



Coping with so much closeness (when in doubt, blame it on the COVID)

- Brigitte Lavoie

We don't always choose what happens to us. I didn't choose to have cancer two years ago, and we didn't choose to have a pandemic this year. Everyone is talking about the challenges of maintaining physical distance, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that for some people, the increased closeness of sheltering in place can be an even bigger challenge than physical distancing.

Cancer gives us a chance to get closer to people we care about, but it can also increase tension with those around us. Do you feel like your home has shrunk since the beginning of the pandemic? Do you feel like you need some distance because those who are close to you are a little too close? I am a psychologist and I offer training in Solution-focused brief therapy, resilience, and post-traumatic growth. I wrote this to share some of the results of research that helped me to have more good days than bad days during a year of treatment for cancer. This knowledge helped me so much that I wanted to share it with as many people as possible.

Choose to have quality time and low-quality time

There is a lot of pressure to have quality time with our children these days. I understand why, but I would like to tell you about something that happened with my daughter that might lift some of this pressure. My daughter was 8 years old and she was about to leave for two weeks of summer camp. I was worried. I was no longer so sure it was a good idea for her to go. She was so little. I told her that morning that I wanted to spend some quality time with her before we left for camp. I don't remember the details, but I think I suggested a lot of different activities and games and she turned down every one. I was irritated, and I snapped at her: *"I don't understand what's going on in your brain!"* (This story has a happy ending, but please don't take this as a model. I knew as I was saying it that it was a bad idea.) I was surprised to hear her answer, enthusiastically, *"Do you want me to show you?"*

She went to get some paper and markers and she asked me to help her draw a brain. I drew the outline, and she started to colour in sections proportional to how much of her brain they were taking up: for parents, friends, and feeling tired (this section was bigger that day and that was why she didn't want to do anything with me

that day). There was one for fear, courage, etc. After a few sections, she ran out of ideas and asked me, *"What would you put?"* I said she should add a section for ideas, because she had really good ones. I think she found that encouraging, because she asked me to get another paper so I could draw my brain as well.

A few minutes later, while we were both concentrating on our drawings, I felt her little hand on my arm. She looked at me pensively and asked, *"Mommy, do you think this counts? Does this count for quality time?"* I still feel emotional when I think about my big girl who wanted to make sure I had a moment of quality time before she left. She was already so nervous. Did I really have to add more pressure? Did she need to draw me a picture so I would understand? Apparently, yes.

I invite you to accept that there will be more low-quality moments in the next few days, and that it's normal under the circumstances, given how big the "tired" section is in our brains. But if you really want to plan time with your children, I have a proposition. Choose a specific moment without other distractions (news, phone) and offer your undivided attention. Let them decide the activity and the role you will play. Don't take any initiative in the way it plays out and don't teach them anything. Try to be interested in the dance show that you are watching for the gazillionth time, play their video game, lose. They have so little control these days. If you do this, you can give them a little. *Does this count for quality time?* It's up to you to decide.

Choose right away what you want to say at the end of this episode

When this is all over, what do you want to be able to say about how you coped? What do you want to have been important? Less important? What do you want your children or your spouse to say about your attitude during COVID-19? What values do you wish to have placed at the forefront?

Why think so far ahead when it can be difficult to get through the day? There are several reasons. First, it will help you make sure that the people close to you are still close when this is over. If that's what you want, of course. If you want your children to say you were patient, if you want your spouse to talk about how much they appreciated

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your support and your sense of humour, you may have decisions to make right now. **What will you do or not do during COVID-19 so you can feel proud when you tell the story about it later?**

You might be tempted to paint your child's bedroom (to feel like you are taking control), but if you do, it could make it harder to be patient, supporting and fun. And is this the best time to paint- when your child's room may be all they have that is familiar right now? Maybe. Maybe not. But it's worth asking the question before you go out and buy the paint. It could also be interesting to talk about this with your children. Very few children will say, *"I'm so glad we took advantage of this time to get rid of all my stuffed animals."* You get the idea. Again, **it is completely normal and human to want to take control of your environment. However, there are others who share this environment.**

At the beginning of my sick leave, I decided that I wanted to be more present for my daughter. Nothing wrong with that, right? Hmm. Do you remember being 16? Would you have wanted your parents to be even more present? And part of this objective was also to change the way we ate. Of course, I didn't want to be controlling. But no matter what my intentions were, there was little chance it would seem like anything else. So I put a stop to that (with her help), and I told myself that I hoped to be there for her when she chose it.

She was at a party when I got the text message: *Can you come get me?* We have an agreement that if she (or a friend) is in trouble and she calls us, we won't ask questions. So I didn't. When I got there, she opened the car door and announced, *"There was alcohol. I'm okay, but the parents don't want to let my friend leave because she's too drunk. Can you talk to them?"* On the doorstep, she reached out affectionately and adjusted the scarf that was covering my bald head, like you adjust the collar of a kid who is about to give a presentation at school. These parents were tough and I was about to face them. I managed to convince them that I would take responsibility for the girl. I filled the car with teenagers, who were all more or less intoxicated. Of course, a few blocks away, her friend was sick in my car.

When everyone was home safe, my 16 year-old, who was already an expert at physical distancing, gave me a long hug and said thank you. I did too. You can imagine that I went to bed that night completely happy. Cancer had stolen many things from me, but not my ability to be there for my daughter, when she needed me- just like I wanted to be able to say at the end of that episode. You should know that I wasn't exactly mother-of-the-year in 2019. I wasn't at my best, and neither was my daughter. But at that moment, we were both at our best. She kept her promise to call me when she needed me, and I kept

mine by being there and by not asking questions. **What makes us happy is when we have a perfect match between who we want to be and who we succeed in being.** It can't happen every day. But if we take the time to decide what is really important in our relationships, it's more likely to happen, especially at times like this. Otherwise, we get bogged down in details.

Choose to believe others are doing their best and let them play a role

Have you ever imagined what animals would say if they could talk? Last year, my sister's cat always greeted me with disdain: *"Not that %?&* again. She's always hanging around here these days."* When we do this with our pets, it's funny. With our loved ones, it's probably one of the most toxic things we can do: *He thinks I'm the maid. She's doing it on purpose. He thinks I have nothing better to do. She's trying to get me mad and it's going to work.* I invite you to replace these sentences with: *He must have a good reason. It must not be easy right now. If it was, she would do it. It can't always be pleasant being with me 24/7. Is it easy? No. But it's so helpful. This isn't about accepting abuse. But most behaviours are just that, behaviours. You're not making their lives difficult on purpose and neither are they.*

You can also avoid a lot of disappointment if you are really clear when you ask for things. They can't read your mind. I invite you to identify the right role for everyone. Some people make us laugh, others know how to listen, some people are better at practical tasks. I can hear you say, *"But I don't want to bother others."* I said that too. A friend helped me realize that it wasn't very useful to think in terms of asking for help or not asking for help. She asked me a question: **"What would they want to do if they knew?"** And she added, gently and seriously, *"You always say how it makes you happy to do things for others. Can you let us be happy doing something for you?"* Touché.

I wish you moments of happiness, despite the closeness. If you don't succeed, I hope you can manage not to criticize yourself and your loved ones too much. When in doubt, blame it on the COVID!