It’s another Bell Let’s Talk Day in Canada. This year, I wanted to bring focus to social anxiety disorder and the ways in which that mental illness interacts with individuals’ experiences with leisure. Given leisure’s important role in helping individuals meet a range of needs they have (e.g., to connect with others, to feel a sense of belonging, to be physically active, to develop new skills) and potential offer a variety of positive outcomes as a result of those needs being met, understanding more about how individuals with social anxiety disorder may experience leisure opportunities and spaces is a first step in supporting those individuals in having meaningful leisure lives.

**What is Society Anxiety?**

Individuals with social anxiety perceive and/or experience social environments and social situations as opportunities in which they may be judged by others and are fearful that they will behave in a way that will result in being shamed, made fun of, or humiliated (Anxiety and Depression Association of America; Canadian Association of Mental Health). This fear is particularly strong when the individual is in a situation that requires them to perform such as the requirement to speak publicly as part of a theatre performance or to sing in front of others. The peak age of onset of social anxiety disorder is 15 (Lecrubier et al., 2000).

For some people, social anxiety disorder can be experienced the way psychotherapist Thomas Richards describes it: “All day, every day, life is like this. Fear. Apprehension. Avoidance. Pain. Anxiety about what you said. Fear that you said something wrong. Worry about others’ disapproval. Afraid of rejection, of not fitting in. Anxious to enter a conversation, afraid you’ll have nothing to talk about. Hiding what’s wrong with you deep inside, putting up a defensive wall to protect your ‘secret.’”

**Considering the Effect on Recreation and Sport Experiences**

Quite simply, for those who worry about being scrutinized in social situations, social recreation and sport and real-life recreation (as opposed to online leisure such as gaming) can be a challenging. Anxiety Canada identifies a number of ways in which social anxiety disorder can affect recreational activities including that the individual may avoid trying new things, avoid taking classes or lessons, and/or avoid activities that involve interacting with others (e.g., going to the gym, attending a family or community event).

Many individuals actively work at taking risks (related to being scrutinized or embarrassed), naturally exposing themselves to situations they fear (e.g., going to the gym), and participating in recreation (Hirsch & Clark, 2004). However, these experiences are not always easy or comfortable or satisfying. In some cases, taking these risks and living outside their comfort zone is part of steps they are taking to...
As a final point, when friends or family do not understand social anxiety or how to support someone who lives with social anxiety, the individuals with social anxiety disorder may be overlooked or purposely excluded from leisure or recreation experiences (e.g., “I didn’t invite you because I know you have social anxiety”; “You did not seem like you enjoyed yourself so I didn’t think you’d want to do it again”). Being excluded can reinforce some of the negative judgements they have about themselves (e.g., “I’m not interesting”, “I said something stupid last time I was there”) and furthers the stigma associated with mental illness.

### Considering the Role of Recreation and Sport

Many individuals with social anxiety seek professional help (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy) and actively work at managing their mental illness. There are also ways in which recreation and sport can reduce symptoms of social anxiety and ways in which those in recreation or leisure settings (be they coaches or recreation leaders or a friend) can be supportive of these who are working at overcoming social anxiety.

1. **Cultivating positive emotions.** Often, social anxiety disorder makes it difficult for individuals to form relationships. Taylor, Pearlstein, and Stein (2017) found that positive emotions play a key role in forming relationships. Therefore, if recreation or sport experiences are designed or implemented in a way that cultivates positive emotions, it can help people with social anxiety disorder to form more social relationships. For example, are there experiences in one’s community or groups that are focused on having fun as opposed to perfecting a skill? Do leaders in programs that do involve instruction think about how to deliver feedback in a way that might encourage rather than embarrass participants and consistently practice this? Because individuals with social anxiety disorder are affected by the actions of those around them, are there opportunities for individuals to engage in programs or services where expectations of being welcoming, kind, or encouraging are set and monitored (e.g., team sport – we will not call out others’ mistakes)?

2. **Understanding recreation and sport experiences can buffer social anxiety.** Research suggests involving children in team sport early on in their life (while in primary school) can help them develop social skills and comfort with social situations that results in them experiencing fewer social anxiety symptoms (Dimech & Seiler, 2011). Research with adolescents has found that experiences with participation in individual sport (as opposed to team sport) may decrease symptoms of social anxiety (Ashdown-Franks, Sabiston, Solomon-Krakus, & O'Loughlin, 2017). Various extracurricular activities allow children and adolescents to develop social interaction skills, to practice these skills, and to build resilience in the face of negative evaluation (White, Bennie, & McKenna, 2015).

