



VALLEY

health & life

ROBOTIC
CLEAN

COPING WITH
ISOLATION

BETTER HEALTH

DEAR FRIENDS OF HOLYOKE MEDICAL CENTER AND VALLEY HEALTH SYSTEMS,

IT HAS BEEN A FULL YEAR since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are still suffering the effects of it. We certainly have made great strides in understanding how COVID-19 is transmitted, how to recognize the early symptoms and how to treat it more effectively. With the vaccine rollout this winter, there is additional hope that the pandemic will be under control soon.

Yet, aside from the physical toll the pandemic has exacted on many, there are additional consequences affecting people in all walks of life that are just as serious. The plans put in place to curb the transmission, necessary as they may be, have created physical and often emotional isolation, disrupted learning, created tremendous financial hardship for many families and stressed the mental health of individuals of all ages.

The mental health crisis resulting from the effects of the lockdowns is hitting us like a whole new surge. Our emergency rooms, mental health clinics and counseling centers are being overwhelmed. As a healthcare system, we are doing everything we can to help, including mobilizing in the fall to create additional capacity for behavioral health beds. As you will read in this issue, we also are renovating two units within the hospital to increase our behavioral health bed capacity from 20 to 54. These units will be ready by the end of April, and they can't come soon enough as many patients are waiting days in emergency rooms around the state for an available bed. In addition, we have done our best to increase the availability of outpatient counseling appointments and have expanded all our telehealth services.

My message to you is to pay attention to the emotional impact of this pandemic. Talk with your children, watch out for the elderly and spend as much time as possible in safe recreation, such as outdoor activities. Use technology to communicate frequently with loved ones. Watch out for signs of depression and seek help if you feel that you or a loved one is in need of counseling. We are here to help in any way we can.

Stay safe, stay strong.
Best,

SPIROS HATIRAS

President and Chief Executive Officer,
Holyoke Medical Center & Valley Health
Systems, Inc.



On the Cover:
Patient Alisha Parent
now enjoys being
active with her
daughter. Read
her story on page 8.



CONTENTS

- 3 HEALTHY HABITS** News and tips for better health. **FAREWELL** to a friend and colleague.
- 4 MEETING URGENT MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS** HMC is constructing two new inpatient psychiatric units for adults.
- 6 10 WAYS TO KEEP KIDS ACTIVE** How to bring a little fun to physical activity despite the pandemic.
- 8 IMPROVING WEIGHT LOSS** How remote patient-doctor communication helped one woman lose over 100 pounds...and counting.
- 10 FOOD THAT LIFTS YOUR MOOD** The most powerful "medicine" for feeling good might be what you put on your plate.
- 12 5 WAYS TO COPE WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING** Wise words from experts, including people who've experienced long stretches of social isolation.
- 14 SUPER BOWL SURPRISE** Two HMC staffers got a coveted chance to attend America's biggest game.
- 15 SHINING A LIGHT ON SANITATION** HMC is safer than ever, thanks to four remarkable new robots.

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HEALTHY HABITS

FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY



4,000,000


The estimated number of elective surgeries—such as knee replacements and cancer biopsies—canceled in the U.S. during a 12-week disruption due to COVID-19.

While not emergencies per se, these delays impacted quality of life.

—*British Journal of Surgery*



CYCLE TO CUT FAT



Twenty minutes of daily cycling for eight weeks can reduce body fat and improve cardiovascular fitness.

—*Preventive Medicine*

SMALL FOOD CHANGES, BIG PAYOFFS

People who added some healthy foods to their existing diets lowered their risk of premature death. According to a recent study, slowly changing the ratio of high-nutrition options to low-nutrition choices pays dividends. Why? People are less apt to stick with a complete diet overhaul.

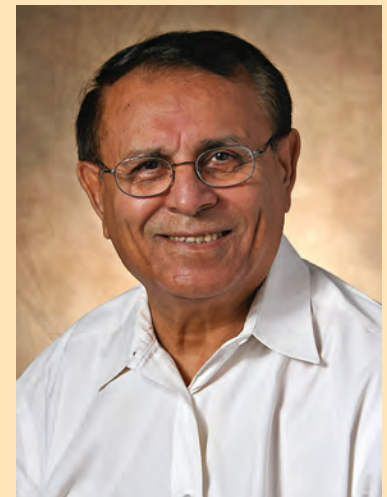
—*New England Journal of Medicine*



HUNGER AMONG SENIORS

One in 10 seniors on Medicare doesn't have enough to eat, according to a recent study. Check on elderly neighbors who might be at risk.

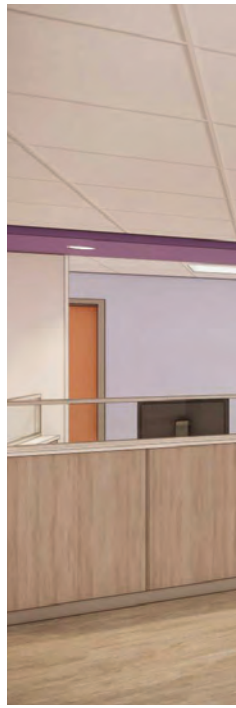
—*JAMA Internal Medicine*



FAREWELL

Holyoke Medical Center (HMC) lost a highly regarded and beloved physician, colleague and friend in January. Dr. Kimat Gul Khatak, who died from complications of COVID-19, had been a valued member of the HMC medical community for 42 years. He cared for a very devoted and adoring group of patients and was a steady presence on the hospital campus.

