what we often do as humans is we say, "No, I accept that, but..." which is not radical acceptance. It's saying, "Yeah, I'm willing to tolerate this, but I'm going to have a little bit of a battle with it." And what we know about being human is that battle is actually where more of the suffering comes than the actual incident a lot of the time. That's not always true, but very, very frequently this human experience of, "I'm fighting what's happening." Is where a lot of the pain comes from. One of my teachers, he says when you're practicing acceptance you have to think about if the issue were you, and someone said, "Come for tea. Come over to my house, have a cup of tea. You are welcome here. But could you be a little different?" And most of us would have that experience of, "What?"

Liisa:

And that's really what we want to look at with this idea of radical acceptance is realizing if we're going to accept it, we kind of have to accept it all. And this human experience means both beauty, joy, delight, ecstasy, and pain, loss, grief, rage, all of it is true. How can we hold more than one feeling at a time? Marsha Linehan is the author of this quote, and she's kind of... I don't know if she would like this term, but I think of her as kind of the godmother of DBT. She's the originator of a lot of the skills, so it felt really important to also name her in this presentation. Next slide, please.

## The Second Arrow

Liisa:

Anybody in the group who has studied any Buddhism probably knows the story of the second arrow. To me, it's one of the best ways to remember this idea of fighting reality. When we think about life having pain, we know this to be true. Painful things occur. Let's say it's, well let's just even use COVID as an example, it's painful that this is happening. It's painful that people are getting sick. It's painful that people are dying, sometimes it feels like unnecessarily because people have done some things that have not landed well in this process. The pain is here, and this is COVID, this hurts. The second arrow that we shoot at ourselves is, "This shouldn't be happening. I don't like it. I don't want it." We could even take it into the layer of our experience of COVID. Before we got on the call today we were all talking about our experience of working from home, and some people like it, some people don't like it. But if it's like, "I don't want to be stuck in my house." Say that was my experience, and then we say, "Why me? Why is this happening? Who made this happen?"

Liisa:

What we take is that first arrow that something is painful, and then the second, third, and fourth are judgements about what's happening. If I get sick, being sick is painful, I'm having an experience of pain that I'm unwell right now. As soon as I start to say, "This shouldn't be happening." That's the second arrow. "Who can I blame?" Third arrow. "I must have done something. Why me?" As humans, I don't know about your own experience, but when we are working from a place of mindfulness we can see all these extra layers that we are kind of aiming at ourselves as a result of our thought patterns. That's the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is unavoidable in this human experience, to the best of my knowledge. If you know something I don't know, please let me know. But I'm pretty sure part of being human is that we experience pain. The suffering is the optional part. The second, third, fourth, and fifth arrows are all optional. The trouble is they don't feel that optional a lot of the time.

Liisa:

I mean, I remember the first time, I think I was about 20 years old and I saw a counselor for the first time and they suggested I had some control over how I felt about something. And my initial reaction was like, "Oh, you don't know anything about my life. This is absolutely untrue. This happened, therefore I must feel this way." I clearly was not practicing a lot of mindfulness at this stage in my life. And what I know now is sometimes I can spot it and go, oh yeah, I'm telling myself a story about this. That's the second arrow I'm shooting at myself. And I do have a choice about how I feel. That doesn't mean I still don't sometimes hop on the rollercoaster of emotion and take myself for a ride, because I'm human too and we do these things. But what mindfulness helps us do is go, "Oh, I'm riding that coaster again. I can get off. I can talk to somebody. I can recognize the truth of what's happening. I can take a moment in nature. I can do all these things that are going to help me realize that I don't have to suffer quite as much as I'm suffering."

Liisa:

I think, with COVID in particular, this is something that we can look at and go, "Yes, this is very painful and we're having a wide variety of experiences to it." Some people have died. Some people are very ill. Some people are experiencing isolation. Some people are actually doing okay. And all of those experiences can happen as just the truth. If we radically accept that that's each person's individual experience of this, then all we have to do is be with reality, which is hard. It is challenging for humans to

be with reality, but it's something we can work towards and this difficult time may help us do that. Next slide, please.

