

Stories & Letters

A close-up photograph of a small green seedling with a white flower bud growing out of a crack in asphalt. The seedling has three leaves and a thick stem. The background is a blurred asphalt surface. The image is framed by a white border with rounded corners.

Using creativity to
navigate meaning in a
pre-post-pandemic world

Who are we?



Karen Moss is a mental health counsellor and has worked with university students, parents, kids and teens for many years in a variety of settings in BC and the UK. Outside of the office, Karen enjoys the great outdoors and a good cup of coffee from the amazing coffee shops in Vancouver.

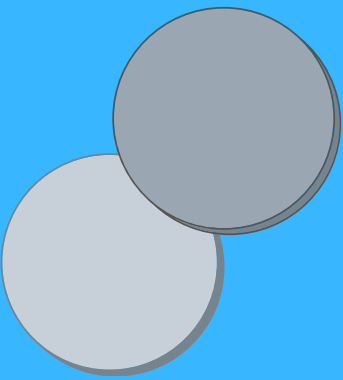
Freeman Woolnough is a mental health counsellor who has worked with post-secondary students for the past decade, at various institutions. Outside of the office, Freeman tries his best to keep active, and also loves singing with choirs!



The Counsellors in Residence provide mental health support for students living in on-campus student housing at UBC.

For more information, check out

<https://vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/counsellor-in-residence/>



Context

Why use this workbook?

With so much taking place over this past year and with more changes likely to come, there is a lot for all of us to process; we have all been experiencing a lot of different emotions.

While there does seem to be hope breaking through on the horizon, we are not there *yet* - and a significant amount of future unknown is definitely scary. As you will see throughout the workbook, writing can be a fantastic way to help make sense of our thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Use this workbook however you'd like - whether you are completing every activity, only a few, or simply reading over the content, we hope that these activities can help you in the pre-post-pandemic context!



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Focus on:

Transitions

Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending.

MARIA ROBINSON (AMERICAN AUTHOR)

Like most things that we touch on in this workbook, transitions are inevitable if we want to lead a healthy and meaningful life.

Transitions can bring stress, fear, and even heartache – and they can also be a time of growth and positive change. Our brains often want us to focus on our current experience: if it is negative, we often feel like it will continue to be negative; if it is positive, we sometimes can't even picture a rainy day. Keeping in mind the broader story of our lives while going through transition can bring perspective and help us to grow in healthy ways.

Activity:

Life as a Story

Picture your life as a story... as a novel, a movie, or even a video game.

What chapters/scenes have already happened?

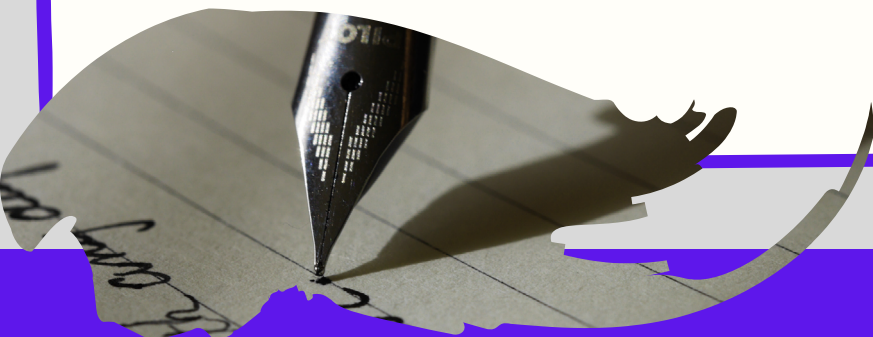
What chapters/scenes are yet to come?

Where are you currently in the 'overall arc'?

What is needed for the story to continue?