Born in Pakistan, Dr. Khatak emigrated to the U.S. in 1974 after graduating from medical school and serving in Pakistan's military. He completed his medical training, including a fellowship in cardiology, in New York and Massachusetts. Dr. Khatak combined his excellence in medicine with a profound dedication to those around him. A passionate leader and a respected community organizer, he loved to participate in Holyoke's annual St. Patrick's Day parade, earning him a fond nickname at the hospital: Dr. O'Khatak. We're thankful for the many fond memories we have of Dr. Khatak and his friendly, jovial, compassionate and generous personality. His shining contributions to the Holyoke community, dedication to the Pakistani-American community, medical expertise and friendship will be sorely missed.



MEETING URGENT MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS



AT A CRUCIAL TIME FOR PATIENTS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS, HOLYOKE MEDICAL CENTER IS CREATING NEW INPATIENT UNITS FOR ADULTS AND SENIORS.

IN APRIL 2020, Holyoke Medical Center (HMC) responded quickly when 40 veterans living at the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke needed temporary housing, repurposing several units to accommodate them. This year, HMC is taking urgent action once again by converting that space into psychiatric inpatient units for adults and seniors. The \$6.5 million construction project will provide desperately needed services for patients with behavioral health concerns.

The two units—one with 18 geriatric psychiatry beds and one with 16 adult psychiatry beds—are expected to open this spring.

A NATIONAL CRISIS

"There's a critical shortage of mental health resources, not just in our community, but across the state and nationwide," says Simon Ahtaridis, MD, MPH, Chief Medical Officer at HMC. "Our new inpatient units are coming at a



A \$6.5 million construction project will create two new psychiatric inpatient units, one with 18 beds for seniors and one with 16 beds for other adults. Both are expected to open this spring.

crucial time for patients with psychiatric disorders.” Dr. Ahtaridis explains that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the mental health crisis and added another difficult barrier to care, particularly for minorities and low-income families.

A recent study published in the *Journal of Public Health* found that depression and anxiety rates in the United States have more than doubled among adults during the pandemic. According to the lead researcher, almost one-fifth of adult Americans had a diagnosable mental disorder before the pandemic, a rate that has increased significantly over the past year. Patients

unable to care for themselves due to mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, psychosis or dementia often neglect secondary medical needs, leading to higher mortality rates.

PATIENTS IN NEED

“At the beginning of the pandemic, people with behavioral health issues were reluctant to come to the hospital for fear of the virus,” says Steven Wexler, MD, Medical Director of the Emergency Department, often the first stop for patients experiencing mental health concerns. “Now the floodgates are open. Patients have reached their maximum and are in desperate need of services—both medically and psychologically.”

Every patient who steps into HMC’s Emergency Department receives a medical screening and a mental health screening. Even if a patient’s complaint is of a mental health nature, it may stem from an urgent medical situation such as a heart attack, respiratory or infectious disease or medication problem. “We can’t

miss a potentially life-threatening medical issue,” Dr. Wexler says.

Once a patient is cleared medically, the behavioral health assessment rapidly begins through the interventions of a dedicated team of skilled behavioral health clinicians. Known as the Comprehensive Assessment Resource Education (CARE) team, they recommend treatment options based on the patient’s symptoms, from outpatient services to inpatient admission for those requiring a more structured therapeutic environment.

Typically, patients experiencing mental health crises spend extended periods in emergency rooms as they wait for inpatient psychiatry beds to become available. It’s a burgeoning health problem at EDs across the country. “The fact that Holyoke Medical Center is adapting so quickly and responding to community mental health needs speaks volumes about the hospital’s commitment,” says Dr. Wexler.

DOUBLING RESOURCES

The new geriatric psychiatry and adult psychiatry units will double resources for patients needing short-term, secure mental health treatment. Construction of the units is being fast-tracked while complying with Massachusetts Department of Mental Health regulations.

“Behavioral health settings must meet unique needs,” says Dr. Ahtaridis. “We’re creating secure spaces with comfortable patient rooms and meeting areas so important to therapy and healing.” Each unit will be staffed by a team of experienced mental health professionals who will work collaboratively with families and medical specialists throughout the hospital.

“Holyoke Medical Center has been in the business of inpatient behavioral health for decades,” Dr. Ahtaridis says. “All of our providers, across every specialty, have a high degree of familiarity working with patients who have mental health challenges. We’re well-suited and ready to expand our offerings to meet their needs.”



Simon Ahtaridis, MD, MPH



Steven Wexler, MD

✳ To learn more about the Holyoke Medical Center Behavioral Health Services, please call **413.534.2627**.