## Acceptance

Liisa:

One of the things that people often get confused about with acceptance is thinking that it would mean you've chosen it. I know I've said that probably 30 times today in the session already of, "Of course we wouldn't choose this." But it's really important to remember that. That I think when we use things like radical acceptance, and when I'm talking with people who've experienced great harm, some of the things that happen in this world that are deeply unjust, we are not saying it's okay. And that's a really, really important distinction. It just means that given that it has occurred, how do we go on and have a good life? How do we move on? How do we continue this human experience and not get stuck in it? It just felt really, really important that I take a moment to say we are not saying any of it's okay, because it's not. It's absolutely not okay to harm other people, we know that. Given that it's occurred, given that COVID's here, how are we going to keep moving through it? Next slide, please.

## DBT Skill: Radical Acceptance

Liisa:

I want to talk a little bit about this skill of radical acceptance, and if any of you are really interested in this, you're welcome to reach out to me after or even if you just want to Google some of the information out there about radical acceptance, there's a ton of stuff on DBT on the internet. And in particular, anything written by Marsha is great. But she would just say to walk through it in these five steps. That we think of an important even. We just think of anything that's occurred. Of course, for today we're using the concept of what's happened to us around COVID but you can apply these skills in all parts of your life. And we say, "What caused the event?" With COVID it's like, what caused the event? A virus. Clearly, totally out of my control. And we just notice how we feel about it. I might have... I'm just trying to think about myself right now, if I take a little mindful moment, it's funny, I feel a little bit of acceptance, but also a little bit of confusion of, what is this going to be like? Which maybe tingles with a bit of anxiety and worry.

Liisa:

"How long is this going to go for?" My brain wants to ask a lot of questions. Can I be with that exact experience in this moment? Okay, that's how I feel about that right now. My feelings do not have to dictate how I live in the world. I can have a feeling of worry, but also, and the step four is the really sort of juicy part of radical acceptance, we choose a coping statement. One of the ones I love, and actually we can go to the next slide because we'll come back to steps four and five in a moment, one of the ones I love is this is happening for me, not to me. Now not everyone's going to like that one, I'm going to own that I almost didn't put it on here because I realize for some people it might feel kind of sticky and blaming.

Liisa:

What I know about my own personal walk on this planet is I deeply believe the things that are happening around me are for me to learn from. I believe that the things that are going to promote my

growth are the things that I'm going to encounter. I always have a caveat around that, that I do not believe that in other circumstances where people have experiences depression. I don't believe that some of that stuff is happening for anybody's growth. I'm just holding a dialectic of that I believe those two things at once and I realize they're super in contrast with each other. And that's what happens when your presenter is a human who has conflicting views in her own mind.

Liisa:

But in terms of a coping statement, for me, when something difficult is happening, I look at it as an opportunity for growth. Not all the time, if I haven't been practicing my mindfulness maybe I want to blame some other people first. But when I'm being my best self, in wise mind, which is a DBT concept, when wise mind is online, I can say, "This is happening for me, not to me." Now some of the other ones you might try are things like, "I don't have to like it to accept it." It's a little more neutral than, "This is happening for me, not to me." One of the other ones I really love is, "I'm in good relationship with reality." I'm not going to create more suffering in my life by fighting reality.

## DBT Skill: Cope Ahead

Liisa:

Often in the counseling room what I find myself saying to people is, "Okay, can we get in good relationship with reality? We don't like it, but it's here. What shall we do next?" What I want you to think about now, and go to the next slide, please, is start percolating on the idea of what's your coping statement? What helps you when you're in those moments when suffering starts to emerge that you could say to yourself, that allows you to come back to wise mind. To come back to that part of you that knows when things are out of our control, how do we cope well anyway? Now, if you remember that list of the five points that I just had up around how to practice radical acceptance, one of the other things that is really, really important with radical acceptance is it doesn't mean we don't do anything. If we just accept things and we never take action we're actually going to end up creating more pain than is necessary in our lives. The other DBT skill that kind of dovetails into this is this idea of cope ahead.

Liisa:

I kind of love cope ahead, because what it says is I do have some agency in some places. I only want to practice radical acceptance in the places that it's needed. But in the places where it's not needed, let me cope ahead so that I can avoid some pain. For example, if we go back to the car accident analogy. I can't control whether I'm going to be in an accident or not, I can control if I pay attention while I drive. I can get my breaks checked. I can make sure my tires are inflated. There's things I can do, which allow me to influence the situation in some way. I was reading some pieces, there's a trainer with DBT, whose name is Tony, and he wrote a whole piece around DBT and COVID. And he was saying there are really some things we can do to cope ahead.