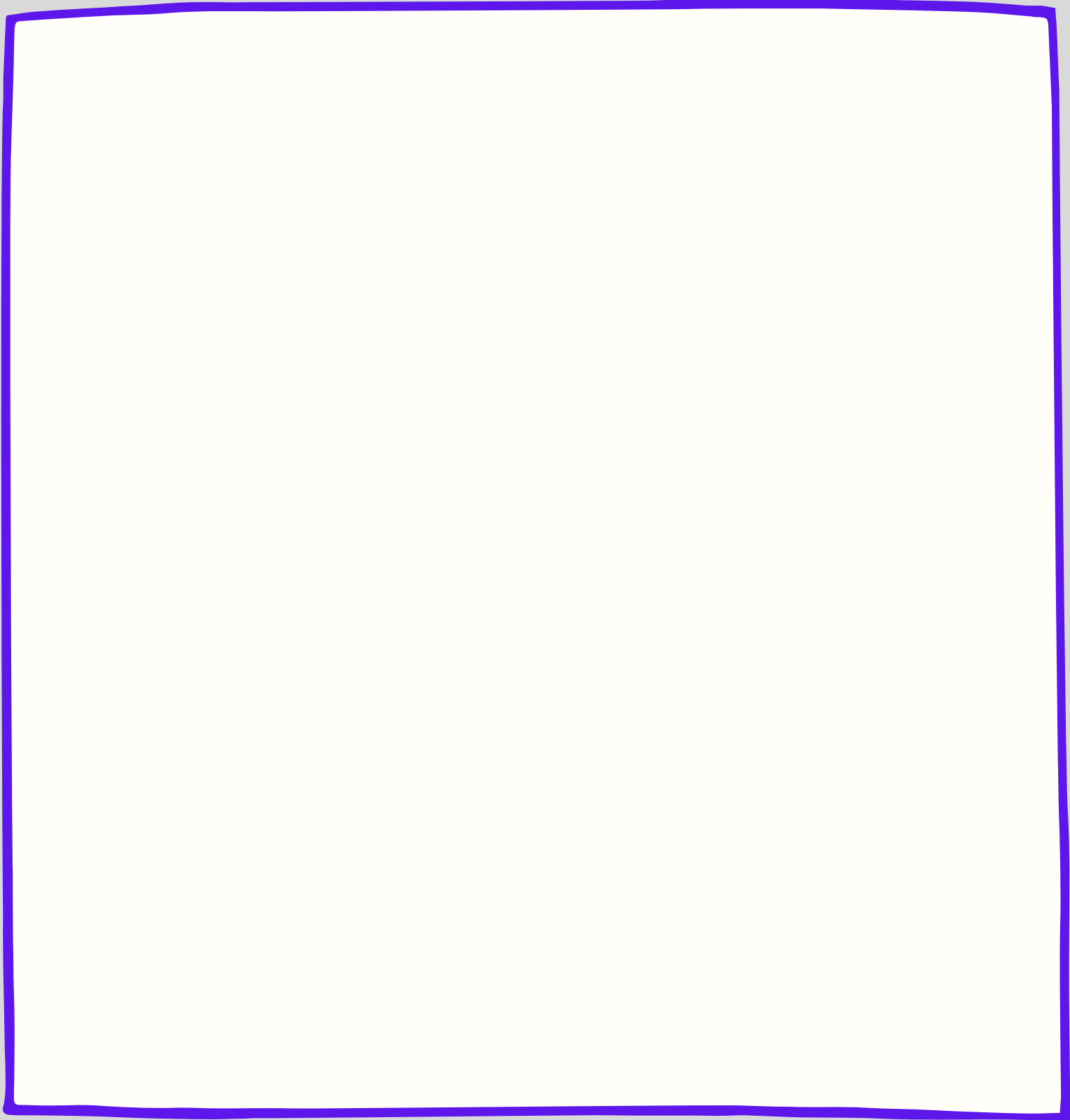
What lessons and tools have been gathered from previous parts of the story?

What are the challenges of the current chapter/level? What tools are being honed?



Activity:

Life as a Story

A large, empty rectangular box with a thick blue border, intended for writing a story. The box is white and occupies most of the page below the title.

Focus on:

Grief

We're talking about grieving a living loss — one that keeps going and going. We don't only grieve for what's missing, but also for the ways in which those losses affect our senses of self.

GEORGE BONANNO (COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PSYCHOLOGIST)



Experiencing loss is unavoidable at different times in our lives, and we can experience grief in many situations. Certainly, we grieve when somebody dies; however, we also may be grieving all the losses we have experienced through the pandemic: loss of stability, the 'university experience', friendships, freedoms... the list goes on. While everybody's experience of grief will be different, we know that most people will feel a number of emotions (or sometimes no emotion at all) – an important task of grief is to express and process these emotions in an intentional way.

