**Let’s talk about how to stay focused and motivated**

Looking back on history years from now, 2020 will stand out as a watershed year. It will be remembered as the year when major change was forced on all of us. We had to learn new ways of carrying on with our lives amidst a global health crisis. As a student, you had an unexpected holiday, which probably brought relief at the time, but made it that much harder to start up again. Moreover, starting up again was complicated by a new and unfamiliar way of studying.

*Change causes stress*

Radical change can cause stress, tiredness, uncertainty and a general sense of doubt and despondence. Some of you may have started doubting your study choices. Change tends to make us doubt ourselves, our career options, our lecturers and our familiar surroundings. These feelings then spiral into low motivation and low energy. If left unaddressed for too long, these mood changes can even lead to depression.

*Two types of stress*

We can typically experience two types of stress, namely episodic and continuous stress. Episodic stress has a “sell-by date”. An example would be an upcoming test or test week. You can plan and prepare for it, go through it, and then it ends. Continuous stress, on the other hand, does not have a definite start or end date. It is a set of circumstances that you are suddenly confronted with, and that can either worsen or improve, but are beyond your control – completely unpredictable. The COVID-19 pandemic is a classic example. Needless to say, we are better at handling episodic stress than coping with continuous stress.

Having to write tests and exams while the pandemic grinds on means that you are experiencing both episodic and continuous stress. Feeling uncertain or doubting yourself and your environment is completely normal.

*Exercise to maintain focus\**

Please join me in an exercise that helps us focus and stay effective amidst our episodic and continuous stress.

1. Make a list of everything you are currently concerned about, such as whether you’ll ever find a job or pass the academic year; your family’s finances, granny’s health, the corruption in the country, those extra kilograms you have picked up, your looks (nose, height, etc.); maybe you’ve fallen behind with your studies and don’t know where to pick up again. List *every* small thing that troubles or concerns you.
2. On another sheet of paper, draw a big circle and write “Circle of concern” at the top.
3. Inside this big circle, draw another, medium-sized circle and write “Circle of influence” above it.
4. Now return to your list. Which of the concerns you’ve listed are within your circle of influence? Can you influence the unemployment rate in the country? Can you influence your granny’s health? Can you influence your height or the size of your nose? Write only those things you can personally influence in the circle of influence, such as passing the academic year, or catching up on your work.

What this exercise tells you is that most of the things you are concerned about you have no control over. This means you are wasting your energy on worries that lead nowhere.

However, if you focus on your circle of influence, you are working towards possible change that will benefit you and those around you in the long run. The higher your success rate with the issues in your circle of influence, the smaller your circle of concern will become. The territory you have control over will become bigger and your self-esteem will grow.

*Positive side to stress*

Finally, there is some good news too. Stress does have a positive side as well. In his famous *The art of war*, Sun Tzu says: “In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity.”

For instance, did you know that …

* … Newton formulated the law of gravity while at home during the Bubonic plague?
* … the iPad was developed within days following the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States?
* … the board game Scrabble was invented by Alfred Mosher Butts in the Great Depression, when he was unemployed?

In trying times, we need our creativity the most.

This has been proved locally as well. The 2019 Chemistry honours group at the University of Pretoria performed the best in the history of the Chemistry Department. When they were interviewed and their study records researched, only one factor seemed to distinguish them from the rest: They were first-years during the disruptive #FeesMustFall campaign in 2015. Back then, these students immediately switched to the available online options. They were motivated and acquired independent study habits, which ended up setting them apart from previous groups.

So, what hidden opportunities will you find in the current chaos?

*\*Information on circle of concern and circle of influence is accredited to Steven Covey.*