3. **Being compassionate and thoughtful.** Developing an understanding of social anxiety is important in being a good friend to someone with this disorder. Taking a friend with social anxiety along to an event, and then running off to chat with some familiar faces before your friend has become comfortable will likely elevate his/her fear and anxiety. Individuals with social anxiety do want to be invited and included. Consider introducing your friend to a few people who he/she might have things in common with and help make some connections (e.g., “you both love to camp”) to get the conversation rolling. If your friend decides to get him/herself to the event rather than accept your request to pick him/her up, understand that this can be an effective coping strategy for your friend as he/she enters a new, unfamiliar social setting. If he/she takes control of transportation, he/she may also feel more in control about how long to stay. You may want to go to the event for 4 hours, he/she may want to try an hour or two.

For leaders, consider how you might “break the ice” for those who are new to a group or activity. Are there ways to help participants identify areas of commonality that might support them in more easily beginning a conversation? If it is evident that a couple of friends come together to a program and you need to divide people into groups, can you be thoughtful about the reason the two friends came together and whether it is necessary to separate them (or ask – “is it okay if I put you two in different groups”)? These small shifts in thinking – recognizing that someone in your program may live with social anxiety – could make a real difference in their participation and experience.

Take time to learn about mental illnesses, consider the aspects of individuals’ lives that mental illness affects, and think about what role you can play in ending the stigma and being inclusive.

### References

Don't Let Workplace Telepressure and Vacation Shame Impact Your Vacation

Leisure, Time, Vacation  June 12, 2017  Leave a comment

With spring behind us and our eye on summer, thoughts often turn to vacation. For some, vacations are routine and/or are based in tradition. This could include weekends at the cottage or a nearby campsite. Vacations sometimes revolve around a week or two at the same time every year to the same place. Or, perhaps vacations are novel experiences each year. Unfortunately, it appears that many North Americans do not take vacation and that portable technology has made it more difficult for us to be fully engaged during our vacation.
Growing up, I had the privilege of experiencing two weeks of vacation at a rental in Nova Scotia near where my maternal grandparents lived. Our first trip there was around my sister’s first birthday (I was 4 and a half). My father, a lawyer, had a fairly stressful job and the idea was that getting away would be a chance for us to have focused time together as a family. Over the years since those summers away, our family has fondly reflected on our time at “Harbour View”. Our rented cottage did not have a phone (and in the 1970s and 1980s, there were no cell phones). My father used to say that one of the reasons we went to Harbour View was because if we did not leave town and get away from the phone, he would never be able to leave work behind.

As I reflect back on my family’s vacation practices, I see the wisdom. It was an opportunity to detach. It was a time for rest, a time to relax, and a time to focus on family. I remember my father reading lots of books, playing tennis with my sister and I (once we were a little older), taking us to the on-site pool a couple of times a day, and playing catch and baseball with us in the field behind the cottage. He was noticeably more relaxed and humorous. Getting away was smart and the outcomes for him (and us as a family) were clear and significant enough that I remember them 35+ years later.

In stark contrast to my father taking all his vacation each year, a number of studies have demonstrated that vacation time is not being used. Project: Time Off (2017), an American study, found that Americans used a half-day more vacation (16.8 days) in 2016 compared with 2015 (16.2 days). However, because more vacation time was earned, more vacation days were left on the table than the previous year. In Canada, the story is fairly similar. In 2015, on average, Canadians accrued 17 days vacation and took, on average, 15.5 days (Montgomery, 2015b). The 2010 Statistics Canada General Social Survey found that one third of Canadians took less than 10 days vacation and 19.3% took no paid vacation days at all (Hilbrecht & Smale, 2016) which is slightly better than the 23% who took no vacation days in the U.S. (Ray, Sanes, & Schmitt, 2013).

In North America, “letting go” while on vacation and disconnecting is also a problem. For example, 57% of Canadians respond immediately to work-related email while on vacation (Montgomery, 2015a). One U.S. study of those working more than 50 hours a week found that 30% did a significant amount of work while on vacation.

Personally, I struggle with taking big blocks of time for vacation and with using all my vacation days. At times I have wondered if it is, in part, a result of not having children. I’ve thought that maybe I’d be more inclined to recreate the kind of vacation experience I had as a kid for my own children or I would crave more intense, uninterrupted quality time that a vacation could provide. However, it seems that perhaps there is more in play that my lack of offspring, and it also seems that I’m not alone in leaving vacation days on the table.

Workplace Telepressure

One of the reasons people struggle with taking vacation is the work norms that produce pressure to respond right away messages they receive through message-based technologies such as e-mail or text messages (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). These pressures make it difficult to set physical and temporal boundaries that support the separation of work and leisure (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011). While personality characteristics (e.g., conscientiousness, extroversion) can contribute to this impulse to check and respond to work-related email, norms in the work environment are also to blame (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). These norms are created in response to the demands of the job (and job overload). It can be created by employers who email their employees during non-work hours and by employees who respond to work messages during non-work hours (who may be keen to demonstrate their work ethic or present themselves as work martyrs; Ammar, Santuzzi, & Barber, 2016). When responding to messages during non-work hours becomes the norm, it makes it more difficult for employees to set boundaries that support detaching from work including during vacation.