Activity: Recognizing Emotions

For each of the following emotions, reflect on the following questions:

What is a time of my life when I felt this emotion most intensely? What was going on for me then?

On a scale of 1-10, how intensely have I felt this emotion over the past months?

How do I know when I am feeling this emotion (ex. what happens in my body, certain thoughts, etc.)?

What situations have (or might have) triggered this emotion in the past few months? How did I manage or cope with it?

What is the 'ideal' of how I cope with this emotion? What is the reality?

Anger

Sadness

Relief

Activity: Recognizing Emotions

Guilt

Fear

Anhedonia ('lack of emotion')

Excitement



Focus on:

Self Reflection

Honest self reflection opens your mind to reprogramming, change, success and freedom.

VIKAS RUNWAL (INDIAN MEDITATION SPECIALIST)

Many of us lead very busy lives, and it can often feel like we are just moving from one stressor to the next, without a lot of time to pause. That being said, taking some time to intentionally reflect on ourselves – past, present, and future – can help ground our wellness as we move forward.

The events of the last year have changed how many of us are living our lives and may have shifted what is important to us. As you do this activity reflect on what you have learned about yourself and what has stayed constant, while living through this past year.

Activity:

Tree of Life

The tree of life concept is a visual metaphor in which a tree represents your life and the various elements that make it up—past, present, and future.

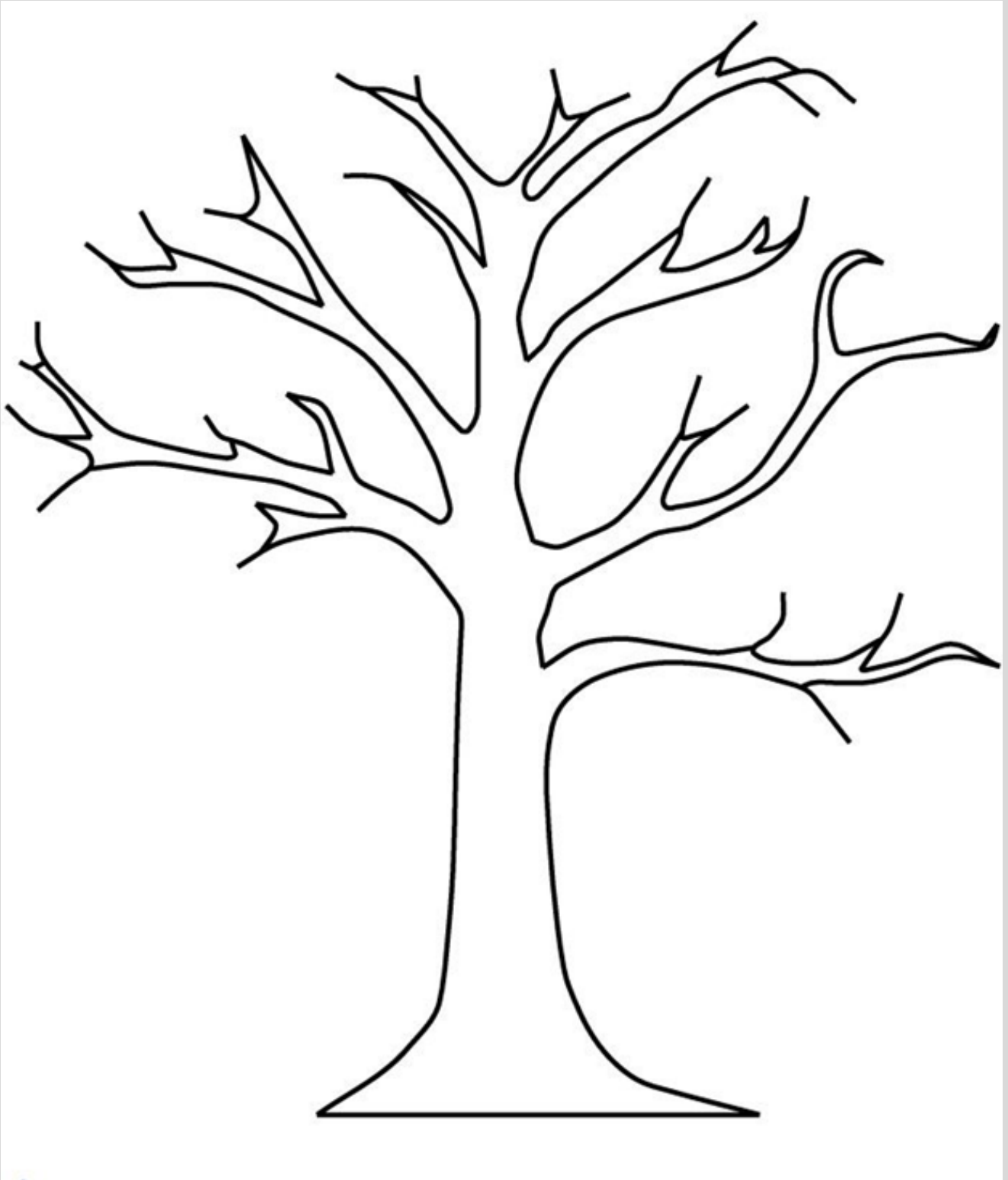
By labeling these parts, you not only begin to discover (or perhaps rediscover) aspects of yourself shaped by the past, but you can then begin to actively cultivate your tree to reflect the kind of person you want to be moving forward.

