How to cope with pandemic fatigue by imagining metaphors

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have dramatic impacts on mobility, work routines, social interactions and psychological distress. Although no longer novel, the pandemic is still causing an overall

disruption of normality and challenging our ability to make sense of the world around us.

The [World Health Organization](#) has been drawing attention to [pandemic fatigue](#), a natural response to a prolonged [public health crisis](#). Pandemic fatigue involves decreasing motivation to follow health-related directives, including engaging in pandemic protective actions like eating well, exercising and decreasing tobacco or alcohol consumption.

All levels of public health are attempting to [explain](#), [prevent](#) and [cope with](#) this phenomenon.

Making sense

In our research on how people make sense of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, we came to appreciate the power of metaphors as a coping tool.

A [metaphor](#) is a figure of speech in which one kind of object or idea is used to understand or explain another by implying likeness or analogy. By combining and reorganizing abstract and concrete features, metaphors influence thought processes, attitudes, beliefs and actions. They help us make sense of situations and stimulate new actions.

For example, by referring to the current growth of COVID-19 cases as the "third wave of the pandemic," we call upon understandings of "waves" to facilitate understanding of the abstract and complex situation of the spread of the virus.

Metaphors make our experiences and desire tangible and allow us to see assumptions, behaviors and resources that are likely to support our goals and desires. As an intervention strategy, metaphors can help us gain insights into our situations.

Metaphors are commonly used [in research](#), [coaching](#) and [therapeutic practice](#) to help individuals make sense of situations and find new ways of dealing with problems.

Coaching helps people achieve specific personal or professional goals under the guidance of a trained professional. We drew on coaching principles used in [Clean Language](#) and [Integral Coaching](#) to help [international students](#) and immigrants to cope with challenges in their lives during the first wave of the pandemic. We found that imaginative metaphors helped them find tangible ways to identify and achieve their goals and they felt more empowered through the process.

We propose that with a bit of imagination, anyone can use metaphors to cope with pandemic fatigue and find better ways to deal with these challenging times by following four simple steps.

Imagining metaphors

Step 1: Identify a goal or desire under your control.

The goal should describe what you want in positive terms. Ask yourself: What would I like to have happen? It should be something that has not yet happened, contains a desire or need and does not include any reference to the problem.

Let's take the example of Tim, one of the participants in our research, who was [struggling to feel connected](#) with his loved ones due to travel and social distance restrictions. Tim found virtual connections unsatisfactory and felt lonely. As he reflected on what was causing him pain, he identified the goal "to be better able to find satisfaction in virtual connections."

Step 2: Imagine a metaphor that depicts how you can achieve that goal.

Ask yourself: And that is like what? Imagine a metaphor that represents the [goal](#) when achieved. It helps to think of a noun and then elaborate on the characteristics of that noun through adjectives.

Tim imagined a far-reaching satellite as a way to articulate a connection that is strong and reliable and happens at a long distance.

Step 3: Fully develop the metaphor by focusing on details to gain a feel for the metaphor.

Ask yourself, "Is there anything else about **this metaphor that I'm using**?"

Tim continued to imagine his satellite and answering the question: "And is there anything else about this far-reaching satellite?" multiple times. Through this process, he explored how the satellite worked to have far-reaching connections. Through exploration, elaboration and articulation, Tim realized that what was important to him was to read the connection signals. He needed to be better at noticing when a connection was happening or when others were trying to connect with him from a distance.

Step 4: Identify what needs to happen for the metaphor to become your new reality.

[Successful goals](#) need to be broken down into small achievable steps to visualize and articulate an action or outcome to be fulfilled. Ask yourself: What needs to happen? And can that happen? Repeat those

questions until what needs to happen is clear and achievable.

Tim decided to make a few [phone calls](#) to people he missed and made a plan to check in with his girlfriend every morning.

This four-step process can be repeated for various goals and is a useful practice to maintain during the pandemic and the long process of recovery ahead. Imaginative metaphors are a powerful tool to keep in the mix of self-care—they help create a renewed sense of empowerment and a change in mindset to deal with [pandemic](#) fatigue.

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