Vacation Shame
Feeling guilty or experiencing shame from co-workers when using the vacation time to which one is entitled is referred to as “vacation shame”. It seems that a younger generation of workers and women are more likely to experience this guilt or shame. A 2016 Alamo Family Vacation Survey found that 59 percent of Millennials and 41 percent of older employees feel a sense of shame when they take time off. And 25% of all women, compared with 20% of all men, reported that feelings of guilt about taking vacation held them back from using vacation time.

These feelings may be a result, in part, of a lack of clear messaging about time off. In the Project: Time Off (2017) study, 66% of those surveyed felt their organization culture was ambivalent about, discouraged, or sent mixed messages about taking time off. When employee vacation time and the benefits that result are not valued, it may not be promoted or encouraged.

Why Vacation and “Unplugging” on Vacation are Important

Detaching from work is critical to the psychological and physical recovery process that allows us to go back to work and perform well (Fritz, Yankelevich, Zarubin, & Barger, 2010). Workplace telepressure and vacation shame make detaching more difficult and lead to employees not using all of their vacation time or not getting the optimal results from the vacation time they do take. The consequences are broad ranging.

Workplace telepressure has been found to contribute to higher levels of physical and cognitive burnout, health-related absenteeism (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015), poor sleep quality (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015). And, when workplace telepressure violates boundaries between work and family life, it can lead to less satisfaction with the investment in family and greater work-family conflict (Hunter, Clark, Carlson, 2017). Vacation shame means that employees often take fewer vacation days which can contribute to lower productivity and burnout (Project: Time Off, 2017). And perhaps it might be useful to keep this quote in mind when thinking about checking and responding to messages while on vacation: “Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master” – Christian Lous Lange (1921)

It is important to understand that there is a relationship between the amount of paid vacation taken and life satisfaction and also self-assessed health (Hilbrecht & Smale, 2016). More specifically, longer vacations were associated with “greater satisfaction with work–life balance, better mental health and reduced time pressure” (p. 49).

One final point. Arguably, one of the reasons we take vacations is because they offer opportunities to create memories with friends or family. If you want to increase the chance that you can fondly reflect back and remember aspects of your vacation, paying attention to how long you are connected while you are on vacation is important. Vozza (2017) reported on one 2016 study that found using your smartphone to take pictures and finding things to do can help with remembering your vacation. However, those who are on their phones for two hours or more a day are 26% more likely to have trouble remembering the experiences you had while on your vacation. Using your device for work-related activities – even for an hour – can have an impact. Only 43% of people who were on their devices for work one hour or more per day remembered all the events on their vacation while 60% those who used them less than one hour were able to do so. And those who worked on their laptops recalled significantly fewer aspects of their vacation.

Final Thoughts

If you have paid vacation, you are entitled to it. If you do not take it, you are essentially donating money back to your organization (Project: Time Off, 2017). You may also be placing your mental and physical health at greater risk and compromising your own productivity on the job. Not detaching from work while on vacation produces similar consequences, but can also have an impact on your family relationships. One has to wonder whether being a work martyr by not taking vacation or all your vacation and working/responding to messages while on vacation is worth these costs.

References


In previous years, on #BellLetsTalk day, I have highlighted leisure’s role in mental health, explored how the digital age may be affecting our mental health, and have focused specifically on the interaction between depression and leisure. This year I wanted to focus attention on a recent article published by a collection of Canadian scholars about the important role that community recreation plays in mental health recovery (Fenton, White, Gallant, Hutchinson, & Hamilton-Hinch, 2016).

Fenton et al. (2016) indicate that participation in community recreation activities and contexts is often an overlooked and undervalued means to support mental health recovery. Their focus is on social inclusion or participation in society/community. Individuals with mental health problems often experience social exclusion in a number of ways including being excluded from consumption activities (e.g., lack of income), production activities (e.g., employment), services (e.g., transportation, health services), social relations or social interaction (e.g., isolated networks) and political engagement (e.g., having a voice; Boardman, 2011). Therefore, a identifying ways in which community recreation can support social inclusion offers a valuable contribution to mental health recovery.

Elements of Recovery

Prior to discussing the role of community recreation in social inclusion and mental health recovery, it is important to highlight some of the common elements in recovery from mental illness. Davidson, O’Connell, Tondora, Lawless, and Evans (2005) review of the literature related to recovery offered a number of common elements including:

- Redefining self in a way that allows individuals to re-conceptualize mental illness as simply one aspect of a multi-dimensional identity
- Incorporating illness sees an individual accepting the limitations imposed by their illness while also discovering the possibilities for achieving various goals


Benefits of Community Recreation

Recreation can be defined as an “experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing” (Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council and Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2015, p. 4). What recreation is and includes can offer much to individuals with mental illnesses as related to some of the elements of recovery. First, recreation involves choice and thus giving individuals the opportunity to exercise control and choose meaningful activities – ones that may help with incorporating illness and with the redefining of self. Recreation activities can provide individuals with a valued identity such as musician or quilter or volunteer (Iwasaki et al., 2014) that allow them to characterize and define themselves beyond their illness. The existing evidence also suggests that community recreation is a chance for social interaction in which individuals with mental illness can develop their social skills, build their social and support networks, and feel a sense of belonging and inclusion (Fenton et al., 2017).