1. **Draw a tree** (doesn't have to be pretty!) You can use your forearm and hand as a starting point (see below) or use the template provided.
2. **Compost:** put here what you no longer wish to be defined by.
3. **Roots:** Where you come from, culture, country, town, parents, core learnings from childhood etc.
4. **The Ground:** what you choose to do on a weekly basis for you (not forced, but your choice).
5. **The Trunk:** write down your values on the base and your skills going up, have they changed this year?
6. **The Branches:** hopes, dreams, and wishes. Are there any new dreams or hopes?
7. **The Leaves:** names of the people in your life who have been significant in a positive way.
8. **The Fruit:** legacies that have been passed down to you (can be material or attributes).
9. **The Flowers and Seeds:** legacies that you wish to leave to others.



Activity:

Tree of Life



Activity:

Tree of Life

Print this page out to draw your own 'tree of life', or if you prefer, simply write down your thoughts that come to mind for each of the categories listed on page 11

Focus on:

Identity

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

ANAÏS NIN (CUBAN-FRENCH-AMERICAN WRITER)

You can't walk through water without getting wet – just as you won't live through the pandemic without being changed in some sort of way. As our environment, relationships, career paths, and support networks change, we tend to adapt parts of ourselves in order to adjust. Identity means different things to different people, and can include our characteristics, groups we belong to, our heritage, our culture, our language, and even the courses we are studying.

Values, a core part of our identity, are beliefs that guide or motivate our attitudes or actions, and it's likely that some of your values have altered as a result of the pandemic.

Activity:

Values

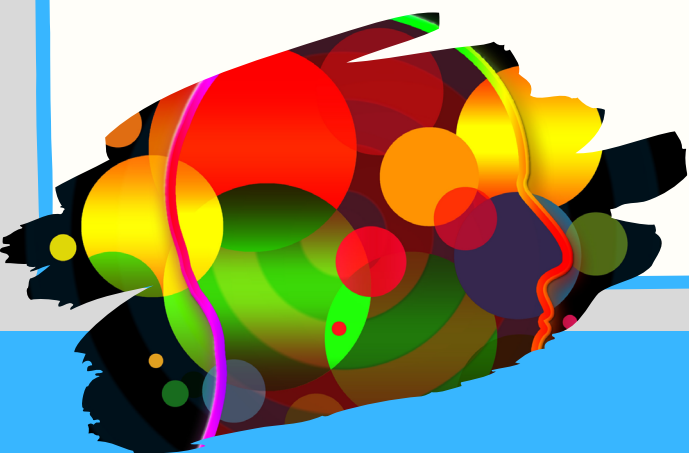
Begin by researching a list of 'core values'. A quick search online will turn up many pages; feel free to use whichever list makes sense for you.

(We particularly like this one:

<https://thehappinessplanner.com/pages/list-of-core-values>)

Look through the list you find, and take some time to reflect on the following questions:

What are my current 'top 10' values? Is it possible to order the top 10 based on their importance to me?



Activity:

Values

How do I know that these values are important for me (what is the evidence)?

How have my values changed over the past year?

