

Mental Health, Productivity, and The New Normal:

Creating yourself amongst this process of newness is embracing all that it has to offer and challenging what was before.

As we continue to move throughout the rest of 2020 and progress through constant change, we must embrace everything that comes our way as part of a constant process.

I've been thinking on this topic for quite a while, tossing from hand to hand why there's such a need to be productive during a time of pause. When quarantine first began, I felt okay with the moment in-between everything else, and many of my friends shared this sentiment. We thought, as almost everyone did, that we'd be social distancing in our homes for maybe 2-3 weeks at most. And over a short period of time, what was to be weeks, turned into months. Now, it has been nearly half a year. As time passes, the pressure to be productive presents itself more and more. It almost feels like a pressing need to not *waste time* whereas before it felt like there wasn't enough of it. Now it is abundant, and in its abundance, it is intimidating. The pressure to be productive can put even more pressure on our mental health.

At some point during all of this time inside, you may have found yourself (like me) considering whether or not you're doing *enough* (I assure you, you are). Once, my calendar was full of everything from work to social events with friends, art events, family events, holiday celebrations and more. Then, it felt like everything got wiped away as I reconsidered how and where to pivot as COVID-19 progressed. Slowly but surely, my calendars and agendas have filled back up again as I continue to move through this change. Then, I found myself struggling to distinguish time spent working from home with the time I spent simply being in my home. I would check my work email well into the evening and first thing in the morning like the news. I worked in my bedroom or from the couch (bad idea). Creative projects became an obsession. Without the gym, I stopped exercising completely. All of this change occurred in a matter of only a few weeks.

Yet, this change, coursing through 2020, never seems to reach capacity and there is almost always something new around the corner, asking me to pivot yet again. This one constant then brings forth the presence of another: the need to constantly turn inward.

With the days blurring together, what could be acknowledged as daily or weekly accomplishments get dismissed as just being "doing something" with the day. I am turning these moments of blurring into moments of gratitude and abundance. I don't have to do everything in one day, one week, or one month. The beauty of this being a "new normal" is that I get to create what I want for my reality. I get to embrace that if I want to.

I ask myself: How can I learn to be productive in this new space and care for myself in the new ways I did not have to consider prior?

This question, and its answer, may be something for many of us to toss from hand to hand too. For me, this has come from paying close attention to what is in my space. I have made my home my sanctuary and have designated spaces in it for the various things I need to do throughout the day. I have a desk and work space and all of the things I need specifically in my work space. I have a relaxation space, full of soft fleece blankets, candles aplenty, and my favorite himalayan salt lamp. I have a workout space, albeit small, to pay attention to my physical self and the need to stretch throughout the day. I have been giving more attention to the food I choose to nourish and fuel my body. I have been giving more attention to the times I choose to put a full stop on everything that is *work*.

I have taken breaks from projects and constant creativity, because I understand I cannot actually create without them. I am at my best when I am rested. I am at my best when I acknowledge what 2020 has constantly reminded me in various ways: I am human and my time here on this planet is to be cherished in every moment and honored as well. It is not to be filled with productivity that tears me down and leaves me feeling unwell. I deserve to give attention to my health, in whatever way is needed at the time. I have the opportunity and blessing to do so now.

I want to share that it's okay if your to-do list for one day carries over from a day to a week, or from one week to the next, or even into 2021. We've confronted a lot of change and internal work throughout this year. It is okay to take *your* time and not feel held to, what are now, archaic ways of being productive. Whether you're feeling pressured to work on a project you'd put off for when you had more time or energy, a book you'd said you'd write, a show you'd said you'd watch, or workouts you'd said you'd try, remember to be patient with yourself. So much change in such a short amount of time is, in fact, difficult to deal with. It is okay to acknowledge that this is a lot. You do not have to diminish it or whatever feelings come along with it.

There will always be something else, a new project, another meeting, another thing to check off your to-do list. Try to give attention to what you have completed in 2020: you have managed to find moments with friends and family and with yourself that did not have before. Those are moments that can never be taken away. Even if the things you do aren't something from your to-do list, you are in the process of creating yourself and knowing yourself in a way you have not been able to before. This is something lovely and special that should be held close.

Our previous notions of what life looks like, what work looks like, even what *we* look like, are being challenged right now, but they are also being given the opportunity to expand. I challenge you as I challenge myself to embrace this process of creation and newness and expand who you are and who you may be. That is productivity that is truly worthwhile. As you move forward in it, you may find that it can hold so much more abundance than we initially thought.