

# Fall Back: Navigating Life Now: As Autumn Brings On Uncertainty, Retrain Your Brain --- Resetting and thriving will take extra effort as the pandemic persists

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## FULL TEXT

So much for the big post-pandemic reopening we expected this fall.

Instead, a season of caution and delay is here: Office-return plans have been postponed. Schools are back in session, but with worries of exposure to the more-contagious Delta variant. Meanwhile, divisions over masks and safety protocols are sharpening, and Covid-19 cases keep climbing. It's a long way from earlier this summer, when the initial rollout of vaccines promised a return to worry-free social gatherings, travel and other elements of pre-virus life.

If you are searching for new ways to steel yourself through this next phase of uncertainty, you're not alone. Many people are over the tactics that sustained them through earlier pandemic stages, such as Zoom cocktail hours, jigsaw puzzles and knitting challenges, say psychologists and other mental-health experts. And our dashed hopes for a less-stressed fall add an extra challenge.

"When you show someone what's possible and then you take it away, it seems almost crueller in nature," says Rob Clark, the author of "Everyday Resilience for Everyday Heroes."

Here, some advice from Mr. Clark and other experts on building personal resilience and thriving during an uncertain season:

### Mine the Negatives for Positives

Use disappointments to identify and focus on positives, Mr. Clark advises. Even the summer's glimpse of semi-normal life can serve as a vision of a day when Covid-19 becomes less threatening and disruptive, as many scientists predict will happen.

"You can look at it like, 'Yes, it was shown to us and taken away.' But you can also look at it and say, 'OK, now we know what's possible,'" Mr. Clark says.

Jennifer Carter of Springdale, Ark. – an area hard-hit by the Delta variant – says she's recently made an effort to remind herself of what makes her grateful, such as no one in her household catching Covid-19, no one in her extended family dying from the disease and the continued rollout of vaccines. Ms. Carter, who has a daughter in third grade, says she also found solace in a recent decision by local officials to require mask-wearing in elementary schools.

"At times, I'm not the best at focusing on the positive, but I just try to remember to try," says the 49-year-old mother and former librarian.

### Change Up Habits

"It is not surprising to feel discouraged, depleted, and frustrated, and become aware that the strategies and routines that were helping before are not working as well," says Ann Masten, a psychologist and regents professor of child development at the University of Minnesota.

That's why it's important to recognize your "resilience gaps," the specific situations that can make you feel particularly overwhelmed, such as a work deadline or family conflict, she says.

When you face such a stressor, try a new variation of a positive habit you adopted earlier in the pandemic as a coping mechanism, she says. If you have been going on daily walks after work, for instance, take a different route or go for an occasional hike. Or take up a new home project or exercise routine.

#### Give Yourself Credit

For some, the latest round of Covid-19 restrictions and mandates recall the difficulty and fear of living in lockdown early in the pandemic. Now is a good time to tell yourself everything you achieved over the past 18 months, be it learning a new skill or completing a big work task at home – while dealing with spotty Wi-Fi and family distractions – says Vaile Wright, senior director for healthcare innovation at the American Psychological Association.

"Remind yourself that even though you were going through a tough time, you did get through it," she says.

Then, ask yourself: "What did you learn from overcoming that adversity?" she says. Knowing that you found a solution can be enough reassurance you will overcome your present challenge.

#### Reset Workplace Expectations

Those of us who draw energy from being in the office with co-workers may be deflated by delayed reopenings. Adjust your mind-set to a longer, uncertain timeline, and think of this next phase as one last push, says Kristen Shockley, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Georgia.

"Are there ways you can still have that social connection with co-workers despite not going back to the office?" asks Dr. Shockley, who suggests planning occasional outdoor happy hours or other small gatherings with colleagues.

Being prepared for new hiccups also helps, says Elizabeth Grace Saunders, a time-management coach. "Instead of just scenario-planning for being in the office, scenario-plan for all the different situations," she suggests.

Sketch out what a day would look like if your child needed to switch to remote learning, for example, and the adjustments you would need to make. "It really can reduce anxiety and increase a sense of control, even in a situation that's variable," she says.

#### Lend an Ear, and a Hand

It can help to discuss your feelings of depletion, fear, or frustration with friends or loved ones, and ask how they are doing, too, says Dr. Wright. "What you're going to hear is others are feeling the same way," she says. "That can be sort of validating, too, that you're not alone in this."

Research shows that helping others can have stronger emotional benefits even than receiving support, says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University. She recommends helping others, volunteering and getting outdoors to feel less isolated.

Alan Chen, a 26-year-old technology analyst in the Washington, D.C., area, says trying to be a thoughtful neighbor even in small ways – such as picking up litter along his stretch of sidewalk and saying good morning to passersby as he sips his coffee outside his apartment – has given him a boost. "It's me just trying to pay it forward where I can," he says.

Credit: By Ray A. Smith

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