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Escapism As A Modern Coping Mechanism

How do you escape? Do you find yourself going to a “happy place” when feeling anxious or stressed? Escapism can seep into our world, sometimes unconsciously, whether it comes from dreaming of a fictional world or staring longingly out a window on a sunny day. Even dreaming as you sleep is escapism! Escapism is the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, and during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, this became prevalent for many. Without it, according to the Journal of Organizational Behavior, many would experience burnout faster than before, and their idea of life would become cynical (Veronika, “Depression Timeout: An Escapist Coping Strategy.”). People who suffer from mental illnesses use this coping mechanism to heal from the trauma they may have experienced in their past.

Often within the mental health community, escapism can be portrayed as a negative coping strategy. However, when done correctly, this is not the case. The coping strategy can be confused with problem avoidance, which is toxic and deteriorating. Problem avoidance is a maladaptive form of coping where the user distracts themselves without solving the issue. Writer Talat Zubair states, “pretending that they do not exist does not make them go away. Our emotions and thoughts travel with us” (Zubair, “Is Escapism an Effective Coping Mechanism?”). California doctor Carla Marie Manly similarly says, “(escapism is) a desire to ignore, evade, or avoid” (Lapelosova, “The Psychology of Escapism and Travel.”). Yet, is escapism the same as avoidance? The answer is no. Escapism is the mindful, brief pause of reality, while avoidance is

simply not dealing with the source of anxieties. Portraying positive coping mechanisms as harmful (due to a lack of information) can cause more pressure on those who use them. Escapism is not a “dangerous method”; it is a source of growth and enjoyment. “We don’t create a fantasy world to escape reality; we create it to be able to stay.”, Lynda Barry, American cartoonist, and author states (Shenoy, “Why a Little Escapism Can Be Healthy.”). Those with mental illness can find comfort in art forms such as reading, listening to music, or writing. Unnamed escapism is so normalized that many engage in it, (such as dancing or meditation), without even realizing that it is a coping strategy. These are “accentuating the positive parts of life,” according to Fort Behavioral Health (Fortbehavioral.com). Escapism can be enormously helpful to those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to combat their hyper fixations on negative experiences. The way it can evolve into a negative strategy is when “escapism overload” occurs (Fortbehavioral.net). Many find their content in film and media or food, but when binge-watching and overeating take over, it becomes harmful for the user. They cite the adverse and detrimental uses of escapism resulting from drugs and substances where your reality can be shifted for long periods of time, such as drug usage/abuse. Addiction born from escapism can lead to a decline in self-compassion and decrease one’s feeling of responsibility for consequences for their actions (Mentalhealth.net). Drug and alcohol industries perpetuate this to their audiences through advertisements. Alcohol commercials commonly use the escapist fantasy by portraying people drinking at parties and on tropical islands. Quick escapism can be by companies looking to make money off their products, but real escapism takes focus and mindful arrangement.

Another healthy mechanism that can be used is called a “depression timeout”. According to writer Veronika of Sour Sunrise, “depression timeout” is a so-called escapist coping strategy

for depression. "...it is a necessary means of survival and maintaining mental sanity, especially in a stoicism-centered society." (Veronika, "Depression Timeout: An Escapist Coping Strategy."). It is a type of prioritization that can pull our minds away from stress and negativity. As with all coping strategies, there are correct and incorrect ways to use this. The first step is to come up with a plan; having a guide, knowing what you want to accomplish, and knowing your boundaries are essential. Second, rather than banishing bad thoughts but merely recognizing and coming to terms with their existence. Third, avoid cutting out routines or social connections. Sometimes when anxiety overload overtakes, it can be easy to shut down and distance yourself from loved ones. Yet, it is essential to maintain relationships and not lose yourself and normalcy in the timeout. Fourth, taking away your anxieties power. Finding the source of your anxiety's power and how to cut them off will give you more control in problem-solving. Lastly, setting measurements and deadlines. It is easy to get lost in the ease of a depression timeout, so arranging a timeline of the start and end will help you assimilate better back into a normal existence. Realizing how to correctly participate in escapism can help a user reprogram their own brain to denounce the stigma but also help others during a time of heightened stress.

Despite the negative portrayal of escapism, author Grace Pulliam argues for it in, "Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society." (Pulliam, "Opinion: Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society, Individuals Alike as a Coping Mechanism."). During an all-time high in global tension, optimists and escapists have created some of their greatest works. Being called an "inadvertent creative renaissance," (Pulliam, "Opinion: Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society, Individuals Alike as a Coping Mechanism."), escapists have invested their fantasies in creating wild language and technology developments. With more time being allotted to devote to leaving reality, the general public has been engaging in escapism, and they may not even realize. The writers of your

favorite TV show, a content creator on social media, and musicians are all artists that create an experience for their audience. In the '30s and '40s, as people took refuge from the horror of World War II, they found comfort in fantasy books such as “the Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings” by J. R. R. Tolkien. Hitting a height of popularity, the fantastical books provided escapism with the real world’s underlying messages during a tense time in history (Pulliam, “Opinion: Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society, Individuals Alike as a Coping Mechanism.”). Now during the COVID-19 crisis, we see artists of all kinds creating, especially musicians. Singer, writer, producer, and director Taylor Swift has made two albums since the shutdown began, “folklore” and “evermore”, with “folklore” being the year's longest-running chart-topper with eight nonconsecutive weeks at number one on the Billboard charts. The album represents a more solemn, alternative sound, contrasting from Swift’s recent turn to pop. The album’s success in the charts correlates to the public’s feelings and represents the turn of many to escapism through musical storytelling. Through collective escapism, we come together as a community.

