



Re: Letters of Reply from Our Professionals

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Disclaimer: *The following section is for general informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional advice. If you suspect that you are facing mental health-related issues, or require more in-depth guidance about issues you are facing, you are strongly encouraged to seek professional help.*

Self-Esteem

Ms Brenda Lee's letter

for Search Engine Optimization Analyst



Dear Anonymous,

Thank you for sharing your experience and how you felt after your graduation. Your story got me thinking about how a lot of who we are and how we navigate changes are in part shaped by our environment, whether it is the family we grew up in or the schools where we spent a significant amount of time in.

We might feel that much of our experiences in school leads to an emphasis on being competitive and goal-driven. ***While this helps us excel, what happens when we run out of goals to drive towards? Or what happens when the goals we are working towards do not or no longer serve us? If we are consistently expecting ourselves to excel and perform, how can we begin to know what defines us outside of how well we do?***

Graduating is a major milestone and it can be daunting to figure out which of the many paths lie ahead of you to take. I thought you were very brave in taking steps, including volunteering, to figure out what you want despite how lost and scared you must have felt. Often it is when we venture out of our comfort zones that we come to learn more about ourselves and what is of meaning to us. It is also heartening to hear how you have leaned on the support of your friends as you took those steps in your journey of self-discovery. Leaning on others for support takes courage and strength. Knowing that we have people we can lean on while we venture out of our comfort zones can help us feel more secure in taking these very steps.



Ms Brenda Lee's letter

to the Search Engine Optimization Analyst



As you continue on your journey of self-discovery and coming into your own being, I invite you to ponder the following:

- When you find yourself in the familiar cycle of comparing and benchmarking yourself to others, be curious about the emotions that are driving this cycle and how you are meeting your needs by comparing yourself to others. Are there other ways you can tend to your emotions? Are there alternative ways to get this need, for instance, for validation, met?
- Part of discovering ourselves includes discovering what is of meaning and of value to us. For others, it may be a connection that drives and enlivens us. For others, it may be about being curious, being creative or being a learner. Values have no endpoints but instead, they can serve as our internal compass as we navigate through life's numerous milestones and changes. Think about a moment in your life where you have felt 'right', aligned and alive - what were you doing at that moment? What values were fulfilled at that moment that brought about this sense of being alive and aligned? How can you embody these values in both the smallest and biggest of ways in different aspects of your life?

It is okay to be lost, and perhaps in being lost, you will come to uncover and love parts of yourself that you didn't know to exist.

I wish you well and all the best.

Warmly,
Brenda Lee
Clinical Psychologist
The Psychology Practice



Covid-19

Many of my clients share similar challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has on their personal, interpersonal and professional lives. Especially for people who are entering the workforce for the first time or are changing careers. It is already challenging in normal times for some, and during the pandemic when you have close to no face-to-face contact with people, it aggravates the challenge, anxiety and fear.

For those who started their careers in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic may have felt like they are entering a crisis zone. Let us look at some of the symptoms of adjustment challenges and ways to cope with it assuming there are no other underlying conditions or mental health diagnosis.

The ASH model (Awareness - Symptoms - Help) can be one of the helpful approaches.

1. Awareness: What is/are the situation(s) that you find extremely stressful?

Stressful events include career challenges, workplace issues, family issues, relationship challenges, and change in environment amongst others.



2. Symptoms: Which of the following symptoms are you experiencing?

Tick as many as you might have experienced in the last 3 to 6 months:

- ☐ Feelings of low mood & sadness
- ☐ Crying spells or frequent crying
- ☐ Lack of hope for the future or a sense of hopelessness
- ☐ Inability to enjoy activities & company of friends that you used to enjoy
- ☐ Higher levels of nervousness and anxiety
- ☐ Often feeling overwhelmed
- ☐ Increased worrying than usual
- ☐ Feeling frustrated/irritated/angry at work/school/home
- ☐ Thoughts of being trapped
- ☐ Recurring thoughts of suicide
- ☐ Difficulty focusing
- ☐ Being more reckless or impulsive
- ☐ Feelings of breathlessness
- ☐ Insomnia or difficulty falling asleep
- ☐ Tightness in the chest region
- ☐ Change in appetite
- ☐ Difficulty in daily functioning
- ☐ Unexplained body aches and pains
- ☐ Withdrawing from social support
- ☐ Avoiding daily tasks
- ☐ Performing poorly at school/work
- ☐ Difficulties in relationships at work or home
- ☐ Others: _____

3. Help: What can I do to help myself?

There are many ways to self-help and to seek help when it gets overwhelming.