10 WAYS TO KEEP KIDS ACTIVE

WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING PUTTING THE BRAKES ON MANY YOUTH SPORTS, AND EVEN RECESS, WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO? THESE IDEAS BRING A LITTLE FUN TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.

EXERCISE IS IMPORTANT for children's physical and mental health. It builds strength for the heart, lungs, muscles and bones; helps control blood sugar and weight; improves coordination; and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression.

"Physical activity helps children's bodies grow in healthy ways," says Beth Brown, MD, of Holyoke Medical Group Pediatric Care. "It also stimulates the release of endorphins, which help children and adolescents with mood and emotional regulation. In addition, children learn cognitively through play, which helps their brains develop important

learning and problem-solving skills.”

According to the 2017–2018 National Survey of Children’s Health, only 28 percent of U.S. children met the level of exercise recommended for them: vigorous physical activity for at least 60 minutes every day. And that was before the COVID-19 crisis sent everyone home and put a temporary end to organized sports, school recess and physical education classes.

Being at home means you’re competing with screen time, too. So how do you make physical activity fun and appealing to your children? These ideas will help.

1 CREATE AN INDOOR OR OUTDOOR OBSTACLE COURSE

that includes several exercise stations. For example, to move ahead on the course, you have to do a summersault, complete 10 jumping jacks or stand on one leg for 30 seconds. Use household items like cushions, cardboard boxes and broomsticks to create the course.

2 PRACTICE HEADSTANDS.

Most kids enjoy headstands and catch on quickly. Headstands exercise core muscles and circulate blood to the brain.

3 MAKE FOOT RACES FUN BY CHANGING THINGS UP.

Variations include carrying an egg on a spoon while you run and racing like an animal (hop like a frog or gallop like a horse). If races don’t appeal, games like tag and kick-the-can are tried-and-true ways to get kids running.

4 IF YOUR CHILD IS OLD ENOUGH,

put him or her in charge of walking the dog.

5 AMP UP SIMON SAYS.

Give each participant a turn at being the leader and award a prize to the one whose actions are the most energetic.

6 HAVE A DANCE FEST.

Alternate between your favorite tunes and those of your kids. When dancing starts to feel dull, incorporate freeze play: Whenever the music stops, everyone has to freeze in place until it starts up again. Take photos of the funniest “freeze” positions.



Beth Brown, MD

7 IF YOU PRACTICE YOGA,

teach your kids the basic positions and run a simple session for them before doing your own practice.

8 BREAK OUT A JUMP ROPE.

Dust off your memories of the rhymes you jumped to as a child or look online for ideas. Kids not interested in rhymes? Hold a competition to see who can jump for the longest time.

✱ Dr. Beth Brown is accepting new patients at Holyoke Medical Group Pediatric Care, located at 10 Hospital Drive, Suite 201, Holyoke. To make an appointment, please call **413.534.2800**.



HOW MUCH EXERCISE?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that school-aged children and adolescents (ages 6 to 17) participate in a variety of physical activities they enjoy that are appropriate for their age. They should be physically active for 60 minutes or more each day, including these elements:

Aerobic activity: either moderate- or vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity (this should make up most of the 60 or more minutes a day).

Muscle-strengthening: activities that involve moving muscles against resistance, such as using free weights, elastic bands or workout machines, or walking/running up stairs or hills (at least three days a week).

Bone-strengthening: activities that produce an impact on the bones, such as hopping, skipping, jumping rope, running, weight lifting or playing sports like volleyball, tennis and basketball (at least three days a week).

“Guidelines are important,” says Beth Brown, MD, of Holyoke Medical Group Pediatric Care, “but I think it’s more important to focus on being active than on how much time is spent on an activity, especially if a child is usually sedentary. Even 15 minutes is a great start!”

9 CREATE A CARNIVAL.

Outside or in a room free of breakables, set up a ball-throwing carnival game. Use cans from the recycling bin or Tupperware as the targets. Set them up on a bench or table and award small prizes for hitting the targets.

10 THIS IS A GREAT TIME TO EXPLORE THE OUTDOORS BY HIKING.

Being outside reduces anxiety and stress, and hiking gets the heart rate up. It also gives you dedicated talk time with your kids—away from televisions and cell phones. If kids need an extra incentive, visit the trail ahead of time to set up a scavenger hunt. If you see others on the trail, just step off until they pass as needed to keep six feet of separation.

“Playing with your children is a great motivator for them,” says Dr. Brown. She also suggests letting kids direct the activity by asking what they’d like to do. “Children are very creative and, given the opportunity, can come up with some pretty crazy, fun activities. Getting creative with ways to play safely at home is key.”



BEFORE



AFTER

IMPROVING **WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS**

WITH THE HELP OF HER EXPERT
PHYSICIAN AND REMOTE
COMMUNICATION, ALISHA PARENT
LOST OVER 100 POUNDS AND
FOUND BETTER HEALTH.

