

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Highs, Lows, and Loop-de-Loops

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March 4, 2022

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The world seems to be convulsing in a time-and-space-warp kind of way. It is as if we are at the top and bottom of a roller coaster in the same instant. Racing thoughts touch on the idea that this human-made odyssey is full of risk. We wonder about the last time the coaster underwent a safety inspection. Such thoughts are too late in coming. The lap bar is already locked in place. We are not getting off until after the vertical cliff dive of 500 feet and the three consecutive loop-de-loops at 150 miles per hour. We are unsure whether to hold our breath, scream, or throw up at moments like these. It is difficult to concentrate.



[Photo Credit](#)

Roller coasters vary in intensity. Weeks do, too. The range of emotional experiences that we are all trying to manage these days is less like Coney Island's Cyclone and more like Nagashima's Steel Dragon. Taking a daily snapshot of my own experience these past five days, I found myself in a very different headspace each night as I climbed into bed.

1. Afraid. The coaster ticks to the top. On Sunday, I listened to the news of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for hours as I drove north on the New Jersey Turnpike from Baltimore to NYC. Loved ones had been texting about nuclear war, evacuation plans, and iodine. My mind and heart started racing. I felt tension across my back. I was afraid. When we perceive danger in our environment, our fear response triggers a cascade of reactions. The amygdala in our brains alerts our sympathetic nervous system, which prompts the release of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Blood pressure and heart rate increase. We start breathing faster. Blood flow moves away from the heart and into our limbs, preparing us for fight or flight. Fear is one of our most basic emotions. It feels aversive, but it functions as a lifesaving alarm. The problem is that it can exhaust our emotional and psychological reserves if we cannot contain the danger and turn off the response. This is the reality for millions in Ukraine at the moment.

2. Inspired. Monday at 8 AM, and again at 8 PM, I had conversations with business leaders from around the world who are passionate about addressing mental health and psychological well being in the workplace. COVID exposed and exacerbated the profound mental health needs of employees everywhere. One CEO observed that we need to understand mental health as an organizational investment, not an expense. Another shared his personal story of losing a loved one to suicide. Adults spend more waking hours at work than at any other single activity. I am inspired by these business leaders who are signing on to be mental health allies and champions.

3. Demoralized. On Tuesday, a Russian bombing attack damaged Babi Yar (Babyn Yar), Kyiv's Holocaust Memorial Site. *"To the world: what is the point of saying 'never again' for 80 years, if the world stays silent when a bomb drops on the same site of Babi Yar? At least 5 killed. History repeating..."* Ukraine President Zelenskyy [tweeted](#). In September 1941, Nazi forces slaughtered more than 33,000 Jewish people at Babi Yar. It was one of the most heinous mass killings of the Holocaust. I remember vividly standing on the edge of the ravine of Babi Yar's mass grave in spring 2019 with members of our Global Mental Health International Advisory Board. The somber experience of remembering was intermixed with joyful optimism for the burgeoning democracy that was on the eve of electing a Jewish president. Darkness swept in with the Russian strike on Tuesday.

4. Grateful and Gratified. One of the most bittersweet moments of being a therapist is bidding clients goodbye when they are ready to wrap up therapy. It is a moment of expectancy, joy... and loss. It is also, more often than not, the last time I see or hear from them. But every once in a while, the phone rings. I heard from a client of mine on Wednesday who I saw some thirty years ago. I recognized her voice immediately. Her wit and wry humor are well intact. She is flourishing. In addition to calling to help a friend access treatment, she shared how life-saving therapy was for her all those years ago. We reminisced as if it were yesterday. I was reminded of one of Faulkner's most quoted lines, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Grateful and gratified.

5. Hopeful. I am bullish about my kids' generation. That's a good thing since I spend a lot of time with university students. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to lead a discussion about mental health for an international group of graduate students residing in NYC. These young people are studying subjects from applied math to international development and human rights. They are on the epic hero's journey - facing myriad challenges from the quotidian hurdles of mastering English and navigating the city's subway to the more existential trials of pandemics and war. Whining and moaning were nowhere to be found. Instead, ideas, dreams, and determination filled the room. I left hopeful that health and healing are what these future leaders are preparing to fight for.

From global events to those that are exquisitely personal, the roller coaster of life is filled with a wild range of emotional and psychological experiences. As I said in [my very first Five on Friday](#), we have a family tradition of dinner together at home on Friday evenings. It gives us a chance to pause and pivot, reflect and imagine, connect and rest after a busy week. The practice of pausing is a practice of self-care that helps us cultivate awareness and compassion, a practice that gives us a greater understanding of ourselves and the potential for a greater understanding of our shared human condition. It is a practice that we can learn to apply in moments big and small and at times that are both quiet and chaotic. It is precisely this freedom that Ukrainians are fighting to defend. The privilege of doing so this evening in the safety of my home surrounded by loved ones while no such break exists for millions of people in Ukraine, and around the world, is not lost on me.