Liisa:

I want to give Tony credit for this because I borrowed some of it from him, but he talked about some of the things we can do now. What an opportunity if I don't have this virus now, maybe I'll never get it, but maybe I will, and can I cope ahead that I've taken care of myself well as much as is within my control in the lead up. As is appropriate for each of our bodies, can we get physical activity? Can we stay active during these times so that we're able to have our bodies be as strong as they can be. There may be some radical acceptance around an illness that you already have, preexisting stuff. We know human bodies

are highly fallible. We probably all have stuff going on, but how do we do the part we can control? The acceptance part is, "Yeah, this is what's happening in my body." The cope ahead part is, "Yeah, but where can I also influence this and make sure I stay strong, make sure I stay active." To get adequate exercise.

Liisa:

Tony's advice was, particularly if you're at home, find creative ways to do this. And it sounds so simple, and I was aware. I was like, "Oh, this is not ground-breaking information I'm bringing to the script today." But sometimes all we need is that reminder of what we already know to be true. I'm not telling you anything dramatic today, but I really want you to think about, what can I do to cope ahead for me? It might be just taking an extra set of stairs, it might be yoga, walking in your neighborhood if you can, taking your pet out if you have a pet. Anything to keep moving and to really avoid some of the things that could make us more vulnerable to illness down the road. Improper use of medication, drugs, or alcohol. Sleep, we know is the biggest thing for not just immunity, it's massive for immunity, it's where all cellular repair happens, is at night. But it's also very, very important for mindfulness.

Liisa:

If we want to be able to spot clearly when the brain is having kind of trip down the vortex, we've got to be well rested. I don't know about you folks, but if I am really sleep deprived, one of the things that happens for me is I'm very quick to emotion. I'm quicker to anger. I'm quicker to sadness. I'm quicker to irritation. And if I'm being mindful, I can see that and go, "Oh my gosh, I am more irritable than normal today. Maybe I can watch that and not take it out on the people around me, and I can spot it a little more clearly before I get too far into the vortex." We really want to be well rested so A, we're less reactive, but B, if we get reactive we can spot it because that's going to allow us to have a better experience through this.

Liisa:

Certainly from a cope ahead point of view when it comes to things like a virus, we really want well rested bodies because the capacity to deal with any stressors is just much better when we're well rested. And of course, eating well. I mean, there's probably whole seminars on this that are going to be part of how we all deal with COVID, but we know that it's the only building block we put in our bodies, it's the only thing we have available to us to create serotonin, which is our feel good neurotransmitter. It's the only thing we have to do cellular repair, to have adequate protein in the body. We really want to be able to take some time now if you are well to think about, what are the things that are within my control so I'm not paralyzed by this experience, but that also then it allows me to know what's out of my control and I don't have to stress about that piece all day.

Liisa:

I can just be aware, I radically accept that it's true that this virus is in my province, it is in my city right now, and I can do some things to look after myself. And if I happen to get it, which I would not choose, then I can radically accept that at that point. I might fight it a little bit because I'm human, but hopefully my mindfulness practice is going to allow me to be in good relationship with reality as we move through this. Maybe I won't ever get it, but I'll be working in a different way, people around me might have less security in their employment, all the other outcomes of COVID are the additional levels of pain that we might deal with. Someone loses their job, that's pain. Suffering says, "Why me?" So how can we have this awareness of what's happening as we walk through this? Next slide, please.

## How Do You Best Cope Ahead?

Liisa:

I've given you a few moments to think about what your... and you can type either one on here. Either what your coping statement is, "This is happening for me, not to me." "I'm in good relationship with reality." Or something that you want to do to cope ahead. It might be, "Oh, I'm going to get out for a daily walk." "Oh, I'm going to make sure I get enough vitamin C in the day." "I'm going to make sure I eat breakfast." "I'm going to make sure I get to bed before 11:00." They just invite you to think about for you what's either a coping statement that you want to remember after this session is done, or one strategy you want to use to cope ahead.

