

Anchoring ourselves

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Feeling adrift

In Dutch naval history, the anchor has long been the symbol of hope. As a symbol of stability, the anchor's purpose is clear: to keep us from drifting off. But what about the metaphorical concept of anchors? How are we ensuring that, as international educators, we are securely anchored during a time of global uncertainty?

Over the past few months, the interest in school wellbeing programmes has soared as, across the world, educational institutes are responding to Covid-19 whilst anxiety and uncertainty seeps into the everyday culture of our schools. Staff, students and parents face hardships as people fall ill, lose their jobs or deal with stressful family situations "back home". A compounding issue is that whilst working internationally brings great reward on many levels, it includes additional risk. In most international schools, there is no government funding when it comes to keeping a school running. The financial self-sufficiency is therefore dependent on school fees which is an added stress for all members of a school community.

For international families in particular, the future can feel fraught. Towards the end of last academic year the fixed endpoint of any school - its exams - were disorganised on a global level. No wonder we feel adrift in these times. Unmoored. Which brings me to this article's topic: attaching ourselves to our anchors to regain a sense of stability and perspective. Like a well-prepared captain, someone working in the international field must make sure that their ship can survive the storm.

As Doug Ota explains in his book *Safe Passage* on international mobility and the impact on schools (Ota, 2014), an international family is as strong as its weakest link. By extension, the same

goes for an international school's community. As educators we owe it to ourselves and our community to take stock of where we are and check our lines are secure.

Can we channel stress into growth?

Martin Seligman is known as the founder of Positive Psychology. This is a field of psychology that seeks to reframe how we look at mental health in a curative sense. In his book *Flourish* (Seligman, 2011) he explores the concept of "post traumatic stress" versus "post traumatic growth".

I wonder, if we take "post traumatic" out of the equation and we put stress against growth, the question of our current predicament shifts. The question changes from "How can I deal with the stress of this global pandemic?" to: "How could I grow from it?"

Growth implies more than "just" coping. It provides a sense of direction and improvement. It is a hopeful notion for us all in these uncertain and stressful times.

Stress and anxiety are related, but different. Where stress is a response to an external event, anxiety comes from the internal mechanisms in how a person responds to stress. There is a lot of stress around the future (worry, fear, concern). Children's behaviour can be more erratic. Terse emails from a teacher or parent become more frequent. A staff meeting is held at full speed with a lack of clarity or time for reflection. All our higher brain functions become affected when stress, anxiety and frustration are at play. With our students this can present with aggressive behaviour - or the opposite, where students are more withdrawn or inwardly-controlling, such as food-related difficulties (Greer, 2020).

Uncertainty will remain. The global economy is something we can't influence, as much as we might want to. Job security, income, housing... no amount of self-reflection or mindful moments will impact these factors beyond our control. But by taking stock of what we can control - our attachments towards each other - we can begin to take ownership of our mental wellbeing and exert positive influence on it.

It'll all make sense when we look back

Whilst we might want to withdraw and hide, we need to connect to our anchors. Trust in them and feel that they will see us through. A famous Steve Jobs quote from his Stanford Commencement address in 2005 springs to mind: "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future." (JoshuaG, 2006) In his address, Jobs highlights that when you're in the middle of something and making choices, you can't always see the path. It's after, when we reflect on the choices we've made and see where we are that it will all make sense. Until then, you need to trust that your choices, these dots, connect.

Connect with yourself first

I would advocate that in this time we look towards creating a framework of support within our community where we can. We can't control what happens to us, but we can control our own voice and our way of dealing with this stress.

Creating stable anchors is important for our wellbeing. By being connected to people and routines we ensure we are in the best possible place to contribute to our community.

Everyone is different and it's important to look at a framework of activities to help get ourselves to a place where we are calm, open and able to connect with the people who matter in our lives. In our schools we carry a collective responsibility for each other. In these times, if you see someone

who shows heightened stress levels and is losing connection, see if you can reach out and offer a helping hand.