Recreation as a Community Arena that Supports Social Inclusion

Fenton et al. (2016) talk about community recreation as a “community arena” – a space in which individuals feel safe and supported to fully participate without being concerned about being defined by their mental illness or mental health problems. These are private and public leisure and recreation spaces in which individuals are viewed as community members, as participants, and as citizens participating in recreation rather than clients participating in therapy. It is in these community arenas where leisure interests are explored and the development of leisure roles and identities are fostered.

It is also within the community arenas where individuals may vary their participation while still feeling and being included. This could mean rather than running as a participant on a team in the annual Run for the Cure event, an individual volunteers to help with registration or at the water station along the run. Community arenas are flexible in the opportunity offered for individuals to participate.

Working to Reduce the Barriers to Recreation

While recreation participation in community arenas can promote social inclusion of individuals with mental health problems and offer additional benefits that support recovery, Fenton et al. (2016) explain that many individuals are not able to access recreation. The symptoms of the mental health problems (e.g., depression) may interfere with participation (e.g., motivation). Individuals may not have someone to participate with (e.g., lack of social network). They may also face a number of structural barriers – lack of transportation, lack of finances, and even social barriers such as stigma or discrimination.

Stigma, in particular, has been identified as a barrier that can have more impact than the illness itself (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). The portrayal and perception of individuals with mental health problems as dangerous or unpredictable undermines opportunities for participation in recreation and increases the risk that these individuals will experience social exclusion (Fenton et al., 2016). With this being the case, one can hope that initiatives like “Bell Let’s Talk Day,” which strives to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness, support, both indirectly and directly, the development and expansion of community arenas in which individuals with mental illness are accepted as participants and valued as community members.

Ultimately, Fenton et al. (2016) recommend and discuss a variety of intersectoral collaboration initiatives that could work to reduce barriers to recreation and to support social inclusion of participants with mental health problems. Their key message is that recreation services must be informed by mental health sector to understand the experiences of those who live with mental illness and what a recovery-oriented model of support involves. At the same time, the mental health sector and individuals with mental illness must value the role of recreation in the recovery of individuals with mental illness. This knowledge exchange is critical to optimizing the engagement of individuals with mental illness in recreation and ensuring that they are participating in community arenas that support them as participants.

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Adult Colouring Trend: Adults Revisiting a Childhood Leisure Activity or Is it Something Else?


As a child, I always loved colouring and, in recent years, as an adult, I have embraced opportunities to colour with my nieces. At restaurants where the tables are covered with brown kraft paper and crayons are placed on the table, I always experience a feeling of joy. I appreciate being given the chance and permission to create and colour in an adult setting.

But in 2015, colouring moved from being an activity that was primarily engaged in by children to one that was important to adults. The growth of the activity was supported with the introduction of wide variety of colouring books and fancy coloured pencil sets. In fact, adult colouring books were among the most popular books in 2015 in United States and Canada. On Amazon.com, three of the top 10 books for the year were adult colouring books and there were five colouring books on the Amazon.ca top 10 books list.

In 2015, Facebook groups were created for adults to share their completed coloring pages or their works in progress. Events and meet ups were hosted for adult colourers. In January 2016, an adult coloring night event (Martin & Ouellet, 2016) for charity in Toronto sold out! Coloring nights have been a low-tech hit at libraries as well with a number of small town and urban libraries offering “color and connect” nights for adults in the community. In my community, even a local wine bar capitalized on the adult colouring trend by hosting adult colouring nights (its first colouring night was held in November 2015).
So what is the appeal of adults returning to an activity that was likely a part of their leisure when they were children? Is it nostalgia? Is it the relatively inexpensive nature of the activity (although some people are willing to pay up to $168 for a box of coloured pencils; Martin & Ouellet, 2016). Is it that it can be done anywhere and at anytime? Is that you can enjoy the activity for 5 minutes and later pick up where you left off with relative ease? Is it that as your time devoted to the activity accumulates, you have a finished product?

Currently, there is very limited academic research on the adult colouring phenomenon and it focuses mainly on colouring as art therapy. However, several popular press articles have been written that offer other explanations for the surge in popularity.

**Colouring as a Beneficial Form of Play**

There is certainly an argument to be made that colouring has become popular among adults because of “a growing trend where more adults are seeking opportunities for play, largely due to the increased recognition of the health benefits it offers” (Umpathy, 2015). Adult life can is full of obligations some of which can be stressful. Play offers a break from work and other day-to-day commitments. Play also stimulates the brain, supports problem-solving and creativity, and is important to relationships (Brown, 2009).