If these are truly my current values, what does that mean for my decisions/actions as I continue through life?

Focus on:

Stress and Anxiety

Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future, but from wanting to control it.

KAHLIL GIBRAN (LEBANESE-AMERICAN WRITER)

If you are like most people, you have likely experienced some form of stress or anxiety over the past few years (possibly more so in the past few months). Stress is a natural reaction, and can be very beneficial for focusing in on and navigating issues that arise in our lives. However, the brain has a tendency to keep reminding us of our problems – whether they are real or perceived. While this is natural and an importance step in problem-solving, it can sometimes create more stress, because the only perspective that our worries and thoughts have is their own. This is why it can sometimes feel good just to talk with somebody else that we trust – to get perspective.

Activity: Character dialoguing

In the absence of having somebody else to share your thoughts with (or even if you just want to get a bit creative with it), one way to encourage perspective is with character dialoguing.

This is a writing activity (typically no more than 10-15 minutes), where you pick a 'character', or a different perspective, and write down a fictional dialogue between an intense/stressful thought that is on your mind, and that character. The character can be a hero (ex. Harry Potter), a villain (ex. Voldemort), or maybe even another aspect of yourself (ex. future you, child you, etc.). Note that the goal is not to come to any specific conclusions, but rather to practice getting a slightly different perspective.

example

Me: I'll never find a job this summer.

Voldemort: You're right; you might as well just give up.

Me: Well it wouldn't be very good to give up - but maybe I should, because there are fewer jobs available these days.

Voldemort: Yes, you should just stop looking for jobs and focus on the hate you feel for everybody during this pandemic.

Me: ...that doesn't really sound very productive. I don't hate other people, but the pandemic has definitely impacted my motivation...

Activity: Character dialoguing



Focus on:

Writing

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

MAYA ANGELOU (AMERICAN POET)

Over the last year we have been alone with our thoughts more than ever. It can be hard to make sense of all that goes on in our minds as we often jump from one incomplete thought to another. Writing is a great tool, slowing us down, to help makes sense of our thoughts and get to the heart of what we are feeling. There are many different ways to write that are therapeutic, such as keeping a gratitude journal, poetry and letter writing.

Activity:

Letter to Future Me

Consider writing a letter to your future self; you can write about anything you choose.

If you are unsure of what to write, we have included some suggestions that may help you get started. You can also have your letter emailed to you at a later date chosen by you, if you go to the website: <https://www.futureme.org/>

example

Dear Future Me,

Today's Date

It's been a year.

I hope you remember that I'm proud of you for.....

I want you to remember what we've learned this year.....

My goals for us are.....

Theses habits will help me/us be healthier.....

