

My Couch, My Walls, My Hair

What to Do (and Not to Do!) for your Mental Health During a Pandemic

Zenaida Garcia

My Work and My Wacky Moments

Part of my job is to be well and to help others find wellness. But sometimes we all lose the sunlit path. We find ourselves wandering into darkness. In this essay, I'm going to take you on my journey into the darkness of depression and show you how I found my way back to the path.

Like many Americans, before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, I was more or less fine. Then, things changed. Because of Covid-19, the city bus became a scary place; a stranger coughing nearby induced anxiety. At work, I was no longer able to see my clients except through Zoom. I found myself isolated. I hit a low.

I work as a Peer Recovery Specialist for a mental health center. As part of my job, I listen to people and support them in their recovery. I let them know that they're not alone. I help them see there is a better life out there. Helping them helps me, too. It gives my life purpose.

But sometimes my clients aren't ready to share their innermost secrets with me until I share some of my own. I know how embarrassing it can be to do things that we're not proud of. Strange times, such as the one we're in right now, bring out strange feelings. Here are some of my wackiest pandemic moments. I share them with you here so you can see you are not alone. You don't have to throw away your furniture, as I did; you don't have to repaint your entire apartment, as I did; you don't have to cut off all your hair, as I did. You can learn from my failed attempts to feel better, as well as from my successes.



Furniture / Paint / Hair

I live in a small apartment. When I moved in, my son bought me a beautiful, comfortable, beige couch. I loved it. So many beautiful memories happened on that couch. My grandson's face used to light up when he jumped on it—he thought he was Superman! I used to catch him and tickle him and hug him. I taught him how to read on that couch. And I told him bedtime stories on that couch until he fell asleep, getting drool on my beautiful upholstery!

But the pandemic was making me stir-crazy! On a whim, I decided to throw away my couch. When the quarantine took effect, I was stuck inside with that raggedy thing for what seemed like decades. Suddenly, its suede felt irritating. I noticed stains that I'd not seen before. I swear it smelled like my grandson's drool. And it took up so much space! I know now, I was suffering from what I would call "pandemic-induced claustrophobia." I. Needed. It. Out. So I posted on Facebook Marketplace "Free Couch!"—and it didn't take long for someone to claim it. The couch was gone, but you know what wasn't gone? My anxiety. I still felt that the walls were closing in on me.

Speaking of the walls, the color started irritating me. I convinced myself that the bone white hue was responsible for my crashing serotonin levels. So I went to Ace Hardware and picked up a couple gallons of bright white paint. And, without the landlord's consent, I did my best to cover up that bone-chilling color. But what it didn't cover up was my depression. Even as the

paint fumes filled my nostrils, I still felt irritated, anxious, and depressed. I almost wanted to start pulling my hair out.

But instead of pulling out my hair, I Face-timed my daughter, and I told her, “Kenia, I’m going to cut my hair, and I want you to ‘be with me’ on this journey.” She said, “Mommy, are you sure

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you want to do this?” Nothing could stop me. I sat on the bathroom floor and put the phone on top of the toilet seat, so that my daughter was on my level. With the aid of two mirrors, I buzzed

and chopped away, until all my curls were on the bathroom floor. When it was over, I looked into the mirror. I did not like what I saw.

After my daughter hung up, I sat on the cold tiles, crying. Nothing I tried had worked. It turns out you can’t throw away, cover up, or chop off the bad feelings you are having. None of these strategies helped me. What I needed was a professional. I called Sam, my psychiatrist.

Seeking Help

I told Sam everything. He helped me realize that the isolation was affecting my physical and mental health. I was losing sleep, gaining weight, and watching the news incessantly. Sam helped me get back on the path. He reassured me that it was normal to feel the way I was feeling, considering the horrors of the pandemic.

Sam suggested that I go outside and have contact with nature. He told me, “Zenaida, you need to get some sunlight!” He reminded me to stay six feet away from others and to wear a mask. His support helped me realize that it was okay to go outside and do what I liked to do, as long as I followed the guidelines provided by the CDC.

So I decided to go for walks near the water and to watch the sunset and walk through the grass barefoot and feel the connection with earth and its energy.

Sam helped me think about how I could take better care of myself. Now, instead of overeating, I treat myself to ice cream once a week. I started to meditate again, as I had learned to do years before. I listen to music and talk with my family regularly. I video chat with my grandkids – they are my motor – every other day to keep my heart pumping happily and my mood elevated. And I watch the news only once a week. That is enough to be informed but not overwhelmed. These forms of self-care have helped me feel much better.

You Are Not Alone

When I work with clients in mental health and substance-abuse recovery, I sometimes share a part of my story. It helps my clients see that they are not alone. I hope sharing all of this with you, dear reader, has been helpful. If the pandemic has caused you to feel strange things and act in a wacky manner, you are not alone! Here are some phone numbers and websites that may be of use to those of you interested in getting back on the sunlit path in the midst of a dark pandemic.

[Mindfulness Meditation](#) with Jon Kabat-Zinn.

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:](#)

1-800-273-8255

[SAMHSA’s National Helpline:](#)

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

AFTER YOU READ: What self-care strategies have worked (and not worked) for you? Explore the resources Zenaida recommends and report back something that you learned.

Zenaida Garcia is from San Juan, Puerto Rico. She currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island. She is a freshman at the Community College of RI, and she has worked for three years as a Peer Recovery Specialist at the Providence Center. Listen to this interview with her and her teacher at <https://explore.thepublicsradio.org/stories/zenaida-and-the-vaiven/>.