The first step to any recovery is to accept that this is a challenging situation or period and I need help. This is not a sign of weakness.

Asking for help requires self-awareness, courage, acceptance of any difficult situation, willingness to be vulnerable and trust in other's abilities to help. What helps each individual might differ from person to person. However, we can try a few of the following as part of self-help strategies before it gets too overwhelming.



Speak with a trusted friend or family member.

Inform them that you need a listening ear and nothing else is expected of them. Share your challenges as openly as possible, including having the comfort to cry out and just focus on sharing without the need to find a solution in that moment.

Brainstorming - List all the problems and find solutions to as many of these challenges as possible.

Engage a friend or colleague to help you with the process and choose the best possible solutions.

Practice daily positive self-talk such as “I’m alright”, “It’s okay”, and “Breathe this away” amongst others.

Pick a word or sentence that works for you.

Visualise being in a place of comfort or with a person who comforts you whenever you feel overwhelmed.

It can be by the seaside, your bed, your partner, a pet or anything that comforts you. Close your eyes or lower your gaze and hold on to this image as you take deep breaths.

Hold on to something that grounds you such as a stress ball, toy, or crystal or anything else that helps you to feel grounded in the moment.

Feeling your body weight on your feet or your buttocks while seated on a chair also helps to ground you. And notice your breathing, by bringing your attention to your breathing again and again. For Belle, having a weighted blanket and essential oils were helpful.

Be willing to challenge your thoughts that might be debilitating.

List down all your thoughts on a daily basis and challenge them with your past success, your strengths, and if need be, ask a family member or friend to challenge them together.

Start a daily exercise regime for 30 mins to an hour without fail.

It can be a walk in the park, jogging, cycling, swimming, or going to the gym. Anything that gets your body moving. Schedule it and do it even when the mind resists.

Practice mindfulness using apps such as CALM, Awareness Space, or Smiling Mind amongst others to start your journey.


Better if you could join a 8 week mindfulness course such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindfulness-Based Wellbeing Enhancement (MBWE) to cultivate a more structured daily mindfulness practice.

Be willing to admit yourself to a hospital if it gets worse just as Belle took a courageous step towards her mental health.

Medications and treatment are helpful to overcome these challenging periods.

When it gets overwhelming, it might be best to approach a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychologist or psychiatrist to get more professional help. Regardless of who you approach, they will be able to refer you to one among many professionals who could provide holistic care for you.





family & Social Relationships

Dr. Shawn Ee's letter

for those facing the threat of loss of your loved one



Dear reader,

Some of the stories have touched on some very pertinent and relevant concerns many of us grapple with today in our day and age – sickness, death anxiety, and the threat of loss. I am sure you are facing a great deal of pain.

Psychologically speaking, the threat of loss arouses anxiety whilst the anticipation of actual loss gives rise to sorrow. In addition, it is such a horrible time to be ill and worse, should there be requirements for tertiary medical care in this dreadful COVID environment. It is with great care that I provide some comments on possible concerns, whilst keeping in mind that I do not know you, nor do I assume to know anything about your life. Thus, it is with great respect that I write, in the hope that some of this might be useful to you.

The threat of losing your loved one can evoke intense anxiety and strong emotional protest. These feelings can easily take over and leave you in the wake of having to pick up the pieces, so it might be pertinent to be mindful of what might potentially be psychological trigger points for you. Here are three areas that may speak to your struggles.

1. The need to be a carer, and partake in being a hero.

To be a carer for your loved one is a stressful experience, and it can be easily overwhelming. Whilst I understand you'd want to leave nothing to chance, it is worth recognising the desire to lessen everyone's harm and suffering by subjecting yourself to the effects of the burden yourself.

Hence, you might need to consider if there was a tendency toward self-sacrifice, as it can strengthen some existent guilty feelings – being away at university, to eat, sleep properly, and work on things you enjoy, whilst taking care of your loved one. The same can be said about throwing oneself into work and being there for others when you need support yourself.



