

# Reflections from The Therapy Chair

~Dr. Janet Athey

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## HOPE DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

As I sit down to write this, I find myself feeling like the person in an old TV commercial who is literally being blown away by the quality of their audio system. The ad opens to a guy sitting quietly in a cozy chair in his den... the music starts, and he suddenly appears to be bracing against gale-force winds. He is gripping the arms of the chair tightly as his hair flails wildly behind him and his face is pulled taut. In the safety of his own home, he finds himself holding on for dear life. Although the situation is pleasurable in the commercial, life under COVID seems very scary to me. And yet I still want to help people, to be part of a healing community.

Most of what I do *best* has had to change. With my business, I've had to learn a totally new style of service delivery. I miss the intimacy a face-to-face session can provide. Therapy involves more than just talking. It includes taking in and tracking the whole of a person – how they sit, move, breathe or where they set their gaze. This allows me to gather information and interact with people on multiple levels. Creating the feeling of personal presence is most important.



In my personal life, many of the outlets I enjoy as an extrovert have been disrupted by COVID. This has not left me feeling like a happy camper. Like you, I have had to make many adjustments.

So, how am I doing? Some days I do well; other days, poorly. I don't have great ideas, just ones that work for me. I've tried a mixture of ideas derived from research in my field and then turned to applying the grit, stubbornness and determination of my Irish-German ancestors.

For me, the first task has been to adopt a general method of how to think about coping with this virus. This has involved making changes on multiple levels (my thoughts and perceptions, my feelings or reactions, and my actions) and remembering to keep the focus on the **solution** and not the **problem** (practical strategy from Al Anon).

The second most important thing has been to develop a set of skills, a toolbox if you will, and practice these new skills daily and diligently. This means doing lots of repetitions.

Think of it like a personal trainer – how many sets will you do? How many reps for each set? It is a lot like cross-training which involves rotating through a set of skills. Some days might involve behavior change, or attitude adjustment; other days may shift to more meditative or spiritual practices.

### Here's my list of coping skills:

- I take one day at a time – an oldie but a goodie. This COVID thing is too big to handle otherwise.
- I have a regular exercise regimen. Have a daily schedule and stick to it.

The COVID pandemic creates many *invisible* stressors. An excellent analysis is provided in an article published this month in Scientific American journal

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-biggest-psychological-experiment-in-history-is-running-now1/>

Key points in the article:

- The number and speed of the disruptions caused by COVID has created considerable stress. In addition, it is unlike anything we have encountered in our history. Our lives have been disrupted in multiple core areas (relationships, work challenges, health). The authors conclude that, “the toll of the disruptions and sheer numbers involved has experts warning of a *mental illness tsunami*”. “This is the first time in living history that we have had a global lockdown that’s gone on for such a long time”.
- The authors noted that COVID is generating unprecedented research on resilience because trauma can be studied in real time. They are hopeful that this could result in “a whole new science of resilience” and learning “how to help people become more resilient *before* these things happen.”

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## Directions for change:

- What makes this pandemic so difficult is the scope of its impact which is forcing us to examine own health behaviors and attitudes towards life. You can't make it unless you change both of these.
- Recent scientific findings that the virus can spread in the absence of overt symptoms is maddening. While I tend to worry about people who don't follow COVID protocol, as a psychologist, I know that they are following a basic law of human behavior: How do you know something is there if you can't see it? I'm having trouble as well, but I understand that we are experiencing a public health crisis and I have to trust and do things for the greater good.
- Educating myself on the facts of COVID has proven to be like an Alice in Wonderland adventure. We are all flooded with medical and scientific data that seems contradictory and changing daily. I will say that even the professionals seem to be confused! Yet, it is important to learn as much as I can, so I try to search what I think are reputable sources like the CDC and keep my mind and eyes open to other's opinions.
- Most importantly, we are all in this together. We can't follow the adage 'I'll do my thing, you do yours'. This virus has shown us that what one person does clearly impacts another person's life. The world is truly smaller than we think and this is forcing the issue of learning to live together on this planet while doing no harm. Although this creates its own stress, I believe it is something we can all do.

I am always looking for new ways to reach out to you.

It takes a village, so feel free to pitch in and email ideas to me.

