



# Deep Breathing during Online Game Advertisements: Finding Surprising Moments of Calm, Self-Reflection during COVID-19

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## Introduction

The world finds itself coming to the realization that we are experiencing a time in our history when our illusion of control is being undermined by Covid-19, setting us on an unknown path. What do you do when you can't visit your friends, go to a movie or the gym, sing at a concert or at church, or have Thanksgiving dinner with more than 3 people and when you might have to stay in your house (or room!) for 14 straight days? Well, many-almost all-of us develop symptoms of Covid-19 fatigue. The intense and prolonged stress of Covid-19 undoubtedly affects our mental well-being and physical health. We hope medical science and an effective vaccine will provide us relief from Covid-19 fatigue, but we also need to take responsibility to seek solutions that work for us individually. So, how do we deal with the reality of Covid-19 without being overwhelmed by it? One tactic, of course, is avoidance. For the November 3rd U.S. election, I found that watching the results trickle in on television over the evening, days, and then weeks generated a sort of Election Anxiety Disorder (self-diagnosed). Simply turning off the television and avoiding most social media allowed me to steer away from that mental health pit. However, knowledge is power (at least it used to be; I'm not quite so confident about that these days) and I don't believe we can just turn away from the information on the Covid-19 pandemic and how it is affecting the world, our healthcare and frontline workers, our family and friends and ourselves. So, the question becomes, what can we do to cope with stress we can't, for the moment, escape?

Admittedly, for me, stress was accumulating before Covid-19; the events in the last two years of my life have been a challenge.

Aside from working full-time and trying to 'launch' two young adult children, I was engaged in a community service project aimed at changing 108-year old electoral boundaries within a rural municipality to address imbalances of representation and power at the Council table. This involved several court actions and a variety of other sorts of unpleasantness. During this period, there was also the shocking reality of a kindred spirit with mental health challenges who took her own life. Also, during this time, I unexpectedly ended up in a major support role for a friend whose family couldn't cope and had largely abandoned her during her end-of-life challenges with glioblastoma and breast cancer. Before mid-March of 2020 I was already experiencing mental and emotional fatigue. Then Covid-19 swept over us.

The first task was to secure as far as possible the health and safety of our immediate family. At the same time, my University employer of 30 years made the decision on March 14th to move to remote teaching of students. The next week was spent transitioning my two face-to-face classes with 200 students, mostly in their first year, to online/remote learning, which involved a cascade of challenges. The experience only occasionally reminded me of being on a wild rollercoaster ride. Sadly, the end of classes coincided with my terminally ill friend taking her last breath on April 29th. So yes, as they have been for everyone else, these last months have been unusually stressful.

Developing coping skills during times of intense and prolonged stress does require reflection. From my years teaching and conducting research in my discipline of kinesiology and health

studies, I know the many and varied benefits of physical activity on mental health. I know from my life experiences and academic studies the benefits of talking to each other to help strengthen the soul and clear a fog that bogs us down mentally. I also appreciate the use of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction as potentially effective in reducing distress for those experiencing physical or mental health problems. And while already engaged in healthy, active living and work to keep meaningful family and friendship connections in my life (most recently via Zoom), the task for me in May 2020 was to find an additional coping mechanism that would be another effective tool in my coping mechanism toolbox.

Surprisingly, I ended up coming to appreciate an old foe that I have professionally and personally always been at odds with-online gaming. Not the gambling kind, just the game kind. For 20 years, through my teaching and research activities, I have advocated for increasing healthy, active living for children while they are in critical periods of physical growth and motor development. A plethora of research exists showing the correlation between children's increased screen time, increased sedentary living, decrease in health and increase in obesity rates. I have pointed to television, laptop, iPad and cell phone screens as the villains stealing our children's ability to accumulate the positive physical health credits they need going into adulthood and eventually moving through the aging process. So, when a friend casually mentioned I should check out an online game, June's Journey, to fill some of my time during the Covid-19 shutdown in my Canadian province, I initially scowled like Superman would at kryptonite.

However, the title of the game intrigued me (due to my name and my last couple of years), and the suggestion to check out the game came at a time that coincided with my daughter relinquishing the iPad that she had co-opted several years earlier. So, I googled the game and found a description of the game in Wikipedia. The backstory is set in the 1920s and opens with the main character, June, receiving the news that her sister seems to have been killed by her husband in a murder-suicide. She returns to her childhood home to care for her niece. It's a hidden object game, in which players are given a list of items to find in a static scene. The story emerges as you progress through these static scenes and find the object. Points can be won in a variety of ways [1].

I've resisted downloading and playing an online game as I thought I could be doing better things with my time-and especially, doing better things than playing Where's Waldo. But one can only do so much solitary walking. So, for six months, beginning during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and into the second wave in late 2020, I've been playing this online game on my reclaimed iPad. I play for about 30 minutes in the morning and usually another couple of shorter sessions later in the day. As a competitor I found I was enjoying the challenge of finding the hidden objects,

whether playing against the clock or not, and honing my strategic skills when playing the game. And, as research would suggest, I believe engaging in this hidden object game has improved my cognitive abilities in the areas of visual search performance and spatial working memory. [2] And, on reflection after six months, I believe I stumbled upon a second health benefit from another thing I have long believed to be a supervillain-unwanted advertising. Fortunately, this health benefit is not one that the advertisers contemplated.

When I first started playing this game, I was very frustrated at the number of times, at differing stages in the game, the player is forced to download and view an online advertisement. I objected to the subtle and not-so-subtle messages telling me what to consume or how to behave. However, because I enjoyed playing the game, over time I started using these forced 15-30 second advertisements to 'power down'. I found myself using the advertising time during the game to close my eyes and slowly breathe. Initially the purpose of closing my eyes was to ignore the visual advertisement and the slow breathing was a secondary function of the first. But now I've come to appreciate that over the past two years, prior to this Covid-19 mess, I haven't done enough of this powering down and breathing with a purpose-to experience a moment of calm. Modified slow breathing exercise has been shown to decrease heart rate, systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure and perceived stress, which in turn improves cardiovascular parameters. [3] Finding a tactic to ignore the game's advertising permitted me to find a surprising health treasure, several moments of calm every day during the Covid-19 pandemic where I could focus on my breathing in a positive, purposeful way. The online game June's Journey has been literally that, one where I, on reflection, discovered another health tool in these challenging times.

## Acknowledgement

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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