

Shanah Tovah!

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September 19, 2020

This evening's setting sun ushers in Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It marks the beginning of the High Holy Days for Jews around the world, which continue for 10 days and culminate on Yom Kippur.



Honey from our apiary

Today is my first Five on Friday following two weeks of vacation. As I ease back into this weekly tradition, the eve of Rosh Hashanah feels like an auspicious coincidence and a wonderful invitation to take stock and take care. The kitchen is bustling as loved ones gather to prepare dinner. Many foods are symbolically associated with this holiday. The meanings and teachings of five of my favorites inform this week's musings on mental health.

1. Apples. This year, it feels especially notable that the apples appear before the protective leaves on the tree emerge, which makes the exposed fruit vulnerable to all kinds of pests and environmental risks for a brief period. It is an apt metaphor for the idea that surrounding ourselves with healthy social connections protects us from harm and promotes health. This message feels especially poignant when we consider the mental health cost of social isolation, especially well documented for [older adults](#). This year, the physical distancing associated with reducing the spread of coronavirus has sadly been associated with [elevated levels of stress, anxiety and depression](#) for many of us across the lifespan.

2. Honey. The quintessential practice of dipping apples in honey on Rosh Hashanah is associated with the

symbolic wish for a sweet new year. It is an act of gratitude that the apple made it to maturity and a practice filled with hopefulness and optimism for a year ahead as sweet as honey. We know that gratitude, hopefulness, and optimism are all associated with positive mental health. Even during this pandemic year, perhaps especially during a year that has been so challenging, traditions that reconnect us to [gratitude, hopefulness, and optimism](#) are all the more meaningful and important for good mental health.

3. Pomegranates. Pomegranates have many seeds. Anyone who has prepared a pomegranate for eating knows that it can be messy and the red juices can stain. But this fruit is not included as part of the Rosh Hashanah feast to remind us to complain about all our hardships. Indeed, just the opposite. The seeds are a reminder of the many opportunities we have to do good in the coming year. Interesting that the same fruit could be used to count the difficulties or the good deeds in our lives. A reminder that so much of how we experience life is a choice informed by the filter through which we see. This principle is central to much of the work that we do in psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy. When we gain conscious awareness of the assumptions we hold and the biases that shape how we interpret what we see, we gain much greater freedom in choosing whether to see the pomegranate as a messy hassle or a million opportunities.

4. Carrots. The Yiddish word “meren” is translated as both the noun “carrots” and the verb “to increase.” Carrots are part of the Rosh Hashanah feast to symbolize the hope that we will have the capacity to increase our good work and deeds in the coming year. The psychological wisdom of this teaching is corroborated by many psychology studies documenting the [positive mental health](#) benefits of service to the greater good. In a year that has called on us to cope and be resilient in the face of diverse and profound stresses, mustering the strength to do good work and deeds can seem like a lot to ask. Our psychology research tells us that precisely when we are feeling depleted, one of the ways to improve our mental health and resilience is to take time to take care - of ourselves and others.

5. Round Challah. It is traditional to eat challah on Shabbat and other Jewish holidays, and I have written about making challah before. What is special about the challah for Rosh Hashanah is that it is round. The shape represents the idea that life is a cycle in which there is no beginning or end. It is a bit of a riddle since Rosh Hashanah is also explicitly the end of one year and the beginning of a new one. Continuity, beginning and ending all wrapped up in one.

For those of you celebrating Rosh Hashanah, I wish you Shanah Tovah, a good new year. For the majority of you who are not celebrating Rosh Hashanah, I wish you Shanah Tovah, a good new year. For in truth, for all of us, today marks the beginning of the next 365 days, which we call a year. May the foods at your dinner table - day in and day out - nourish not only your belly but also your mental health.