I want to start by disclosing that I have no degrees or training in the areas of psychology, therapy, or any other field that pertains to diagnosing or treating mental-health issues. That being said, I am sure everyone can agree that this year—which seems to have encompassed about a week and about a decade all at once—has been a challenge in just about every aspect of life on some level. The anxieties about the future, present health or financial challenges, division and unrest, injustice and hope, have left me feeling wrung out at the end of every week (if not every day). Despite being someone who loves working from home and is a self-described homebody, as the summer proceeds into fall, I have found myself pacing the confines of my house, wondering when it will feel safe or normal to step beyond my doors.

In the September issue of EON Deborah Bowman wrote about this state of anxiety, this shift in the world and our mindset toward it. She mused “What I’m wondering is how all of this is going to mark us mentally and emotionally… Will we ever feel comfortable shaking hands again? Hugging? Or will we always hesitate and pull back out of fear?” Her article hit a distinct chord with me: I’ve felt this shift myself, questioning activities and physical interactions I used to take for granted. And there’s no way of knowing when—or if—we’ll ever be able to go back. Many of us thought this would be “over” by now. And yet, here we are.

The blur between life and work has gotten fuzzier, too. Publishing is a high-stress, high-volume job at the best of times. In the last few months some of us have experienced tripling workloads as COVID-19-related research flooded our submissions systems. We’ve had to figure out how to manage this increased workload, sometimes in expedited timelines, all-the-while trying to juggle new office spaces that may be constantly interrupted by pets, the needs of family, or just slow internet as our bandwidth tries to keep up with everyone on the block downloading, streaming, or browsing. Some of us have experienced a sudden drop-off of work as the country and indeed the world ground to an initial halt. And some too have experienced furloughs, unemployment, and uncertainty about the future. And that’s just the work-related stressors.

At this point I’m summarizing what you all know already. We’ve lived through it and are still living through it. But I think it is all too easy to forget—when we’re feeling overwhelmed and anxious, angry and frustrated, and wondering why on earth we might feel this way “for no reason”—that there is every reason to be struggling right now. A recent perspective published in The New England Journal of Medicine reminded that disaster events tend to go hand-in-hand with emotional distress, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no different. A preliminary study by Case Western surveying some 600 respondents described that “90% of the sample reported experiencing one or more post-traumatic stress symptoms[1]” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated by the NIH, “it can be difficult to cope with fear and anxiety, changing daily routines, and a general sense of uncertainty.” It’s not just the fear of possibly getting ill or the fear that our loved ones could get sick, although for many of us that is a real and terrifying factor. It’s also the constantly shifting global status and response, a struggling economy, and a lack of clear direction forward in so many areas of our lives. All the usual stressors are still there, but now they have to compete. And that constant uncertainty is a powerful corrosive on mental health, whether in obvious or more-subtle ways.

I’ve been calling this general malaise of negativity in myself White Noise. Things that normally wouldn’t have made me blink an eye six months ago have gotten harder to deal with. I’ve felt as if I were on a roller coaster, experiencing emotional highs one day and then extreme emotional lows the next, seemingly without provocation. I don’t feel rested, and my mind is constantly worrying about nebulous possibilities and things I can’t control. I try to focus on what I can manage day to day, but even when I’m not thinking about it, it’s there. To
be an utter geek and quote The Matrix (1999): “Like a splinter in your mind.”

Ok, that was dramatic, but you get my point. This wasn’t the 2020 any of us expected. It’s more important than ever to be focused, driven, and organized—and yet it’s more important than ever to not beat ourselves up when we have off days or when we feel anxious, fearful, and doubtful. It’s time to recognize that we may not have the energy or desire to do the things that we usually love to do, and that’s understandable. Nevertheless, there are resources, tips, and tricks that we should be aware of and feel confident including in our wheelhouse of mental-health maintenance.

The ISMTE North America Virtual Event (#ISMTEGlobal) held August 4 to 7, 2020, included a webinar titled “When Was Your Latest Mental Health Check-Up?” In this webinar, speakers Dr. James Galipeau, Megan McCarty, and Julie Edwards discussed methods that they had taken, individually and in their workplaces, to encourage mental-health maintenance, wellness, and practical methods of employing wellness philosophies across the work-life barrier. Speaker Julie Edwards reminded that self-care (the practice of taking an active role in protecting one’s own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress) is a responsibility, not an indulgence. Speaker Megan McCarty shared her experience at J&J Editorial, LLC, of establishing a Health and Wellness Committee in the workplace, which helped employees feel engaged and supported. Speaker Dr. James Galipeau described the concept of Blended Working as a means of breaking down the work-life balance into a flexible flow between job and life. This webinar was a good reminder that it’s not a failing or an extravagance to take care of our mental health—it’s a necessity. Mental health is becoming a larger topic of open discussion in the workplace, and often our employers can (if they don’t already) provide additional support and engagement. It was a good reminder also that, as the industry evolves and changes, throwing up new challenges, it can also provide new opportunities, such as flexible work hours and locations.