To build and maintain strong connections, we need to get ourselves to a place where we're ready to connect to them. This means that looking after ourselves comes first.

Let's begin with self-talk, or "that voice in our head which gives us these thoughts". It's important to check in with ourselves and to recognising what that voice does and how we can let these thoughts go. As mindfulness teaches us, we are not our thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 2012) and creating space between our thoughts and ourselves helps us to recognise this. There are many excellent websites and resources available to start your journey on mindful meditation which can be a benefit to finding that little bit of perspective. It's an important process to recognise that we aren't in control of these thoughts and that they come and go, but that we can regain our sense of self by choosing how to deal with them.

Another useful tool is journalling. There are many great apps out there these days that offer guided journalling exercises and the self-help section of any bookstore has a range of books filled with journalling prompts. These might be beneficial, but all you need is an empty page in front of you (digital or analog) and fifteen minutes to pen down your thoughts. This type of journalling, known as "stream of conscience" can be a liberating experience if you don't overthink it, but write it down. Until you have nothing left to write.

If you are the introspective kind, a journalling practice can help you confront paradigms about your worldview and bring you closer to an authentic sense of self. In her book *Getting Real*, author Susan Campbell gives a set of questions to help you reflect on your behaviour (Campbell, 2010).

Our brains are creatures of habit. Another way to lower stress is to find solid routines that you can rely on. This can be an evening walk, a morning jog, a daily cup of tea or chat to a colleague. . . anything you can do to keep a recognisable pattern to

your day is beneficial. If you manage to slot in daily walks, the more you can include nature (be it a park, a beach, a range of potted plants), the better you will feel about it. Whilst we've become good at building cities around us, our brains do enjoy that connection to nature to help calm our nerves.

Within the field of Positive Psychology something that's at the heart of this movement is a concept called "character strengths". These twenty-four positive strengths (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019) are tied to six virtues and include strengths such as "appreciation of beauty" or "forgiveness". Their positive attributes tie them together into a powerful tool to help reframe your situation. On a difficult day, you can ask yourself which of your strengths you could utilise to change your perspective on the situation.

Connect to your anchors

Firstly I would like to focus on the people closest to us, our family and close circle of friends. These people fulfil a crucial role in our life as part of our anchoring. Many of us are facing the hardships of being far away from our families, with no opportunity to travel. Creating as many opportunities to connect online is worth it. Is it the same as giving a hug? No, but as we all experienced over the past few months, any connection is better than no connection.

In the workplace, either working from home or socially distanced at school, make a deliberate time to meet colleagues and discuss their wellbeing. A collective "checking in" moment is powerful, and acknowledging the bizarre current situation can be a relief for many.

For your anchors to help, don't worry if they're long-term, like family and lifelong friends, or not. Fostering short, high-quality interactions, shows lasting benefits (Cummings, 2020) when you use multiple ways to connect. The three main ingredients that Cummings describes are trust, collaboration and influence. The days of fostering strong connections through hierarchy in an organisation are behind us, connect with others to gain influence

and strengthen your professional relationships. In all of your interactions, start with positive intent, be open and vulnerable, pay attention the other and listen to show interest and learn something new. This powerful and simple approach will help bring you to an anchored place as you find meaningful connections with your colleagues.

Will these things have an impact?

There is evidence into the effectiveness of web-based interventions (Woodworth et al., 2017) which is hopeful and provides a reason to say that, yes, these things we do in the virtual space will have a positive impact on wellbeing.

The body of research that will be collected over the next few years, as the impact of Covid-19 will be explored will be telling. I don't believe that, right now, enough hard evidence exists to say if an online "video quiz night" provides the same rich, deep connections that an in-person one does. That's the challenge we face as international schools: we have to act now to do the best we can. And see what dots can be connected when we look back at this time and reflect on where we ended up. Time to drop anchor and begin connecting.

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