Liisa:

I just invite you to type those in now and share them because I'm super curious what you're going to come up with. "I can't change what happened, but I can find the most positive outcome." That's really powerful. Thank you, whoever wrote that, that's great. These are challenging, so I'll just give you a moment to think about them, either something, and you can type both if you want, one way you're going to cope ahead, or what your coping statement is. Anybody else? I'll be patient for one more second, just in case you're typing because I know these are hard. Okay. Yeah, it's okay we can go onto the next slide. If there's any that you're thinking of that you want to type in the chat after this slide's over too, that's super fine.

Liisa:

Oh, "Spend time in nature." Awesome. That's a wonderful way to cope ahead. We know that nature has the capacity to bring our nervous system down, so if you have this kind of elevation, it brings us down a little bit. It activated the parasympathetic nervous system. It gets us out of that fight or flight response, and it can be really, really great. Nature is a wonderful idea, and especially right now where it's difficult to be inside, to recognize, "Oh, one of the things that is still available to me is nature." Oh, there's a few other ones. Prioritize sleep. Really, somebody was listening. Totally agree with you on that one. Absolutely prioritize your sleep.

Liisa:

And, "Keep virtual connections with friends and family." That's another one that it's funny, it wasn't on the list that Tony had come up with that I shared with you, but that's absolutely one of the things that is a way to cope ahead. If we are well connected we feel that we're able to share what's going on for us with other people, we know that that's protective for immunity, for longevity, all these things. Absolutely, that's a really great idea to stay in connection with friends and family. Those are all really great ideas, thanks for sharing them. Next slide, please.

## Conclusion

Liisa:

The last slide that I want to share with you is one from Tony, who I referenced earlier, who has been thinking a lot about DBT and COVID, and I'm really grateful for some of the thinking he's been doing. I think this quote from him just absolutely summarizes a way that we can walk through this in a good way. He says, "It's very important to take the pandemic seriously. Based on science..." One of the other

things you do in DBT is check the facts. When we look at the facts on this, it absolutely is worth taking very seriously. And let's not get immobilized by the weight of it. Tony said his own experience is that since February he's been basically at home. I did some training with him, and we've all been doing this from Zoom at home. He says, "I'm aware that other people have been personally affected by illness and death." That is a big deal. We're not meaning to minimize that. But at the very same time as that he says, "I'm currently healthy. The sun is shining. I'm cooking, and gardening, and my neighbors are being kind to each other from a distance."

Liisa:

This is that ability to hold the dialectic. If we just sort come full circle for a moment before we close today, one of the things that mindfulness allows us to do is see both those things. Absolutely, we have a clear view that this is dangerous and kind of scary. And it's true that neighbors are being kind to each other. In BC, we have Dr. Bonnie Henry who is helping take very good care of all of us, and encouraging us to be calm, kind, and safe. So we can hold those realities next to each other, so that there is a possibility of coming through this in the best way we can. As healthy as we can, acknowledging which things are out of our control. That's all the content that I have for you today. I'm going to hand it back over to Duane, and then we'll see if there's any questions that you want to ask.

Duane:

Okay. We're at the end and we have a few minutes. If there are any questions feel free to unmute and ask them, or to type them into the chat area and we'll read them for you.

Liisa:

Comments are welcome too, if you don't have questions or thoughts.

Duane:

I'm guessing at this point, people are in deep reflection. Barbara says, "Thank you. And very insightful."

Liisa:

Well, thanks Barbara, I appreciate that.

## Ending

Duane:

Okay. I think we'll wrap things up then, and on behalf of BC campus I'd like to thank you very much, Liisa, for facilitating the session and helping us to stop and think about what we can do, and what we can think at this time. For those of you that participated today, you will receive follow up information from BC campus, including a link to the recording of this and the slide deck. Also encourage you to consider subscribing, if you haven't already, to the BC campus newsletter, the link is on this final slide, so you can be kept up to date on upcoming webinars and our Mindful Mondays when Liisa will return and move us through a guided practice. I'd also like to thank [Kelsey 00:54:05] and Paul who are in the background and providing technical support for these webinars. And wish everybody a very healthy, well mental health week. Hope to see you back again soon. Thank you.

Liisa: Thanks, everyone.