

Living on Play in a World on Pause

Three years have passed since the onslaught of the novel coronavirus pandemic, a period in modern history that would change our lives in ways more than one.

While hysterical politicians donning masks held monthly press conferences and ordered lockdowns where any string of infections dared to pop up, businesses, tourism, and everything else fell apart. As the surreality of utter chaos unfolded, we, the youth, sat imprisoned in our homes, knowing we had yet to face the world that awaited us outside the door. Our fears grew larger with the terrifying footage of people lying sick in hospital beds or the apocalyptic sight of bodies lying around in hospital corridors.

Like everything else, schools and the educational system, too, fell to the incursion of time and we were forced to learn within the confines of our houses. Lo and behold, the alternative learning system was born. Those fortunate enough to have data and a good spot to grab cellular signal or the often laggy Wi-Fi were given online classes, while students who did not have such resources were given papers chock-full of information most of them had no clue how to approach.

I would have ideally attended my classes at home, but I spent most of my online learning under the guise of my parents who worked in a small office, tending to an agricultural business owned by my grandmother. For lack of a better explanation, you could say my grandmother was the CEO—which she was, being the sole proprietor of the business—and my mother was the SEO. I suppose my father shared my mother's title. In reality, they never really decided to bear any titles.

During my time at the office, I learned a lot of things. For starters, while roaming the gardens, I stumbled upon a green vine that boasted beautiful purplish-blue flowers. I plucked a flower off the vine and sprinted to the office. And just as quickly as I had entered, I shoved one

of the flowers in my mother's face, as if to declare, "I have made a grand revelation in the field of botany!" As she carefully studied a book detailing the earth's flora, my mother told me to drop the flower into a cup of steaming hot water, and I obeyed. As it floated atop the water, the flower shriveled as the water took on a bright blue hue. Fascinated, I asked my mother if I could drink the unremarkable concoction, to which she replied, "*Pwede naman, 'nak,*" with a tone I can only describe as a mix of sarcasm and insistence. So I did. I had learned that the addition of a mere flower made no difference to the taste of water, and I, an avid tea drinker, was left disappointed.

I also learned that despite the catastrophic nature of the pandemic, there were changes that could be made and changes that we had no choice but to adapt to. Take, for example, severe isolation. The pandemic, then, was some sort of a breather for all of us—an ironic distinction given the coronavirus' common symptom of affecting the function of the respiratory system, giving ailing patients difficult time breathing. During the last few months of the pandemic, I started a bit of a fitness regimen. I had not been the fittest child for a lot of my life, and I decided that it was time to change that. It took a few setbacks caused by each time my "love handles" returned, but after months of dedication and consistency, I cut down a significant amount of weight. It was the best decision I have ever made, and I am proud of what I have so far achieved.

You may have said either through a mutter or the small voice in your head, "Good for you, but what does your weight loss have to do with the pandemic?" To put it simply, trying to maintain your physical health is something that, for the most part, only takes determination and consistency. These can all be easily uplifted by watching those trending "grindset" edits flourishing on YouTube or Tiktok. Or maybe you fancy listening to the *phonk* accompanying those edits, profane as that genre of music often comes. Maintaining the aesthetic of a fit body is,

at best, something we can simply choose to commit to whenever we have the time—something the pandemic gave us a lot of.

To nurture the mind, however, amidst a time we were stripped of socialization and the validation that comes from it, and to some, the comforts of a leisurely and expensive vacation getaway, is a completely different scenario that demands an alternative solution.

A survey conducted in Luzon in 2020—the same year the novel coronavirus reached an unprecedented spike in morbidity for the first time—revealed that out of 1,879 completed surveys, youth aged 12-21 years old and students, among other subgroups, were associated with greater risks for psychological impacts of stress, anxiety, and depression. This was only mitigated by timely and accurate health information and the perception of good health status as well as confidence in healthcare providers. The rampant misinformation and the stigma around the healthcare community at the height of the pandemic probably didn't help.

I wondered, “How much could those percentages have changed had they included the unaccounted general population? How much higher could they have been had they conducted the study at the climax of the pandemic?”

As I was writing this, I decided to look up which month the commemoration of “Mental Health Awareness Month” fell under, and I received the answer to my prompt on short notice. It was October, the same month I was born. Under the impression that my day of birth had something to do with mental health workshops, I thought, “Surely I must remember an event dedicated to mental health.” I pondered, albeit without the longest or the hardest effort. But no deepness of thought would suffice as I eventually came to terms with the fact that I failed to think of a single event dedicated to mental health that I would have witnessed or caught wind of. This, to me, reflects a problem in the state of affairs as we emerge from a pandemic that has

wrecked households and livelihoods, taken lives and jobs, and most importantly, challenged both the minds and spirits of many.

I never understood what depression or anxiety was like as I had never experienced these things myself. But like any other student, I surely knew what stress was like, and the lack of organizations and identities actively promoting awareness of mental health amid one of the most chaotic times in modern history was, to me, a concern. That or I held onto the instinct to lean towards unrealistically ambitious solutions.

A sound mind is just as, if not more, important than a healthy body. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention state that “depression increases the risk for many types of physical health problems, particularly long-lasting conditions like diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.” So if not many people are promoting mental health, what can we do if we or those around us are afflicted by the repugnant assault of stress and depression?

I am aware that it doesn't sound like the most helpful activity, but a simple 30-minute stroll around your neighborhood or hike on the local trail is an effective way to boost your mood and improve your health, both mentally and physically. *I see that as an absolute win!* Even then, I suppose not everyone lives in the safest neck of the woods. Worry not, for even the smallest activities add up. I would even go so far as to say that they are major contributors to healthy living. You could drink some tea, listen to music, or continue that one book collecting dust on your shelf. I am certain that I could benefit from the latter, as I have yet to complete George Orwell's acclaimed dystopian novel, *1984*, or begin my literary adventure with Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

Despite the occasional confrontation with the vitriolic raging madman embracing his inner “keyboard warrior”—an experience I have had my fair share of—society can do its part as

well. Searching for them is not easy, but finding people who are truly willing to support you on your journey is vital because they can serve as your support network in your darkest hours. After all, we live in an age fueled by interactions both in the real world and on social media, where almost every available service is right at our fingertips, from online forums and licensed therapists to easily accessible consultations that are set up with a few clicks. But if you don't fit in with the social type, do not fret, for you can find comfort in your family and your closest, most trusted circle of friends.

If you happen to be on the opposite side of the issue, why not lend a helping hand? Many counseling clinics and nonprofit organizations are open to accepting volunteers for their programs. As social creatures, we can empower each other through mutual support, and the wondrous medium of communication, the internet, makes this more accessible than ever. And all we have to do is reach out.

Never mind this essay's verbosity. All I wish to say is we must never turn a blind eye to our mental well-being, for mental health is complex and dependent on our choices, much like the arduous journey we call life.

As many are only just beginning to crawl out of the wreckage, we may find ourselves high above them. Should we choose to stay and help those that cannot help themselves or walk away from the wreckage and continue where we left off is a decision for you and me to make in our own time. For now, we must learn to live on play while much of the world remains on pause, and what better way to start than with our state of mind?