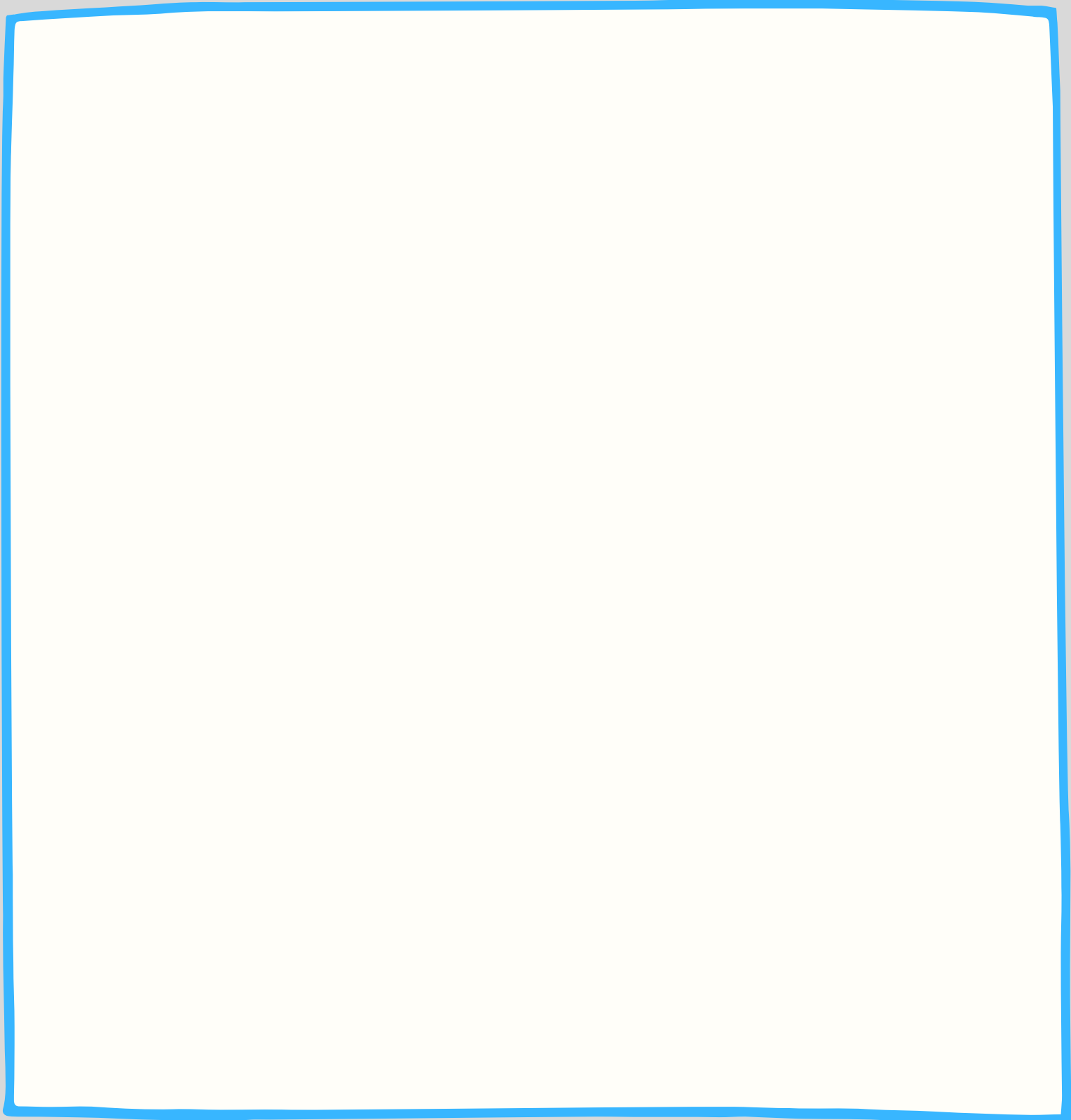
Remember to be kind to yourself, especially in these areas.....

Have fun.....don't forget how much we love doing....



Activity:

Letter to Future Me

A large, blank, cream-colored rectangular area with a blue border, intended for writing a letter to future me. The area is framed by a thick blue line, giving it the appearance of a piece of paper or a card. The background of the entire page is a solid light blue.

Focus on: **Becoming vs. Returning**

For me, becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end.

MICHELLE OBAMA (AMERICAN ATTORNEY AND AUTHOR)

As we transition from the constant changes of this year – adapting to new ways of being social, learning online, wearing masks – we may be hoping that we will be able to return to “normal”. However, it is important to realize that the “normal” waiting for us on the other side of this change is not going to be the same – we cannot turn back the clock and simply return to the past. Instead, we can look at where we have come from, where we are going, and reflect on how we are constantly becoming anew.

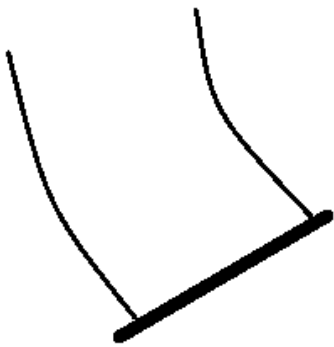
Activity:

Trapeze bars

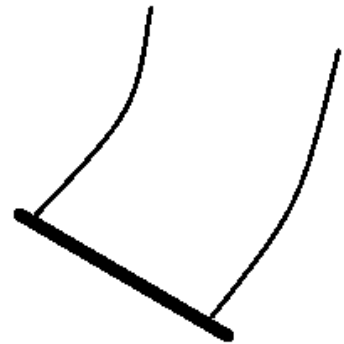
Managing a transition, we are often drawn toward the future, but also can experience a pull toward the past – sometimes at the same time.

