

Isolation forces inward reflection

by MARK PAVILONS

We casually toss around phrases like "taking stock" and "glancing inward," or even "taking time to reflect."

These can be nasty things, especially when they're forced.

As isolation stretched out seven, eight, nine weeks, our nerves frayed and our patience has been tested. We've likely been frustrated to say the least.

We know exactly what the culprit is and yet this doesn't help our mental state one iota. Almost everyone would admit to being stretched to the limit in recent weeks, like a modern-day Gumby.

Polls and surveys all point to skyrocketing stress levels and daily attacks on our mental health and well being.

I think aside from the physical isolation, there's one root cause of our inner turmoil. That's being forced to look into ourselves and examine our lives like never before.

And this may have produced some unsettling conclusions.

It's not easy to look deep, opening all those locked doors inside our hearts and minds. Who knows what you'll find?

I try not to dwell on the fact I lost both my parents and my sister. When I do think of them, I try to remember the brighter moments. But I don't find prolonged grieving or sadness very productive, so I simply push these thoughts aside.

My youngest often wonders why I don't talk about them more often. My parents had tough lives, during and after the war. They started their new lives here simply and worked hard to achieve a level of sustainability. Their deaths were painful ordeals.

But this past Mother's Day, late a night after a couple of stiff drinks, I posted an emotional note on social media, indicating I missed my mom every day.

Wow. Is that how I really feel? All this time, have I just been keeping this buried inside and putting on a brave face?

My kids have been quite agitated at times and studies show that children and youth are more susceptible to mental health challenges. While we're dealing with our own woes, we forget that our kids aren't as happy-go-lucky as we think. They, too, sink and get stuck in some dark places.

Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years are three times more likely to have a substance use problem than people over the age of 24. Roughly 24% of deaths in 15- to 24-year-olds in Canada are due to suicide (Open Minds, Healthy Minds, 2011).

COVID-19 has had an adverse effect on the lives of our most vulnerable youth. We are witnessing increased stress, anxiety and depression in young people. Many more youth are reaching out to helplines and counselling agencies across the country and are worried about what the future holds in store for them.

We've been talking to our kids more and have managed to get them to open up a bit. Boy, I never imagined that young people today carry the weight of the world on their shoulders.

When I was in my late teens and early 20s, all we thought about was hitting the drive-in, getting a case a beer for the weekend and

just chilling. We never worried about the world economy, climate change, or questionable choices for president.

I have found a certain amount of peace during this COVID-19 forced solitude. I don't miss the traffic congestion at all and I have found my short trips around town quite enjoyable. I don't even mind the lineups!

I may miss going out to dinner, the movies and chats with my hair stylist, but I've come to realize that I can live without a lot of these things. We can pare down our lives substantially and still live normally, sharing family dinners, backyard barbecues, cards, movie nights and long walks.

Granted, it's not very exciting, even mundane. But isn't that okay? Isn't simplicity the key?

I remember, when it came time to choose a career, I wanted something that was different every day and not monotonous in any way. That's why I chose journalism - keeping up with current events, constantly changing, meeting new people all the time.

Even during these times, the news of the day never sleeps. There's always something new going on. But there are more lull periods and quiet times.

While I've always enjoyed me time, I don't always like the company I keep. My wife says I love my own company, but trust me, there's not a lot of joy inside this thick skull.

In this extended period of down time, I try to find new ways to keep busy and engaged, active and mentally sharp.

I enjoy online window shopping, but I'm restrained by my inherent cheapness.

My wife frowns upon what she calls unnecessary expenditures, but she uses much more colourful descriptions. I do shop around, always in search of a deal and I do my research and compare prices and sources.

I did make one rather unique purchase recently - a 3,000-year-old sword blade from a European dealer. It was found in Uzbekistan circa 1,200 B.C. I called upon a local craftsman to create a wood handle (of prehistoric wood from the Marsh) to complement this specimen, which will be proudly displayed (and handled regularly by yours truly). Thank you George Burt!

While I can now wave around my new plaything in my PJs, life outside remains in limbo.

Sure, things are slowly creeping toward a new reality. But I worry that the cancellation of most summer attractions, concerts, amusement parks, maybe even beaches, may drive us all mad in the coming months.

I don't have any answers or quick fixes. The only thing I can suggest is - sharing is caring? when it comes to family.

We'll never get another opportunity like this to really open up to one another and explore our inner selves.

Take advantage of it!