

Jenny, PiAP:

Welcome to a segment of In This Moment Stories from the UNC Partnerships in Aging Program on May 28th, 2020. We talked today with Cathy, who is 66 years old and lives in Asheville, North Carolina. Cathy, thank you for talking with us today.

Cathy:

You're welcome.

Jenny, PiAP:

Thank you. I wanted to ask you first about how you're managing in the time of COVID-19 and, um, just what this experience has been like for you.

Cathy:

Um, I think that I'm probably not too different from most people. That overall I'm managing fine, and I have great days, and then I have terrible days. And some days I can understand why the day is terrible and other days I can't. But overall, you know, I'm grateful that I have, the resources that I have and that's, you know, wide ranging. I mean that I live I'm in a comfortable house, and I have plenty of room. And I have financial resources, family, friends; I have a lot of interests. I also think that my professional background as an OT [occupational therapist] is a resource during, has been a resource to me. Mmm. So I would say most of the time, I'm not only grateful for those resources, but using them. And, you know, if I was going to rate myself, I would say I'd probably be at 93. Overall I'm accounting for some bad days and some really good ones.

Jenny, PiAP:

It's interesting. We've heard more about, um, the sort of good day, bad day rollercoaster as, as this has lingered on longer than I think some of us knew it would. And I I'm wondering, is there anything in your background in your life that has helped you prepare, you mentioned your profession, but are there any personal experiences that have helped you to manage the day to day?

Cathy:

Yes. Um, I think, you know, we went into self isolation before the rest of North Carolina. So, I have, I was, I guess, isolated from the middle of March. Um, and then Buncombe County put theirs, put the isolation order in maybe a week later. So between self isolation and then Buncombe County, um, I decided mid-March is when I kind of date back to how long it was. Umm... and I would say that by early April, I realized that this, that I was feeling much the same as I felt after my husband died. Um, Mark died eight years ago and it was unexpected. And I, I began to see the parallels that, umm, after he died. And I think initially during COVID isolation, a lot of what I thought about was, um, when I get my life back. Umm, I want my life back.

And when it comes back, then I'll be able to, you know, do all of these things. And there was a point, and, um, that's what I was thinking about how long into it, it was, I would say two or three weeks and maybe in early April, when all of a sudden it dawned on me, the parallels between how I was feeling and how I felt out the summer after Mark died. And I began to understand that, that this is a grieving process. And I also began to understand that, um, what I learned from after he died was that I'm not going to get my life back. And, you know, putting all my energy into wishing that I had my life back or a, when is my life going to come back was not productive. Um, and I figured that out, it took me months to

figure that out after Mark died. And, you know, fortunately this time, you know, prior learning and experience was there. And I didn't, you know, I figured it out. It's like stop thinking about when your life goes back to normal. This is your life, right now, and invest in life now. Um, it's not that I don't think ahead and think about, you know, what I will do when, you know, we things open up more or uncomfortable going out or, you know, six months or a year from now. I do think about that. And I think about, you know, some elements of my life pre COVID coming back, but I realized I couldn't afford to sit and, you know, spend too much time thinking about when my life comes back. And I needed to just invest in, in here and now. And, um, I don't want to come out of this thinking, wow, I really regret that, you know, I spent so much time grieving what I did have or might not get back that I forgot to live. Um, and I, so I feel like that, um, that experience of having lost him and, you know, finally figuring out, you know, you're not going to get that life back, um, invest in, in life that you have. And, you know, be resilient and joyful. And, you know, find the joy where you are.... so that's, that's what I work on every day.

Jenny, PiAP:

Hmm. That's a, it's a really poignant story and I appreciate you sharing it. I'm also thinking that there was so much in that that was in response to my third question for you, which is, um, what would you tell future generations who faced a similar circumstance? So knowing that, you know, your experience is singular, but as you look at other people managing this, what, what would you say to them to prepare for the next time, something like this or something similar comes along?

Cathy:

You're right that is each of our experiences is singular. And I have shared what I just shared with you with other people. And, you know, I can tell when it doesn't really resonate; it's like, it's my story. And, um, and we each have to sort of craft our own story about, you know, how we cope with adversity. But, you know, I think overall the search is to find that, find those things that truly matter to you, um, and to, to focus on those, those relationships, those activities. Because I feel like really knowing, you know, who and what is important to you in your life, that's the point you can go back to no matter how difficult things are. And, you know, that's your starting place that your grounding place. And, um, that's what you invest in. And that's where your resilience ultimately comes from is, you know, being very, very, very aware of who and what is important and spending your time and your energy with those people in those activities, um, and allowing yourself to be there and, um, and be energized. And be as positive as you can be by investing in those sort of almost everyday ordinary life relationships and activities.

So, I'm going to get poetic. Um, Gary Kielhofner, was an occupational therapy academician and scholar, had a phrase in the introduction of one of his books. Um, and he talked about occupational therapist, um, being, being concerned with the poetry of the common place and that just really throughout my career, that's just that resonated with me. And I feel like that's my, maybe that's the core of my advice is that everyday life activities on what sustain you, because that's oftentimes, you know, that those are with the people that matter are there, we're doing the things that are important to us. And there's beauty in that every day commonplace kind of activity. And, and if you can get that real strong base, then you can go out from there. So thank you to Gary Kielhofner for that beautiful sentiment that sustains me.

Jenny, PiAP: Thank you, Gary Kielhofner, and thank you Cathy, for sharing the poetry of the commonplace. We appreciate your time.