**Colouring as Form of Meditation and Supporting Mindfulness**

In one The Atlantic article, Beck (2015), suggests that the trend in adult colouring might best fit with trends related to meditation and mindfulness. Colouring brings our focus to doing one thing (assuming you're also not trying to watch television or help your child with his/her homework). The patterns associated with certain colouring page designs and the repetition associated with is relaxing and calming for some.

The notion that colouring is a form of meditation has been supported by the research of Curry and Kasser (2011) who found colouring did draw participants into a meditative state and allowed them to experience a reduction in feelings of anxiety — if the piece they were colouring was complex enough. “Coloring a mandala for 20 minutes is more effective at reducing anxiety than free-form coloring for 20 minutes”(Curry & Kasser, 2005, p.83). This finding that colouring a mandala might be the type of design that best represents a meditative practice was further supported in a more recent replication study (van der Vennet & Serice, 2012).
Some adult colourers have found colouring offers them a flow experience (McDonald, 2016). Flow is a mental state in which one is so completely absorbed in an experience that time and space and self no longer disrupt the present moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). While colouring can certainly produce feelings similar to flow – being focused, feeling competent in the task we are engaged in, being in “the zone” where time passes without our awareness, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that true flow requires us to stretch our mind or body to accomplish something. Since it is unlikely that colouring pushes us in this way, Csikszentmihalyi believes that colouring could be a microflow experience (Roston, 2016). Microflow does not involve the same level of arousal that flow does – that peak mental arousal when there is a balance between our high level of skill and a fairly high level of challenge. Rather, colouring may be a small, flow-like experience that offsets the boredom that we would otherwise feel when time passes slowly (Whitbourne, 2015). Because with colouring, our skill level is quite high and the challenge level fairly low, we have the opportunity to experience it as a relaxing activity as opposed to one in which we experience high mental arousal.

**Colouring as Social Activity and Opportunity to Connect**

With the number of out-of-home colouring events advertised, it is difficult to ignore the opportunity for social interaction that may be offered to colourers. In situations where individuals are colouring at a social or meet-up event, I suspect that there is less chance that someone may experience it as meditation and it may not facilitate the same degree of mindfulness that solitary colouring might. However, certainly the opportunity to colour with others can foster social interaction among individuals who share an interest and help develop a sense of belonging. As I mentioned above, libraries, such as the Lethbridge Public Library in Alberta (below), are incorporating adult colouring into their program offerings. The library offers to supply participants with what they need making it a no-cost activity for those who may not be able to afford colouring books or coloured pencils or for those who want to try the activity without committing to purchasing supplies until they know they like it.

**Conclusion**

Adult colouring is a phenomenon that has offered adults opportunities to access a variety of benefits associated with leisure. It can be a solitary, meditative activity. It can be a social activity that allows you to engage in an interest with others. It can serve as a break from routine and the stresses of everyday life. It can foster creativity. It can be a way to meaningfully relieve boredom while stimulating your brain. If you have yet to engage in adult colouring activities, it may be worth trying (maybe at a no-cost event) to assess what the activity might offer you!

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Can the “Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up” Process Enhance Your Leisure?

Barriers to Leisure Leisure January 9, 2017 Leave a comment

Last January, I got the book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. I had joined a closed Facebook group called KonMari Adventures after one of my own Facebook friends had shared several posts of her experience of tidying and recommended the group. After a week of reading the stories that the women were posting – stories of the results they were experiencing from doing the author’s discarding and organizing process, I had to get the book and read more.

I consider myself a fairly organized person and if you came to my house, you would likely not say that it was cluttered. But one of the key goals of the KonMari process (named after the author Marie Kondo) is that create a lifestyle that sparks joy.

I followed the KonMari process by doing my clothes first. I appreciated that the book empowered me to rid myself of clothes that didn’t fit well; those that I had enjoyed at one point, but did not any longer; and those which I had been drawn to and bought, but which actually never suited me. I appreciated these items for what they had given me (part of the process) whether it was joy in the moment when I found and purchased them or the lesson they taught me about my style and clothing preferences.

Realizing the Connection between the KonMari Method and Leisure

After completing the clothing categories, I moved on to books. I re-read what Marie Kondo had written about how to approach the discarding of books. I love books and was dreading the category. She explains that half finished books should be let go – that the time to read them has likely passed. I found this to be a particularly freeing idea. Many times, I have purchased a book or have been given a book that I was excited about, but after getting down to reading it, I have discovered it was not as interesting or engaging as I hoped or expected it to be. When this happened, I ended up denying myself permission to purchase or start a new book until I “finished” the one that I was not interested in. I now realize that while I denied myself the enjoyment of others books, I likely let the critical moment of interest in those other books pass as well. I began to see my half-read books as missed opportunities to experience joy – barriers to more enjoyable reads and maybe the best read of my life. It was during the process of going...
through my books and reflecting on Marie Kondo’s advice that I began considering how this process could create space for new or enhanced leisure.