One way to visualize this experience is to picture yourself as a trapeze artist. If you are not familiar with trapeze, this is an acrobatic art where the trapeze artist flies through the air between two suspended bars – sometimes they are holding onto one, or both, and sometimes they have let go completely.

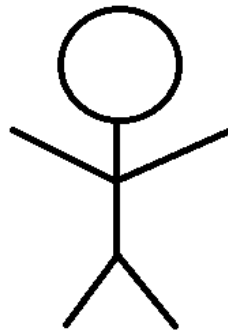
What thoughts and feelings do you have when 'holding' onto both bars?



What are you swinging away from (what is in the past?)



What are you swinging toward (what is in the future?)



What thoughts and feelings do you have when you 'let go' of both bars?

How are you feeling right now?

Activity:

Trapeze bars

Print this page out to draw your own 'trapeze bars', or if you prefer, simply write down your thoughts that come to mind for each of the categories listed on page 24.

Focus on:

Planning

It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near one.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN (BRITISH AUTHOR)

Living through a pandemic, as we've found out, is difficult. Even with our best intentions, many of our plans have been derailed and fallen by the wayside. Despite this, it can be tempting to continually set new plans, going strong until we can't go any more, due to burnout and a lack of energy. Rather than simply continuing to set goals, it is important to also have some foresight into potential roadblocks, which allows us to refine and be realistic about our planning. The ability to plan more intentionally will be crucial as we continue toward a post-pandemic world.

Activity:

Roadblocks & Workarounds

What is one goal that you have for the next two weeks?

How are you planning to meet your goal (be as specific as possible)?



Activity:

Roadblocks & Workarounds

What are two potential roadblocks that may hinder or prevent you from meeting your goal?

What action(s) can you take now, to prevent these roadblocks from becoming a hindrance, or at minimum lessening the impact if they still do occur?

Focus on:

Memorialize

What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial. But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured?

MARGARET ATWOOD (CANADIAN AUTHOR)

Creating a piece of art, a poem, or a time capsule can be a healing way to mark the significance of what we are all going through. By marking this moment in time, it will help us to remember what we have been through, the lessons learned, and how it has shaped us. We often make memorials of important people or events to help us stay connected to the past; however, these are often created by only one version of history. Consider what is important for *you* to remember about this time.

Activity:

Time Capsule

A Time Capsule is a container holding historical records or objects representative of current culture that is kept for preservation until a specific time in the future. You may choose to create a container, or use a box you already have. You may even wish to make it a digital time capsule saving info to a specific file or flash drive.

Suggestions for what to include:

- Any articles, blogs, music, diary entries, pictures, that represent this past year
- A list of expressions that were spoken a lot (ex. 'Zoom fatigue', 'you are on mute')
- Ask family or friends to write letters to future you and put them in the capsule
- Photos of you in your favorite daily clothes (ex. pjs, lounge wear)
- Scenes from your neighborhood (ex. very quiet campus, people in masks)
- Video messages to the future
- A list of popular or favorite TV shows (ex. Schitt's Creek?!)
- Major news events
- Your Top 10 music hits

Once you have completed your time capsule, store it somewhere safe and pick a date in the future when you will open it!



Focus on:

Managing Expectations

I'm a junkie for exhaustion, and I'm a junkie for setting up my expectations too high and then trying to meet them.

STEPHEN COLBERT (AMERICAN COMEDIAN)

Expectations or beliefs that a certain outcome or event will happen are helpful for giving us direction as we move ahead. However, when our expectations differ from reality and don't leave room for unforeseen situations, or other perspectives, this can cause us distress, and even leave us feeling as if we have failed or done something wrong.

As we begin to shift into this pre-post-pandemic reality you will likely have expectations of what this will look like. It is important to hold a sense of hope; however, it is also helpful to keep your expectations measured and flexible.

Activity: Experiment with perspective.

Write down your hopes and expectations for different aspects of your life and consider ways to be flexible.

Different aspects of life	Hopes and expectations	Possible reality	Where is there room for flexibility?	What can I do to help myself in this situation?
Social				
Academics				

Helpful hint: Try to separate your self-worth from the outcomes, be realistic, and keep on trying.



Activity: Experiment with perspective.