WHEN MASSACHUSETTS ordered non-essential businesses closed last year to curb the spread of Covid-19, Alisha Parent found herself with unaccustomed free time. The busy single mother and director of a Hadley, MA, daycare center decided to make the best of her time off. She began taking strides to lose weight and improve her health.

Alisha, 33, reached out to the Weight Management Program at Holyoke Medical Center. She answered prescreening questions online, watched program videos and spoke by phone with bariatric surgeon Yannis Raftopoulos, MD, the program's medical director. "I wanted to learn more about the gastric sleeve procedure," she says. Dr. Raftopoulos agreed that a laparoscopic sleeve gastrectomy—which reduces the size of the stomach and allows the release of fewer hunger hormones—was the best option for Alisha.

Before she could proceed, Alisha had to assure her candidacy and commitment. She underwent medical tests and had a psychological evaluation over the phone.

In June 2020, Alisha weighed 327 pounds, her highest weight. During two months of virtual guidance by Dr. Raftopoulos, she lost 26.2 pounds. On the day of her surgery, August 25, Alisha weighed 301.8 pounds. "Dr. Raftopoulos was straightforward," says Alisha. "He taught me that bariatric surgery is a long-term approach, not a magical fix."

IMPROVING HEALTH

Despite her size, she did not yet have obesity-related concerns such as high blood pressure or diabetes. "But I was getting close to being prediabetic and

had bad plantar fasciitis," she says, noting that her legs and feet were often swollen.

She also had polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal disorder that

can cause weight gain and irregular periods and make getting pregnant difficult. "I'd tried every diet program out there," says Alisha, who was able to lose 60 pounds before conceiving her daughter, Isabella, now 2. "Then I put the pounds back on, plus some."

Through her talks with Dr. Raftopoulos and the Weight Management Program's therapist, Alisha learned she was an emotional eater. "I'd wait until my daughter was asleep so she didn't see the foods I was eating," recalls Alisha of her late-night binges following stressful days. "I didn't want Isabella to have an emotional relationship with food. She became my biggest driving force to lose weight—I wanted to be a better role model."

A SOLID CONNECTION

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, Alisha went alone to her gastric sleeve procedure. Though it was her first time meeting Dr. Raftopoulos in person, Alisha felt connected. "We had communicated remotely so many times beforehand," she says.

After surgery, weight came off quickly as Alisha followed a meal replacement diet and began exercising regularly. By February 2021, she'd lost 108.4 pounds—a third of her initial weight in just six months—and weighed 219 pounds. "I haven't been less than 250 pounds in 10 years," says Alisha, who plans to lose another 70 pounds. Her PCOS is now under control without medicine, and she's free from joint swelling. "I can cross my legs again!" she says.

Throughout Alisha's journey, Dr. Raftopoulos has followed her remotely—offering weekly advice and support. A longtime proponent of telemedicine, Dr. Raftopoulos says communicating with patients through technology keeps them engaged and accountable. In Alisha's case, she purchased a Bluetooth scale that syncs to her cell phone and tracks body composition. Many patients use fitness trackers to monitor calories and heart rate. Blood pressure monitors and glucometers are advised for patients with hypertension and diabetes.



"By looking at objective numbers, I can give feedback to help patients reach goals and can identify problems and make suggestions. It's a powerful and cost-effective way to manage patient care."

Yannis Raftopoulos, MD

"Patient data is sent to me via phone and email and logged into a protected database," Dr. Raftopoulos says. "By looking at objective numbers, I can give feedback to help patients reach goals and can identify problems and make suggestions. It's a powerful and cost-effective way to manage patient care."

Alisha says telemedicine offers convenience and flexibility. "As a single mom, it's hard to get a day off at my daycare job. Doing this program virtually means I don't have to worry about childcare to attend office visits. I share my data with Dr. Raftopoulos without leaving home."

In the past, Alisha resorted to fast-food and relaxing on the couch after a long day. Now, she's preparing nutritious meals for Isabella and herself and rediscovering life's simple pleasures. A recent winter night reflects her newfound energy and enthusiasm: "Isabella and I got home from work and school and went outside and built a snowman!"



Yannis Raftopoulos, MD

*** The HMC Weight Management Program is located at 11 Hospital Drive, 3rd floor, Holyoke. To learn more, visit www.HolyokeHealth.com/wmp or call 413.535.4757.**

FOOD THAT LIFTS YOUR MOOD

THE MOST POWERFUL “MEDICINE” FOR FEELING GOOD
MAY BE WHAT YOU PUT ON YOUR PLATE.

WHAT IF YOU WERE OFFERED a tool that was guaranteed to lift your spirits and give you the energy to do all the things you want to do?

The fact is, you already have this tool at your disposal. Numerous medical studies have found that what we eat on a daily basis is powerful “medicine”—perhaps the most powerful—for fighting depression and fatigue.

“Food can impact mood in a negative or positive way,” says Zoraida C. Rodriguez, RD, LDN, a dietitian at Holyoke Medical Center. “Consuming too much or not enough of certain nutrients can affect the response of cells and neurons, playing a major role in mood and energy as well as inflammation and diseases.”