This was further reinforced when I got to the paper category. Among the collection of papers that covered my home office floor, were programs and ticket stubs I had kept from various performances I had attended over the years. I realized it was an excellent opportunity to reflect on the types of performances I had most enjoyed and to clarify, for myself, what I wanted to see more of in the future. In this way, the KonMari process was an opportunity for leisure self-awareness.

### Clarifying How “Stuff” May Be a Barrier to or Opportunity for Leisure

The next category, the Komono category (miscellaneous things), is a rather large one, but contains subcategories that are arguably related to our leisure like crafts, games, puzzles, CDs/DVDs, and sports equipment. For me, these categories were a bit of a trip back in time to the various points when I enjoyed and engaged in cross stitching, tole painting, scrapbooking, wreath making, card making, and candle making. None of these hobbies were things I was actually doing in the present nor had a desire to do. Similar to books, I had been telling myself that I should not take up anything new until I used up all the things I had already collected for these various hobbies. I decided this thinking, although perhaps logical in some ways, was a barrier to new leisure pursuits that I would enjoy more in the present. I got rid of all of the supplies for things I knew I was never going to do again. I made room – both physically and psychologically – for new things I wanted to pursue in my available time (like knitting – which I had just learned to do and was excited about working on).

I also donated the collection of jigsaw puzzles I had accumulated over the years as gifts. As I stared at the pile of them, I concluded that I am not someone who does a puzzle more than once. Therefore, once it is done, it has served its purpose for me and it time to let someone else enjoy it. By donating the ones I had, I gave myself permission to be able to select a new puzzle to do if and when one captures my attention (and one may never capture my attention again, which is okay).

Another notable discard was my roller blades. I had acquired these when I lived in a community with lots of paved, flat trails near my apartment and when I had a couple of friends who loved to go often. I had not roller bladed in 15 years. I did not miss it, but often felt guilty that I had the equipment for something that I was not doing. I did not want to keep feeling guilty for the leisure I was not doing or did not have a desire to do. So, bye, bye roller blades. I now had space for my new snowshoes.

In sorting through my games, I rediscovered ones that I knew one of my nieces would enjoy. Sometimes when tidying up and decluttering, you can find things that will facilitate leisure, create memories, and will spark joy – things that had become buried with the stuff that does not.

### Concluding Thoughts

Freedom is one of the common, essential characteristics of leisure. Generally, freedom as a characteristic of leisure has been conceptualized as being free from obligation (i.e., work) or constraint as well as being free to choose what to pursue. The KonMari process gave me the chance to reflect on the potential for the “stuff” I had collected and the attitudes I had developed about my stuff (e.g., you cannot be wasteful, you do not get a new book until you finish the one you have) to limit my sense of freedom to choose leisure that would bring the most joy at particular points in my life. I do recognize that you need to be privileged with stuff to have this problem and I also recognize that some individuals have no problem purchasing new things even if they have unfinished projects or books. However, there are many individuals for whom stuff carries a weight and may preclude them from regularly evaluating their leisure interests or what needs they could be meeting through particular leisure pursuits. When there is an opportunity to shed these materials that to not bring enjoyment or weigh us down for whatever reason (e.g., guilt), it may lead to a clearer understanding of may spark joy and what satisfying leisure one might want to pursue as a result.
The Digital Age, Social Wellness, and Mental Health on Bell Let’s Talk Day

Leisure, Mental Illness, Technology  January 27, 2016  1 Comment

This year on Bell Let’s Talk Day, I’m in Nanaimo, BC. It’s hard not to reflect on the fact that this beautiful spot in Canada arguably has a winter climate that supports mental health (temperatures above 0 degrees, no snow, and I actually saw some flowers when I was walking by the waterfront on Sunday).

This year, the relationships among social wellness, digital technology, leisure, and mental health are at the forefront of my mind. I’ve been reading Sherry Turkle’s new book, Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age. As I’ve read what she’s learned from talking to people about digital technology, the implications for our social wellness were troublesome to me and worthy of some consideration.

Social Wellness

Social wellness is the dimension of wellness that focuses on our interactions with others. Having positive, meaningful relationships with others; using good communication in our interactions; having a support network of friends and family; and respecting yourself and others all contribute to our social wellness. Social wellness, in turn, supports our mental health. For example, positive social interactions can help us manage and prevent depression (Cruwys et al., 2013) and the support networks we have and even our perception that we have support can buffer stress (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Our positive relationships with others also contribute to our feelings of self worth, our self-esteem, and our self-confidence.

But how might our social wellness (and therefore, our mental health) be affected by trends in how we communicate and interact?