I want to cap this all off by saying that if you are experiencing extreme anxiety and depression, please reach out—to your doctor, your church, your family and friends, a colleague. The CDC has an entire page dedicated to coping with stress, including crisis helplines and informational resources. Many employers have assets for their employees to help manage mental health in themselves or their children (sometimes quarterly assistance newsletters are part of an insurance program; reach out to your HR coordinator to see if one is available or might be requested). There are also many online resources dedicated to helping individuals with mental-health conditions cope during this difficult time. The University of Michigan Health has put together a list of practical tips and online support, as well as a free online toolkit, and there are many others available.

In the meantime, here are some general tips and tricks you could incorporate into your day. Give some a try, and remember to try new things! You never know what exactly will cut through the White Noise.

Managing Work Stress:

- Try reorganizing the way you manage your to-do list. Have you ever tried sticky notes? Digital calendar reminders? Perhaps now is the time to try journaling or keeping a physical planner. Play to your strengths, but also switch it up if there’s an organization technique you haven’t tried (even if you think you might not like it). For example, I’m a hand-written list maker. But I’ve also come to love calendar reminders in my work email—if you don’t have to think about a task for two or three weeks, put it on the calendar and take it off your mental plate. This reduces the clutter of your day-to-day priorities. You can’t think about everything you need to do each month in a single day.
- Talk to your manager about work priorities. What needs to get done today, or this week, or this month? Make sure that you are exerting your time on primary tasks. If something can wait a week or a month, it’s good to know so that you don’t spend time finishing that first, and then get pinched by a deadline that was more essential. Perhaps your workload can be rebalanced if one of your colleagues has less to do during this time than normal. Or maybe something you’ve been doing all this time isn’t relevant anymore and can be retired. Now is the time to reassess.
- Think about what changes might make your day easier. Sometimes these changes can be helpful not only to you, but to your colleagues as well—and sometimes these changes can even positively impact your authors or reviewers. What are the pressure points in your workflow system? How can you ease them?
- TAKE TIME OFF! It might not be the vacation you hoped for, but time away from the computer screen, off the phone, and unplugged from work is essential for recharging your ability to cope and stay focused. A half day, a long weekend, or a longer break can all have their benefits. Try going on a walk, a hike, or a picnic. And don’t check your email while you do. Never underestimate the power of the Staycation.
Managing Overall Stress:

- Get fresh air and exercise. Whether running, walking, gardening, taking the dog out, hiking with a friend or family member, biking, or whatever your physical/geographical/financial ability allows, getting outside in the sun and getting your heart rate up are proven methods to release endorphins and improve mental health.
- Talk it out: Discuss the situation with friends and family members, even your colleagues. Let them know if you need advice or just a listening ear.
- Do the things that make you happy. Make time for hobbies and activities that help you relax or make you feel good. But also be honest with yourself. Perhaps sewing or knitting has seemed too difficult recently; maybe picking up your guitar or sitting down at the piano has felt like a burden. Whatever your hobby is, try getting back to it—but don’t force yourself if you’re struggling. Anxiety can make even the happiest activity feel like an effort. It might be time to try something new, to trick your brain back into a healthy form of stress management.
- Stay hydrated. There are phone apps that you can download to give you reminders to drink water. For that matter, set a timer to get up and stretch, or to remind you to sit up straight. Healthy habits are hard to manage, and it’s no failing to use technology to our advantage.

Disclosure Statement
The author has no relationships or conflicts to disclose.

References:
Call for Volunteers

Volunteers Needed for Strategic Plan Implementation

The following ISMTE committees are in need of volunteers in 2021:
Sponsorship Committee
Website Committee
Webinar Committee
Marketing and Social Media Committee
Asia Pacific Conference Committee

If you are interested in sharing your time and talent with ISMTE please sign up via the ISMTE Volunteer Form

The ISMTE Board of Directors are executing a three-year strategic planning process that involves an examination of all current programs, committees, goals, and objectives. As we wrap up Year One of the strategic plan implementation process and head into Year Two, we invite you to consider becoming more active as a volunteer of ISMTE. A broad range of opportunities with varying requirements of time and expertise are available. This enhanced level of engagement provides more opportunities to create resources that benefit the profession, enhances opportunities for interaction with other editorial office professionals, and provides an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

Medical Editors Short Course

Where: Oxford
When: November 11-13, 2020
https://www.pspconsulting.org/medical-editors/

Training journal editors for over 20 years, this workshop is designed to help editors ensure their journals achieve the maximum impact with the best research. The programme looks at the world of publishing, attracting (and keeping) authors, ensuring quality, and increasing visibility and readership. Run with only 25 participants, the course is highly interactive and allows editors to discover solutions for their own journals.

The course is endorsed by the BMJ, Wiley, and the European Association of Science Editors.