Below are some ways that what we eat can affect how we feel.

DEPRESSION. Research shows that a higher risk of depression is linked to a diet that includes few fruits and vegetables, but lots of red or processed meat (deli meat, bacon and hot dogs) as well as high-fat dairy products like whole milk and butter. Meanwhile, a diet that includes lots of fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy, whole grains, fish and olive oil is strongly associated with a much lower risk of depression. “Foods like these, which are rich in vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids,

can improve symptoms of depression,” says Rodriguez.

ENERGY. Sugary foods like soda and candy lead to a sharp surge of energy because they trigger the brain

to release a feel-good chemical called dopamine. However, this so-called “sugar high” will be brief and will be followed by a slump in mood and energy levels.

On the other hand, a well-balanced diet that includes healthy fats, whole grains, lean proteins, fruits and vegetables leads to steady levels of energy. “And let’s not forget water!” says Rodriguez. “Drinking water (yes, even in the winter months) helps increase energy. Replace high-sugar beverages with water and you’ll notice your energy level improving as this becomes a new habit.”

MEMORY AND THINKING. A recent large-scale study of 28,000 people in 40 different countries found that people who ate the healthiest diets were 24 percent less likely to have a decline in their thinking skills, compared with people who ate the least healthy diets.

ANXIETY. Certain foods spur the release of the feel-good brain chemicals dopamine and serotonin. This category includes foods rich in the nutrient magnesium, such as leafy greens like spinach and Swiss chard, as well as nuts, seeds and whole grains. The same is true for foods rich in B vitamins, such as avocado and almonds, and foods that contain zinc, such as oysters, cashews, liver and egg yolks.

These emotional benefits, of course, come on top of the physical benefits of a healthy diet—joints that don’t ache, fewer colds, better bowel function, lower cholesterol, reduced risk of heart and kidney disease, and much more.

“Choose healthy foods and your body will respond in a healthy way,” says Rodriguez, “giving you the energy and positive mood to continue your journey and enjoy it more.”



Zoraida C. Rodriguez, RD

✳ **Nutritional counseling services are available with a physician referral at the HMC Endocrinology & Diabetes Center, located at 10 Hospital Drive, Suite 104, Holyoke. To make an appointment, please call 413.534.2820.**



YOUR PLATE, YOUR WAY

Good-mood meals can be created using your favorite ingredients—no matter what cuisine you prefer.

The eating plan most often linked to positive moods is called the Mediterranean diet because it’s based on the traditional eating habits of people in areas bordering the Mediterranean Sea. But in reality, this way of eating has no geographic boundaries. Favored fruits, vegetables and fish differ from country to country, but they’re all nutritious and good for you.

The Mediterranean diet includes:

- Daily consumption of seasonal vegetables and fruits, whole grains and healthy fats (such as those found in nuts and olive oil)
- Weekly eating of fish, poultry, beans and eggs
- Moderate portions of dairy products
- Limited intake of red meat.

The plan is easy to adapt. At right, find cultural flavors and whole-food ingredients in recipes from around the world that reflect the principals of the Mediterranean diet.

ETHIOPIAN VEGETABLE STEW



Based on a traditional Ethiopian recipe, this hearty dish is packed with nutrients and flavors commonly used in African dishes, including teff, a whole grain with a mild, nutty taste, that thickens the base of the stew.

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 cups chopped onion
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon berbere spice blend (purchase in an African grocery)
- 4 cups vegetable stock, low-sodium or organic
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup uncooked teff
- 1 ¼ pounds sweet potato, chopped into small cubes
- 4 tomatoes, chopped, or 1 14.5-ounce can no-salt-added tomatoes
- 8 cups collard greens
- ¼ cup natural peanut butter (containing just peanuts and salt, no sugar or added oils)

DIRECTIONS:

- Place olive oil in a large stew pot. Add onion and garlic; cook until translucent.
- Add berbere spice and cook 30 seconds, stirring until combined.
- Add stock, water, teff, sweet potatoes and tomatoes. Bring to boil, stirring occasionally.
- Cover and cook 20 minutes, adding a little water if stew is too thick.
- Add collard greens and simmer until wilted.
- Add peanut butter. Mix well and serve.



FISH TACOS WITH TILAPIA, PEPPERS AND ONIONS

This recipe uses ingredients commonly available in the Caribbean diet—lots of fresh peppers, onions, lime and fish combined with corn or rice and seasonings that provide a little heat, such as the jalapeño used here.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 white onion, sliced
- 1 red pepper, seeded and sliced
- 1 yellow pepper, seeded and sliced
- 1 orange pepper, seeded and sliced
- 1 small jalapeño
- Cooking spray
- 4 tilapia fillets, 5 ounces each
- 8 6-inch corn tortillas
- 1 tablespoon fresh chopped cilantro
- 1 lime, cut in 8 wedges

DIRECTIONS:

- Preheat skillet on high heat with olive oil.
- Add onions and peppers and sauté on high heat until edges of vegetables begin to brown. Set aside in mixing bowl.
- Spray grill pan with cooking spray and cook fish fillets until translucent, about 3 minutes each side or until fish flakes easily when tested with a fork.
- Add fish to vegetables and toss lightly.
- Warm tortillas according to package directions.
- Divide taco mixture among tortillas and garnish each tortilla with cilantro and wedge of lime.