“I’d Rather Text than Talk”

The popularity of mobile communication devices (MCDs) has offered a way of communicating with others that does not require conversation. Turkle (2015) highlights that there is currently a generation of young people who indicate that they would rather text their friends or email than have a conversation. For perspective on the growth of text messages, Pew Institute survey results revealed that in 2000, 14 billion text messages were sent in the US. In 2010, this number had exploded to 188 billion. While this seems to be a particular trend among young people, Turkle also found that in the workplace, some adults choose to email colleagues rather than walking down the hall and having a conversation. Why? Part of it seems to be that we enjoy having control over what we communicate when we text or email. We can edit and perfect our messages before hitting “send”. In other ways, it is perceived as more efficient or convenient – it is quicker to send a text or an email than it is to engage in a longer interaction than we wanted or needed (again, it is about control).

But what is lost when we opt for texting over talking or emailing over conversation? The biggest concern seems to around the impact on the digital natives – those who have grown up with technology and MCDs. Developmental psychologists express concern that this form of communication is likely to most greatly impact young people (e.g., tweens and teens) because they have not yet fully developed their interpersonal skills. Turkle (2015) argues that conversations provide opportunities to think, reason and self-reflect – skills she says are the bedrock of social development. Without conversation, the opportunity to develop empathy, interpret nonverbal cues (facial expression, body language) and understand emotional subtleties may also be lost. For example, Turkle talks about the difference between saying “I’m sorry” via text and apologizing in person when you might see, through nonverbal cues, the pain and discomfort you have caused another person. It is this kind of face-to-face experience with the “messiness” of human relationships that leads to better relationships and social wellness.

I should note that while Turkle (2015) argues that the little bits and pieces of text messages do not add up to a conversation, others argue that the increased contact that occurs through text messaging could be helpful to friendship development (Hartley-Brewer, 2009). Personally, I need to see more evidence that quantity of interaction trumps quality of interaction in terms of social wellness and associated outcomes.

Having Lunch or Coffee – The Phone on the Table
In *Reclaiming Conversation*, Turkle (2015) discusses what she learned through her research about how phones can influence our social interactions. “Studies show the mere presence of a phone on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking and there is a phone on a nearby desk, each feels less connected to the other than when there is no phone present. Even a silent phone disconnects us” (p. 21). One of her participants explained that if, during a conversation, someone picks up his/her phone, it is a sign that the conversation is getting too serious or heavy and that it needs to be lightened up. I cannot help but wonder how this impacts one’s perception of support or one’s ability to access support. If the possibility of interruption is ever present, are we as likely to enter into conversations in which we are vulnerable – conversations which can result in two people having a better understanding of each other and a closer, deeper relationship? Or, do we keep the conversation on a more superficial level? If conversations occur only on a superficial level, do we access the same positive outcomes of social interaction as we do when we have those conversations in which people are sharing themselves – their fears, their disappointments, or their hopes and plans. How do we ask for support from people in our network during a difficult time (an action related to social wellness), if we cannot have a deeper conversation about what is going on with us and what we need?

Certainly, superficial conversations can happen anywhere at anytime, but the idea that an object on the landscape (as Turkle refers to it) could block opportunities for more meaningful conversations and the deepening of relationships is something we might want to pay attention to. Arguably, this practice could impact our social wellness.

I wonder how important and desirable group gatherings in which the norm is for the phone to stay in your bag or pocket might become. Might those leisure experiences in which this is the norm offer the best opportunity for having the social interactions that support our mental health? Should we be seeking out yarn parties, sporting activities, or a book club – gatherings where the focus is on engaging in something together and where conversation is a natural part of the interaction if we want to develop those close social ties or deepen the ones we have? Or, is it unrealistic to think that there are any sacred spaces in which the conversation will not be interrupted by someone not present?
Expectations and Stresses of Modern Friendship Lived Online

For young people in particular, the trend or practice seems to be that when they are together, they are inattentive (e.g., on their phones...together, but not really together). However, when they are apart, Turkle describes them as hyper vigilant. Some of the young people she talked to as part of her research expressed feeling stressed when they must go long periods without their phone. This was in part because there is an expectation that if a friend sends a text, you will respond within a few minutes. Missing out or being left out of something is a big deal for teenagers in particular. Even at night, young people expressed worrying about this and many indicated sleeping with their phones right beside them or in their beds so that they would know if a text came in.

With these expectations and the stresses that seem to accompany them, I wonder how “present” youth can be in their activities that separate them from their phones and their online social lives. As someone who studies leisure, I have concerns about how these expectations affect someone’s enjoyment of or engagement in what they are participating in at the time. Leisure offers excellent opportunities to meet people with shared interests and to develop friendships. But does the concern about what is happening online affect one’s ability to develop and enjoy meaningful face-to-face relationships when the opportunities exist?