2. Death anxiety and the threat of loss.

The sense that your loved one may be living on borrowed time, and that your life has somehow been put on hold, can be experienced like your life has been held hostage. Living a daily fear that you're constantly running out of time is an anxiety-provoking experience. Thoughts of potential death have the ability to create a sense of powerlessness, loneliness, and meaninglessness, and for some, may seriously undermine their experience of happiness or peace. Although people may develop helpful methods of managing their fears of death, such as building relationships and working towards meaningful goals, you may equally engage in maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance.

Having the impending anticipation of the threat of loss or actual loss of a loved one, can often precede the onset of agoraphobia or post-traumatic stress disorder, amongst other depressive, separation anxiety or health-related concerns. As we are all hardwired for connection, the threat of losing a significant other can trigger us to overcompensate in either an intense need for closeness or avoid the signs that might suggest an emotional connection is necessary. Nevertheless, you might find yourself overly dedicating to the care or avoidance of the thoughts of death.

3. Powerlessness and a lack of control of the situation.

Feeling like you can't change anything can be a disempowering experience, and simply accepting that there's nothing you can do about it may not be the immediate step to take when a significant other is nearing the end of life. If you're not used to experiencing the tirade of emotions that can accompany a sense of powerlessness, it can be very overwhelming when your family values the ethos of being a hero. Big feelings like terror, anger, sadness and guilt may be experienced and felt as being too much to contain.

Here are some tips to help you cope:

Observe your feelings and insecurities (and your dreams).

It can help you notice if you're overwhelmed and would require support. Perhaps explore them with someone you feel safe with.

Prioritise and focus on what's most important to you.

Don't overly stress yourself out with other unrelated issues, and obsess over doing things right. The outcome of your mum's situation is not contingent on how well you do things.

Recognise and respect your own psychological defences.

Your way of coping needs to be understood, and when you're feeling more settled, spend meaningful time with your mum, and make pleasant memories together. Your loved one's time is not up yet.

Permit yourself to have a life, and take frequent breaks because they are necessary for you to stay charged up and more able to deal with stress.

Keep supporting each other at home, and don't go at it alone.

Remember, your concerns are never a burden and burdens are lighter when shared.

If you've never received psychotherapy or any form of counselling, and if any of these issues mentioned above made sense to you, maybe seeking some form of professional assistance can alleviate some of that stress/guilt and provide some meaningful direction for you. No matter how strong we are, we all need support. Keep well.

Kind Regards,
Dr. Shawn Ee
Clinical Psychologist
Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist
The Psychology Practice





Career

Dear reader,

We all know that certain professionals such as firefighters and policemen are highly stressful professions. Teachers should perhaps be placed in the same category. Although their job is not life-threatening, it is still stressful as their workload has increased tremendously in recent times that extend beyond teaching.

Besides feeling stretched from teaching, they are constantly in the eye of the media and parents to “not make mistakes”, to be “role models” and to be like a second parent to children. This can add to their stress level and anxiety especially when a “boundary line is not drawn”.

However, regardless of profession, anxiety is experienced by many in their career, and relationships amongst others. Let's explore some ways to help ourselves to navigate through anxiety assuming we are not diagnosed with any underlying conditions with the ASH approach.

***The ASH model (Awareness - Symptoms - Help)
can be one of the helpful approaches.***



1. Awareness: What is/are the situation(s) that you find extremely stressful?

For the teacher in this scenario, her trigger seemed to be around her work and especially when parents reached out to her.

2. Symptoms: Which of the following symptoms are you experiencing?

Tick as many as you might have experienced in the last 3 to 6 months:

- ☐ Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- ☐ Fast heartbeat or heart palpitations
- ☐ Difficulties in breathing or shortness of breath
- ☐ Chest pain and tightness
- ☐ Feelings of panic attacks
- ☐ Feelings of throwing up and nauseating
- ☐ Sweaty palms or hands trembling
- ☐ Body shaking or trembling
- ☐ Inability to concentrate or focus on anything
- ☐ Constantly worrying about what others think of you or feeling judged
- ☐ Feeling dizzy
- ☐ Constant worry or fear of the future or worries of past events
- ☐ Black and white thinking
- ☐ Light headed or headaches
- ☐ Constantly nervous and restless
- ☐ Feeling overwhelmed
- ☐ Crying spells
- ☐ Constantly overthinking about work, relationships, health, money etc
- ☐ Inability to sleep or constantly waking up in the night
- ☐ Feeling tense such as muscle tightness in the face, chest and body
- ☐ Stomach cramps
- ☐ Loss of appetite or overeating
- ☐ More self-doubt, second-guessing and lack of confidence