COCONUT PUMPKIN SOUP

Pumpkin is used in African and some Asian cultures. In tropical locales such as Thailand or the Caribbean, coconut milk is used frequently in beverages or sauces. A number of cultures combine pumpkin and coconut in stews, rice dishes and soups.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 medium orange sweet pepper, seeded and chopped
- 2 medium carrots, chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 14-ounce can reduced-sodium chicken broth
- 1 15-ounce can pumpkin
- 1 14-ounce can light coconut milk
- ½ teaspoon ginger or pumpkin pie seasoning
- 1 medium fresh jalapeño, seeded and finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons snipped fresh cilantro (or another seasonal fresh herb, such as sage)

DIRECTIONS:

- In a large saucepan, cook sweet pepper, carrots and onion in hot oil over medium heat about 5 minutes, or until tender.
- In a large bowl, combine broth, canned pumpkin and coconut milk. Stir in ginger and jalapeño.
- Add liquid ingredients to saucepan of vegetables.
- Bring to a boil, reduce heat. Simmer, uncovered, 10 minutes or until heated through, stirring frequently.
- If you like a thicker soup, simmer longer to desired thickness. Be careful to cook on low heat, checking frequently.
- Add cilantro or other garnishes to taste.

5 WAYS TO COPE WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING

WISE WORDS FROM EXPERTS, INCLUDING PEOPLE WHO'VE EXPERIENCED LONG STRETCHES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LIMITATION.

AS THE EARLY DAYS of social distancing have stretched into a full year, we've learned new coping strategies for the inconvenience, isolation and anxiety it causes. We'll need those strategies and more while we wait for vaccinations to catch up with the coronavirus, experts say.

The effects of widespread, long-term social distancing haven't been studied. However, the impact of similar situations, such as quarantines and social isolation, has been researched, and study after study has shown a significant risk of negative psychological effects.

"Many of our clients are identifying increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, fear and irritability and decreased motivation," says Chassity Crowell-Miller, a licensed independent clinical social worker at River Valley Counseling Center and Director of its Holyoke Outpatient and Holyoke Public Schools Clinical Services. "People are reaching a point where they're just done with social distancing and are ready for the world to open up. On the other hand, they understand the seriousness of potentially contracting the virus and possibly spreading it to others. Many people are struggling with this conflict."



Chassity Crowell-Miller,
LICSW

Self-care in this situation is a serious matter. "This is a great time to be creative," says Crowell-Miller. "Among my clients, I've seen some really neat ideas." For example,

sharing a weekly meal with friends or family over a video call or renting out a movie theater for a socially distanced birthday celebration.

"I've had clients who taught themselves a new skill, like crocheting, or a new language," says Crowell-Miller. "Others have joined a virtual exercise group, explored cooking different cuisines or reimaged a room by moving furniture around and adding a fresh paint color. The internet is a great resource for thinking outside of the box about new hobbies and projects."

What else can you do to keep your spirits up for the long run? People with extensive experience in confined quarters have stepped in to offer some additional advice.

1 "MAKE A ROUTINE, TEST IT AND STICK TO IT,"

says Jon Bailey, who, as a former U.S. Navy submariner, spent months on deployments undersea. Maintaining set days and times for work, meals, exercise and more helps differentiate one day from the next, one week from the next and so on, reinforcing the passage of time.

2 "KEEP A JOURNAL,"

says retired NASA astronaut Scott Kelly, who did just that when he spent nearly a year on the International Space Station. If daily events don't provide much fresh fodder, write about memories or about what you're feeling, hearing, seeing and eating to bring the experience alive. Make a note of positive changes that have come with staying home. For example, more time for family activities like games and movie nights, or the freedom to work on a personal project for which you don't usually have time.

3 "READ BOOKS,"

says *Washington Post* writer Jason Rezaian, who was held in prison in Iran for 544 days. "I found myself gravitating toward books about hardship," he says. "They demonstrated for me that my experience, no matter how difficult, was one that I could survive."