The CNN Documentary #Being13 that was aired in October of 2015 demonstrated this fear of missing out when teens in that study estimated checking their phones up to 200 times during the school day. They appeared to be anxious – worried that they might be left out of something. They might see a photo of some of their friends hanging out without them or at a party they were not invited to. One teen explained that she was only as good as her latest selfie and status post on Instagram. Apparently, popularity and belonging fluctuated based on these factors. This documentary left me with the impression that social wellness, for these youth, was very unstable. Friends who intentionally exclude you from a party and post photos they know you will see – that doesn’t seem like a healthy peer relationship. Or, feeling left out and hurt because you see two of your friends hanging out without you – that suggests youth may be quite vulnerable as social lives are lived online.

Social wellness occurs when relationships are positive and healthy – you feel good about the relationships you are in. It occurs when you have a support network – people you know you can count on to help you when you need them. It seems that as social lives are lived as much online as they are face-to-face, developing social wellness may be more complex and challenging to achieve. And if social wellness is low or unstable, it will have an impact on mental health.

Because of the important links between social wellness and mental health, I think it will become increasingly important to be aware of our digital interactions, the role that our devices play in our relationships, and how they may interfere with us achieving and maintaining a high degree of social wellness.

References:


Can a Word for the Year Facilitate Leisure?

I've been following a UK blogger, Susannah Conway, for the last couple of years. I have enjoyed receiving her "Something for the Weekend" posts which always offered lots of links for interesting reading. There was always something in the list that made me smile or left me inspired. In December of 2014, I noticed a post toward the end of the year focused on Finding Your Word for 2015. Having just moved in the middle of the academic term and facing a chunk of grading in December and anticipating that I'd start the January term behind, I quickly thought my word for 2015 would be "survive." I did not take the time to go through the process of choosing a word and maybe if I had, my 2015 would have gone a bit differently. In any case, this occasion was the first I was aware of this notion of a word for the year.

This December, with my six-month sabbatical approaching and after having a semi-difficult year with my depression and anxiety, I chose to take the time to go through the Find Your Word process of choosing a word. I signed up for the free five day mini-course and I joined the Facebook group. Each day for five days, I received an email to guide me through the process of finding my word. I also had a chance to read posts from others who had chosen their word or were seeking help in choosing the perfect word to describe their intentions for 2016.

What has been fascinating to me is reading the stories behind the word choice of the members of the Facebook group. The posts come almost exclusively from women and the chosen words – even the same word for different women – are steeped in meaning. There are words like embrace, act, invest, faith, forgive, move, presence, enough, adventure, and create – each come with an explanation for the choice and a vision for its meaning in 2016. Many of the discussion around chosen words is about how time will be used. For some women, the word they have chosen, in part, serves as a reminder to enjoy hobbies or pursuits, try new ones, spend time with friends and make new ones, do things that bring feelings of joy, and engage in activities that promote self-care.

After going through the process, my word became clear. Nourish.

I was looking for a word that would capture my desire to stimulate my mind outside of work-related activities – that will encourage me to choose, for example, leisure reading over television; that will encourage me to engage my mind in ways that will bring joy, satisfy my curiosities, and peak my interests (as opposed to simply distracting or numbing my mind). In 2015, I made some good progress in making changes to my eating habits and devoted more attention to working out and taking time to be
outside – I needed a word for 2016 that would encourage me to continue those actions and would be a
good mantra on days when a bag of chips seems like a good idea for lunch. This summer, I want to do
more gardening – I want to pay more attention to helping things grow and needed a word that reflected
this intention. I wanted a word that would capture my desire to focus on building and deepening
particular relationships. Finally, I wanted a word that would capture all these intentions in a positive way
and would not leave me feeling as though paying attention to these things was drudgery (e.g., I “have to”
exercise; I “should” eat something healthy for supper). Because the word “nourish” seemed to so simply
reflects my intention, the “should” and “have to” words do not feel necessary. Saying “nourish” seems
like a gentle reminder of what I’m hoping to do on a daily basis.

My word is certainly not entirely focused on leisure, but “nourish” and the intentions linked to the word
does force reflection upon how I am using my unobligated time or leisure time. Already, only three days
in to 2016, I find myself asking about my choices in my leisure time: how will this action “nourish” my
mind, my body, my spirit, my relationships? I don’t expect that ever single thing I do in 2016 will qualify
as nourishing, but I do see that selecting a word for the year that has connections with leisure intentions
could facilitate more leisure time, new leisure pursuits, leisure choices that better one’s needs, and more
satisfying leisure in general. I am interested to see if a word can shift my attitude about or the meaning I
attach to certain activities that may not always feel like leisure. Only time will tell whether the mantra of
“nourish” will convert meal preparation from something I do not particularly enjoy and see as a chore to
something I see as an enjoyable act of self-care.

Some women in the Facebook group have shared that they will be doing art journals for their word,
creating experiences that reflect their word, and even taking photographs throughout the year that
capture their engagement in actions that reflect their word’s meaning. It seems that particular leisure
skills could come in very handy in supporting their efforts related to self-awareness, self-development,
and/or intentional living in 2016.

If you use a word to guide your actions for the year or to represent your intentions, are there ways in
which the meaning of the word represents your intentions related to your leisure?