

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

[An Easy Fast](#)

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This week was Yom Kippur, the holiest of holy days for the Jewish people. It's really big. Even those who don't go to services regularly throughout the year take themselves to synagogue on Yom Kippur. It is the last day of the 10 Days of Awe. The Day of Atonement. A day for reflection and self-examination.



[Photo Credit](#)

Fasting is one of the hallmark features of the day. No food. No water. From sundown to sundown. Given this tradition, rather than wishing someone a happy holiday, the common practice is to wish someone “an easy fast.” It’s a nice idea. I appreciate the intent. It also gives me pause. What’s the problem?

1. Easy is not how we grow psychologically. “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” Putting this wisdom of German philosopher, [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) to music, Kelly Clarkson made history with [Stronger](#). Yes, it is largely in life’s challenges that we grow emotionally and psychologically. [Erik Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development](#) brilliantly describe the natural course of maturational challenges. At each juncture, we are frustrated and tested in predictable ways that ultimately shape, among other things, how trusting, independent, self-starting, industrious, confident, loving, caring, and confident we are. And beyond the universal stages of maturation, our lives are punctuated with moments that challenge us to rethink, reframe, and revise how we understand the world and ourselves. Not easy.

2. Easy is not how we create great works of art. The effort it takes to create something authentic, dare I say “beautiful,” is fundamental to every work of art that inspires us. Catalan’s legendary architect, Antoni Gaudi, commenced work on the monumental Catholic church *Sagrada Família* in Barcelona in 1883. At the time of his death in 1926, he had devoted his life to this audacious work, and it was less than a quarter finished. Nearly 150 years later, people from all over the world are awed by its design, detail and the dedication it represents. Whether it is *Sagrada Família*, *Monna Lisa*, *Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5*, *Casablanca* or lesser known works of art, “easy” does not feature heavily in telling the story.

3. Easy is not how we learn complex ideas. Reading Immanuel Kant, studying calculus, measuring the distances of far-off solar systems, or digging deep into the legal or mental health implications of humanitarian crises. These are time and focus-intensive pursuits that engage our curiosity and challenge our intellect.

Without this kind of disciplined mental inquiry, we would be missing essential and defining aspects of the human experience, not to mention the technological fruit that this kind of complex thought has brought (including the screen in front of you or the phone in your hand).

4. Easy is not how we solve big problems. Place a marshmallow on a table in front of a young child. Tell the child he or she can eat one marshmallow now or can wait a short period and instead have two.

This [marshmallow test](#) was the iconic paradigm made famous by psychologist Walter Mischel who was interested in understanding self-restraint and how it is related to problem solving. It is not easy to wait for rewards, especially when they are sitting right in front of us. However, the capacity to delay gratification is associated with all kinds of lifelong success. Kids who naturally resisted and those who were taught strategies to help them practice restraint, such as closing their eyes, had greater success in later life as measured by educational attainment, health status, and life satisfaction.

5. Easy is not how we love others. We all know that our most meaningful relationships - romantic, familial, friendship or professional - take effort. Of course, every relationship has moments when everything is going swimmingly. And in good relationships, some things are easy. But getting to meaningful, getting to joyful, getting to great - takes work. All the more so when we consider loving someone who has serious mental illness and/or substance use disorder. Sandra Luckow, filmmaker and Artist in Residence at our Global Mental Health program, painstakingly and poignantly captures in her award-winning film, [That Way Madness Lies](#) that additional - and not easy - layer of challenge when we love someone with serious mental illness.

As the saying goes, smooth seas do not make skillful sailors. It seems to me that fasting - a practice that is found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - is not actually intended to be easy. It is intended to rock our boats - not so much that we capsize - but enough so that we can grow, create, learn, solve and love.