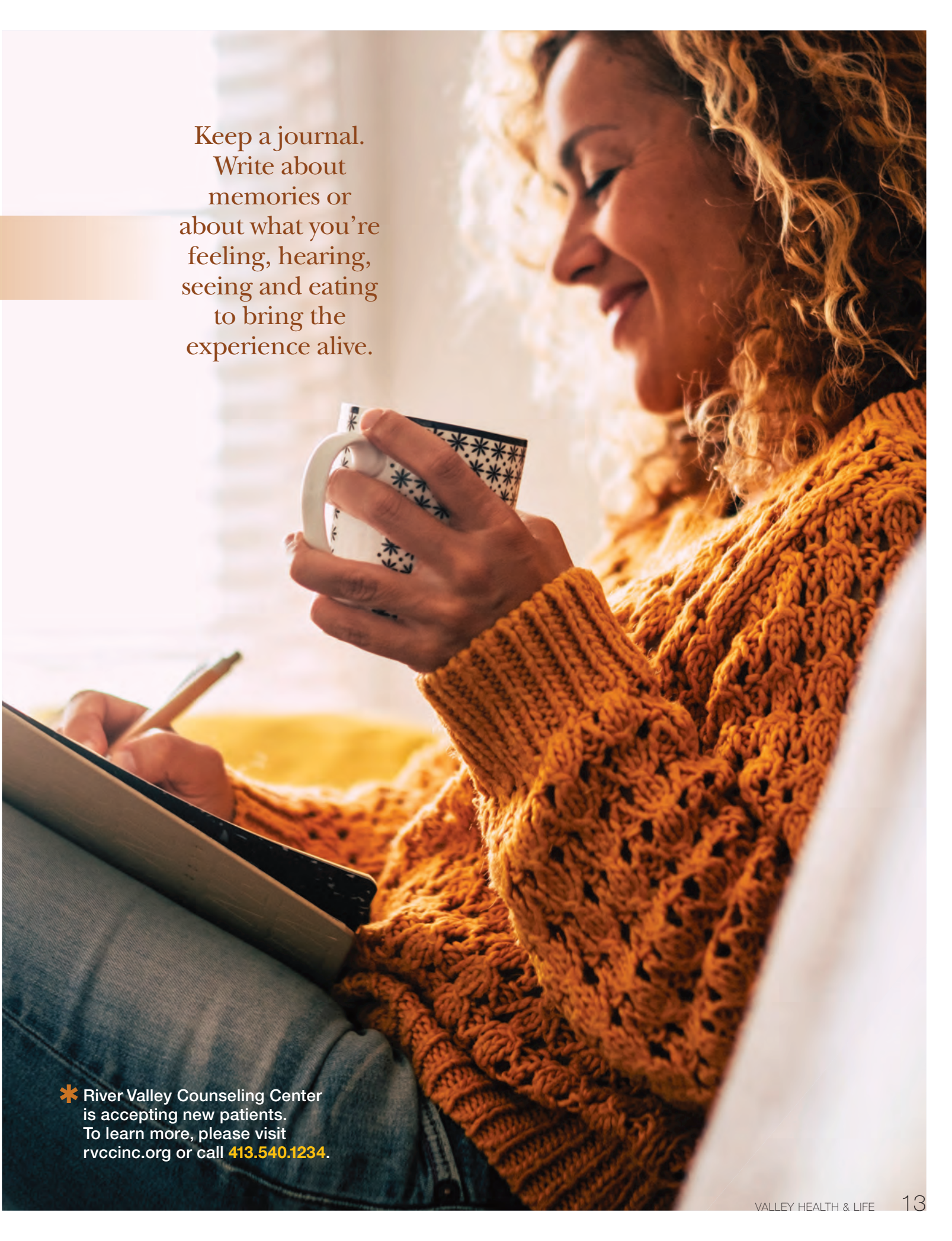
4 NURTURE YOUR ENVIRONMENT.

Polar scientist Marion Dierickx spends months at a time at the South Pole carrying out telescope maintenance. Whether at the polar station or social distancing at home, she tries to control her environment. "In the lab space, I would obsessively clean it," she says, "and now I'm doing the same thing, stuck in my apartment. Nurturing our environment can only help our psychological balance." Dierickx also suggests modifying the décor of a room, which both creates change and is a great way to channel energy.

5 REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE DOING A GOOD THING.

One study found that thinking about quarantine conditions as primarily voluntary, rather than mandatory, made them easier to accept. Your actions are helping to keep others safe—not only your family, friends and neighbors, but people you'll never meet, including vulnerable people such as the elderly or those with preexisting medical conditions. Give yourself credit for your altruistic actions.

Although it's good to seek advice from others about ways to combat social isolation, Crowell-Miller points out that what works for one person may not work for another. "Don't be afraid to try a few different techniques," she says. "Then you can decide which ones feel right. Find the ones that work for you and your lifestyle."



Keep a journal.
Write about
memories or
about what you're
feeling, hearing,
seeing and eating
to bring the
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Eric Blondin and Kathy Sexton at the Super Bowl (left) and in front of the Patriots' jet with Robert Kraft (right).

SUPER BOWL SURPRISE

TWO HOLYOKE MEDICAL CENTER STAFFERS GOT A COVETED CHANCE TO ATTEND AMERICA'S BIGGEST GAME.

ERIC BLONDIN STOOD in Holyoke Medical Center (HMC), clutching his chest as his heart raced. This may sound like the start of a medical drama—but actually, he was reacting to some incredible good news. Blondin, a floor technician at the hospital, had just received a call from HMC's president, Spiros Hatiras, who told him he'd won a trip to the Super Bowl that Sunday. A second lucky employee, registered nurse Kathy Sexton, also learned from Hatiras that she'd be attending the game. "I was like, 'Is this really happening?'" says Sexton.