Dr. Sunita Rai's advice

for Anonymous Teacher's story

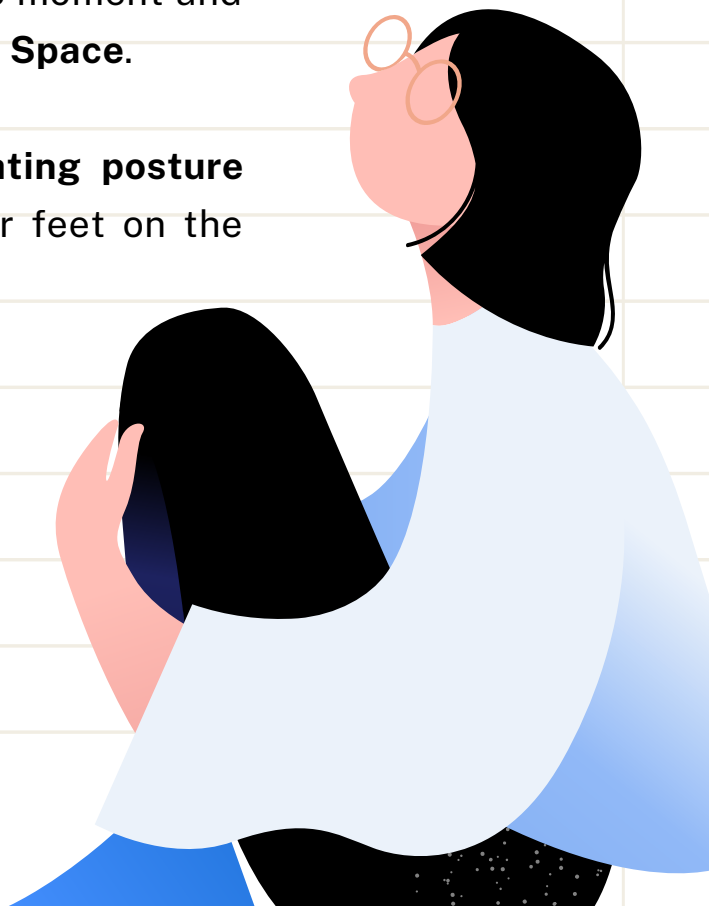
- Avoiding friends, colleagues, family members and also activities
- More distress in social situations
- Feeling frustrated/irritated/angry at work/school/home
- Inability to relax and constantly tired
- Others: _____

The teacher in this case has a few symptoms such as “trembling hands, heart palpitation, random tears” and unhelpful thoughts such as “I need to put up my best front for my students. I need to teach, and I don't have time for these feelings”. Thankfully she was aware of the symptoms and realised that she needed help.

3. Help: What can I do to help myself?

Rather than providing a whole range of ideas, I would like to share an immediate help that you can provide for yourself. It is like a fire extinguisher that you can immediately use to calm yourself at the moment and this practice is called **Coping Breathing Space**.

Adopt a comfortable standing or seating posture that keeps your body relaxed and your feet on the ground.



Close your eyes or lower your gaze. Notice the surface on which you are standing or sitting and the weight of your body on your feet.

Tune in to your body. Bring your awareness to your body from your toes to your head as if you are scanning your body.

Then ask yourself: What is my experience right now in my thoughts and feelings? Observe that these are mental events and emotions and you can notice them without engaging with them.

And then letting go of your body, redirect your full attention to your breathing. Observe the rising and falling of your belly with every in-breath and out-breath.

If it helps, place your hands on your belly and your heart area. Just focus on every breath you take. Your breath is your anchor.

When you feel ready, expand the field of your awareness to include the sense of your body as a whole, from your head down to your toes. Experiencing your entire body feeling grounded and breathing at the moment. Feel the weight and the strength of your body. When you feel ready, open your eyes and continue the day with a sense of stability.

*Whenever you feel overwhelmed,
tune in to your body and your breath.*



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