Different aspects of life	Hopes and expectations	Possible reality	Where is there room for flexibility?	What can I do to help myself in this situation?
Work/Financial				
Play				
Health				



Focus on:

Safety

Be kind, be calm and be safe

DR. BONNIE HENRY (BRITISH COLUMBIA'S PROVINCIAL MEDICAL
HEALTH OFFICER)

The above quote has been a mantra for many of us throughout the pandemic. If you are not familiar with her, Dr. Bonnie Henry has been a stalwart mainstay in British Columbia, and also takes a lead in researching and developing the public health orders and restrictions that have kept many of us safe over the past year. As we continue to be in a pandemic, it continues to be critical that we maintain safety – for ourselves as well as for those in our community.

Take some time to reflect on what this means for you!

Activity:

Reality Check

Before reflecting on the following questions, check out the most updated information about current pandemic restrictions:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/info/restrictions>

How have I been doing my part to ensure others' safety during the pandemic?

Are there restrictions or rules that I don't fully understand, or don't get why they are important? What other information do I need?

Activity:

Reality Check

Are there people in my life that I can talk to about how *they* are following the restrictions and guidelines over the next few months? Are there people I *should* be talking to about this?

How can I continue doing my part to ensure the safety of my community as we transition to (but aren't completely in) the post-pandemic world?



Focus on:

Fun

We're so busy watching out for what's just ahead of us that we don't take time to enjoy where we are.

BILL WATTERSON (COMIC WRITER, CALVIN & HOBBS)

This year, it has been a lot harder to take part in the activities we would normally do for fun. However, it's important that we still try to have fun, even if it's in different ways. Regularly participating in activities that you enjoy, and spending time with people who make you happy, will provide you with positive benefits such as consistently lower stress, positive feelings, better sleep, better coping abilities, and improved relationships!

Activity:

Do something fun!

Why not give some of these a try?

- Go to a dog park and watch the dogs play
 - Have a fancy picnic or BBQ
- Have a themed dinner party (online if possible)
 - Discover a new board game
 - Have an online dance party
- Start a garden in a community garden
 - Build a fort and watch movies
- Have a distanced water balloon fight
 - Hula hoop!
- Play in the sand, build a sand community
- Look for heart shaped rocks on the beach
 - Paint the rocks you find
- Discover old music or old movies
 - Make and fly a kite
 - Make some crafts!
- Get into the habit of doing really nice things for people who will never find out. The best way to cheer yourself is to try to cheer someone else up.
- Look at every object you interact with as if you were three years old and seeing it for the first time, wondering how you could play with it.
- Mine your past for play memories: What did you do as a child that excited you? Did you engage in those activities alone or with others? Or both? How can you recreate that today?
- Tell a fantastic tale with lots of enthusiasm and hand gestures to at least one child of any age every week/month.

Activity:

Do something fun!

What is my fun plan for the coming month?

Use this opportunity to make a 'bucket list'!

Whatever you choose to do, remember this year has been incredibly hard and, not only do you deserve to have fun, we insist that it's necessary for your health and wellbeing!



Focus on:

Resources

It may sound paradoxical, but strength comes from vulnerability. You have to ask the question to get the answer, even though asking the question means you didn't know.

MAJID KAZMI (CANADIANAUTHOR)

Regardless of how the past year has gone for you, chances are high you have - at some point - considered reaching out for support.

Maybe you already have connected: to a friend, family member, or one of the many resources available on or off campus.

In particular as we collectively navigate our paths through the final stages of the pandemic, it is important to know that you do not have to walk these paths alone. Please consider reaching out!

Counselling Services

<https://students.ubc.ca/health/counselling-services>

Student Health Service

<https://students.ubc.ca/health/student-health-service>

Centre for Accessibility

<https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/centre-for-accessibility>

Wellness Centre

<https://students.ubc.ca/health/wellness-centre>

Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office

<https://svpro.ubc.ca/>

Crisis Centre of BC

<https://crisiscentre.bc.ca/>

Access and Assessment Centre

http://www.vch.ca/locations-services/result?res_id=1186

UBC Student Assistance Program

<https://students.ubc.ca/health/ubc-student-assistance-program-sap>

AMS Peer Support

<https://www.ams.ubc.ca/student-services/peer-support/>

GSS Peer Support

<https://gss.ubc.ca/peersupport/>

Counsellors in Residence!

<https://vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/counsellor-in-residence/>



RESIDENCE LIFE