It was. The tickets were a gift from the Kraft family, owners of the New England Patriots. To show their appreciation for the pandemic's frontline heroes, they were sending 76 fully vaccinated healthcare workers, representing all six New England states, on an all-expenses-paid trip to the Super Bowl. HMC received two tickets and drew Blondin and Sexton's names from a lottery of vaccinated staffers. "It was over the top, unbelievable!" says Sexton.

A GILLETTE STADIUM TOUR

The night before the game, Blondin and Sexton drove to a Foxboro hotel, where

they were each given a complimentary two-night stay. Early the next morning, they walked to nearby Gillette Stadium, the Patriots' home base. "We went on the field and took pictures with the mascot," says Sexton. Afterward, the group boarded buses for Logan International. "We had a police escort," says Blondin. "No stops."

At the airport, the media greeted the winners as they boarded the Patriots' private plane for the flight to Tampa.

GAME-ON EXCITEMENT

As the group disembarked in Tampa, Robert Kraft, patriarch of the Kraft family, was there. "He shook our hand and gave us a Lombardi trophy pin," Sexton shares. After that, it was on to Raymond James Stadium.

The group arrived three hours prior to kickoff and enjoyed lunch and the pregame show. "Miley Cyrus came onstage and had nice things to say about healthcare workers, and she sang great," Sexton says.

Before they knew it, it was time for Blondin and Sexton to take their seats, about 25 rows up in the Kansas City

end zone. "When Tampa had its first touchdown, [Buccaneers tight end Rob] Gronkowski caught the ball right in front of me," marvels Sexton, who has long admired Gronkowski and quarterback Tom Brady, both formerly of the New England Patriots. "I got the most beautiful picture."

Blondin was thrilled as well. "It's so different than on TV," he says. "There was no lack of entertainment." That included the story of how the Buccaneers and Kansas City got to the Super Bowl and the halftime show starring pop sensation The Weeknd.

Once the game ended, the group was bused back to the airport and flew on the Patriots' plane to Providence, landing around 4 a.m. At the Massachusetts border, "Police officers escorted us back to the hotel," Blondin says. There, the group caught some shut-eye before heading home.

The adventure was over all too soon—but Blondin and Sexton are still awestruck. "It was a whirlwind," Blondin says. "The Patriots organization is top-notch and gave all us healthcare workers a VIP experience."

Daniel English, Director of Environmental Services, with one of Holyoke Medical Center's four LightStrike Germ-Zapping Robots, which achieve a 99.9 percent level of disinfection against the virus that causes COVID-19.

past a patient, it gets quite a look. People always ask, 'What does it do?'"

What the robots do, in fact, is clean rooms beyond what even the most meticulous people can accomplish by obliterating dangerous pathogens the eye can't see. "After regular cleaning and disinfection, we then use the robot as an extra level of disinfection," English says. "We bring it in, plug it in, enter the room name and switch it on."

HOW THE ROBOTS WORK

The robot will then run through a disinfecting cycle lasting either four or eight minutes, depending on the room type. A light bulb containing Xenon, a colorless, odorless gas, rises up from the robot and pulses out a type of ultraviolet light called UVC. (For safety's sake, staffers and patients leave the room before this begins. Rooms generally require several cycles, with the robot in different locations, for full disinfection.)

"UVC light is germicidal and sporicidal," English says, which means it quickly destroys viruses, bacteria and spores. One study showed that in just two minutes, the robot achieves a 99.99 percent level of disinfection against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. It's also effective against a wide range of other microorganisms.

The robots, which are American made, were purchased using CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act funding received through the City of Holyoke. English and his team put the robots to work the moment they arrived. "We have a staff of 40 people, and we trained everybody to use the robots, so they can be used right around the clock," he says. "If you're passing by the hospital at any hour of the day or night, you often can see a pulsating light from one of the windows."

While the fight against coronavirus rages on, English feels better equipped than ever to face the unseen enemy. "This robot," he observes, "is an ideal weapon against it."



SHINING A LIGHT ON SANITATION

THE HOSPITAL IS SAFER AND CLEANER THAN EVER, THANKS TO FOUR REMARKABLE NEW ROBOTS.

HOLYOKE MEDICAL CENTER has always done everything humanly possible to keep its facilities sparkling clean. Now, the hospital is taking this mission even further, supplementing human efforts with high-tech ones. As of December, four new coronavirus-killing robots can be found on the floors, busily protecting patients and staff from infections by destroying the pathogens that can cause them.

Each of the LightStrike Germ-Zapping Robots, as they're officially known, has its own special name. "We have Luna on the fourth floor, Layla on the third floor, Astra in the Emergency Department and Zappy in the operating rooms at the moment," says Daniel English, Director of Environmental Services. "In terms of their appearance, people liken them to R2D2 from 'Star Wars.' Especially when you get into an elevator with one, or wheel it

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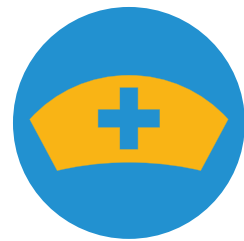
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