

On your mark, get set, stumble!

by Mark Pavilons

We've been presented with some unusual and often difficult challenges lately.

It has meant many of us have had to alter our behaviour, habits, routines and even way of thinking.

We've had to adapt, to modify, to change. Easy for some, not so effortless for some of us 'older' people.

While some things have been revised, a few others have not. Our stress levels have actually increased. And let's not forget, we're still part of this massive maze, a daily grind waging the battle of life.

In many respects, and in light of the pandemic, the term 'survival of the fittest' has unfortunately taken on new meaning.

I am still keenly aware of the 'rat race' I'm in. And I hate it.

Originally coined in 1945, 'rat race' often refers to excessive or competitive work. It also points to those pesky rodents in a maze, expending a lot of effort running around, ultimately achieving nothing meaningful.

Do you feel like that these days?

Our 'track' may have become a bit shorter, but this race continues, albeit in slightly altered form.

It's been said that competition brings out the best, and the worst, in people. It can give you focus and energy.

But the type of 'competition' we've been lured into offers no prize or checkered flag.

We're all involved in a competitive jaunt, a climb up the ladder. I envision the image of crabs in a bucket, trying to claw their way out, dragging their friends down.

Day in and day out we face challenges, leap over the obstacles, or fall flat on our face as our shin scrapes the hurdle. We get up, brush ourselves off, grimace a bit from the pain, and dash off.

Every day we have goals. We may not clearly see just where the finish line is but that's our destination. We know we have to make lane changes, sprint ahead and keep energy in reserve for the final lap. Sometimes we're the anchor, other times we're the finisher.

From the time we get up in the morning and switch on our mental engines, we're primed and ready to take on the world. But it's always a horse race, to see who inches ahead, who remains in a close second and who is taking up the rear of the pack.

At work, in the checkout line, at the gas pump or in traffic, we need to be better than the next guy. We need to get out in front, be superior, so we can puff out our chests with pride.

Hence the similarities to being in the giant societal hamster wheel.

We've created a level of society that's unseen, and untouchable, but we all know it's there. It's as real as walking into a plate glass window.

It even infiltrates our speech, our interactions with co-workers and our family discussions.

In our house, we have some strong heads, equally strong opinions, and some rather loud vocal chords.

We all chime in, often all at once, causing quite a stir. We all want to be right, to win the argument, to make a point.

Experts say this need stems from insecurity, a lack of self-esteem and a preoccupation on how we're viewed if we're wrong. It's also a defence mechanism, but most agree it can be destructive and unhealthy.

As far as 'winning' goes, it likely stems from our biped ancestors, who had to outsmart critters like tigers and bears to survive.

As we evolved, we began to take pleasure in winning, thanks to dopamine. Winning feels good.

As intelligent creatures, we also learn and apply successful strategies to future 'battles'.

This is also true of losing where we try to prevent making future mistakes.

Or, as someone wrote 'sometimes life puts you in the same situation again to see if you're still a dumbass.'

Today, we are surrounded by it. Competition 'winning and losing' is predominant in politics, sports, gambling, lotteries, even finding bargains on retail shelves. Beating another car at an intersection or being first in line when stores open on Boxing Day. This idea of being 'first' is part of who we are.

Like anything in life, moderation is the key. We have to look at competition carefully, and perhaps see it as another form of 'cooperation'.

But, if you've seen parents in the stands at a hockey game, the messages we give our kids is still clear 'winning at all costs.'

I don't know if we'll ever be free from this concept, or this inherent urge.

How do we change, or just how do we jump off the moving hamster wheel without injuring ourselves? I'm not sure.

I think a lot depends on our attitude. Maybe we can start by 'toning it down a bit'.

We can all enjoy competition and winning, but maybe we can be more humble about and a little less in your face.

The rat race is a long one, indeed. It may last our entire lives.

As many have pointed out, it's not winning, it's the journey and life is a marathon, not a sprint.

But time flies, you know. In a blink of an eye, my children have gone from screaming monsters in the back seat of the mini-van to young adults, capable of venturing out on their own.

There's no question they learned from their parents and yes, maybe picked up some bad habits. I hope I taught them some decent morals and have been a good example.

But yes, I still have my race jersey on and my running shoes are tattered, with a toe poking out here and there. My aches pains prevent me from clearing all of those hurdles, but I can still keep up with the pack.

My wit, humour and charm keep me in the race, and my ability to hurl barbs can distract my fellow competitors. I'm a writer, not a kick-boxer.

As an 'old dog' I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. I still have plenty of advice to share.

My few gray hairs tell me the finish line is not far off. My marathon is more than half over.

As long as there are friends and family at the sidelines, ready with a cold drink, I think I'll be okay.