

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## Wisdom from the Hives

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*I can't wait to see my honeybees. They have been clustered in their hives through the winter. With the arrival of some sunny March days, they are beginning to take flight from their winter huddle to scope out the world anew.*



## [Photo Credit](#)

*This transition from winter to spring makes the dwindling colony buzz with excitement. The sweet nectar of spring blooms is nearly here. But March is also a month of great risk when many colonies collapse. As the pandemic recedes with the promise of vaccination, as we start venturing out from our hives, the honeybees, who have been doing this for millennia have a few things to share.*

**1. Collective protection.** Honeybees do not hibernate in winter, but they do get quiet. Each colony forms a winter cluster below their stored honey, which they depend on as their food source. With the queen at the center, the bees create their own heat source by flexing their flight muscles and creating a vibration that raises each bee's body temperature. Rotating from the outside to the inside of the cluster, with thousands of bees vibrating in this manner, they keep themselves, and each other, warm through the freezing cold of winter. When healthy, our COVID-19 pods have served much the same function, protecting our health, including our mental health.

**2. No antibodies.** This pandemic has produced an unending television mini-series in virology and immune response. We have discovered how much we really do not understand about this domain of science, but we do know that, in general, when bacteria, viruses, or other pathogens attack our bodies, we produce vast quantities of antibodies to fight these invaders. Honeybees do not have the capacity to form antibodies specific to new pathogens. Unable to acquire this kind of responsive individual immunity, their survival depends on collective action to keep the colony healthy. For the past year, the novel coronavirus ravaged communities around the world and millions died because individual immune systems were not able to successfully mount the antibodies needed to fight off the invaders. The pandemic response - from cooperative development of vaccines to frontline workers and community volunteers - is the story of the enormous potential of collective action to support our health, including our mental health.

**3. Time to clean house.** As the warm weather arrives, honeybees undertake a major housecleaning. They will remove from the hive wax scales dropped by secreting bees, dead bees, and other insects or their larvae - alive or dead. All the offending items are carried to the entrance of the hive where they are dropped over the edge. As we anticipate a relaxation of restrictions and a reopening of our world, it is a moment that offers each of us the chance to do some housekeeping of our own. The pandemic upended default assumptions and routines. The disruptions and dislocations invited each of us to reflect on what we most care about. By doing some essential housekeeping this spring, we will enhance our capacity to move forward with intention, agency and purpose, all good for our mental health.

**4. Transitions increase risk.** For the honeybees, late winter/early spring is when colonies are at heightened risk of dying. The colony is at its weakest. The number of bees in the hive has dwindled. Honey stores are depleted. Flowers are barely in bloom so pollen and nectar, the honeybees' essential foods, are scarce. The conditions are treacherous. In 2020, U.S. beekeepers lost four out of ten hives, with the majority being lost at this time of year. Transitions are hard for people, too. We know that mental health risks increase at critical developmental junctures and life transitions - for example, entering adolescence, starting school, moving in and out of employment, relocating where you live, changing who you live with. Such life changes increase our vulnerability under usual circumstances because they move us from what is familiar into unknown territory. This year, the transitions from pandemic conditions to newly imagined work, school, and socializing carry great potential. They will also be associated with new stresses, losses, fears and anxiety. Taking time to attend to our mental health needs will be key to navigating the upcoming transitions successfully.

**5. Don't forget the honey.** All this work, for what? Liquid gold. The average worker bee will produce 1/12th of a teaspoon of honey in her lifetime. A colony will visit over 2 million flowers to make a pound of honey. The honey lovers among us are eternally grateful. But even if you rarely consume honey, about [one out of every three](#) mouthfuls of food that you consume is, in some way, a product of honeybee pollination - from fruits to nuts to coffee beans. It is rather poetic that honeybees produce honey - something so splendid and joyful - as a

byproduct of their pollinating services on which the rest of the plant and animal kingdoms depend. Perhaps a reminder for all of us that during this time of transition, filled with uncertainty, loss and stress, our health and mental health depend on cultivating practices that yield their own sort of honey.

*As the pandemic shows signs of receding, as we go from winter to spring, may we find comfort and support in our communities that help us navigate the transitions ahead. Wisdom from the hives. Honey for our mental health.*