The pandemic has brought about an unbelievable wave of anxieties for everyone across the globe. During the age of isolation, distance has made worries for some stronger than ever. When done right, escapism can be a powerful tool to help overcome being overwhelmed in isolation. “If you’re feeling as though everything is a mess and you just can’t cope anymore, escaping it all might be just what you need to recharge,” states E.B. Johnson (Johnson, “How to Effectively Use Escapism in the Age of Social Distancing.”). Recharging for many showed itself as community gaming. In times of disconnect, individuals turned to their Nintendo Switches and escaped into the game “Animal Crossing: New Horizons”. Collective escapism helped many forget about the world for a while through shared experiences. Lindsey Pratt, a New York City psychologist, explains “a general sense of loneliness (creates) a shift in the way (people) fit in

the world around them.” (Lapelosova, “The Psychology of Escapism and Travel.”). Even before COVID, the rise of the social media era began with disconnection becoming more common among Americans. This was needed as the Pew Medical Research Center reported that “43% of Americans feel nervous, anxious, or on edge three days a week (in regards to COVID)” (Pulliam, “Opinion: Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society, Individuals Alike as a Coping Mechanism.”).

Those who found their escape in traveling, community, or even work primarily found themselves trapped. Travelers have been hit extra hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring the world for some is a source of escapism. Being immersed in a new and different reality and culture can offer comfort while pushing one’s scale of normality. “Travel and vacations are a means to reshift and reorganize identities,” states Karen Stein, a sociologist studying culture and travel (Lapelosova, “The Psychology of Escapism and Travel”). Although some may not think of it as such, some find escapism in their jobs. Studies prove, mostly at corporate or office jobs, businessmen and women use their position as a means to escape the real world. Diving into projects and emails provide many an escape from anxieties such as relationships and income. And in terms of community, religious gatherings, clubs, and team sports are all means of escapism that have had to be put on pause during the COVID-19 lockdown. Sports escapism stems from a release of stress through aggressive sports such as Rugby and team-building with companions (Mentalhealth.net). Not only for the players, but many sports fans lost their primary means of escape. Some may have found themselves becoming interior designers as redecorating and impulse buying hit an all-time high. Faith and religion provide a sense of belonging and a relief from the constant feeling of needing life’s answers (mentalhealth.net). “Belonging to a community or support system, such as a family, partnership, or religious group can make one feel comforted as well, creating a sort of safety net for life” (Fortbehavioral.com). Without a sense of

community, many who were without coping mechanisms found themselves lost during the pandemic.

Utilizing escapism has been proven to be more prevalent in younger generations. According to a study done by the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 93% of those with depression or anxiety use this mechanism to cope (Jerabek, "Coping Through Escapism: New Study Reveals How Today's Youth Deals With Stress."). Pyschtests.com tested a vast majority of age groups to prove there is a generational gap when it comes to coping strategies. Baby Boomers (1945-1964) as well show minimal results about escapism, with their number one strategy being problem-solving (Jerabek, "Coping Through Escapism: New Study Reveals How Today's Youth Deals With Stress."). As a result of their rough and traumatic upbringing, boomers are more likely to solve their own problems and be more reluctant to accept help. Generation X (1965-1976) uses problem-solving the most, yet this generation shows the lowest results in reaching out to a loved one (Jerabek, "Coping Through Escapism: New Study Reveals How Today's Youth Deals With Stress."). There is a connection between the independence of Generation X and Boomers. Generation X was raised by boomers and therefore adapted their qualities and coping strategies. Generation Y or Millennials (1977-1995) use escapism the least and problem-solving the most, similar to older generations (Jerabek, "Coping Through Escapism: New Study Reveals How Today's Youth Deals With Stress."). The lack of escapism seen in older generations often results because of the stigma that was placed around coping and mental health in those eras. Generation Z (1995-2017) use escapism as their primary coping mechanism; this strategy scored 61 out of 100 in this age group (Jerabek, "Coping Through Escapism: New Study Reveals How Today's Youth Deals With Stress."). They show the least results in emotional regulation (meditation or mindfulness). To contrast all other generations,

Generation Z has carved out its own unique results when it comes to mental health as it becomes commonly discussed in society. There becomes a disconnect between generations as different ideas about mental health are developed.

The main disconnect between thought groups of escapism is simply miscommunication and lack of definition. As we see, rising in Generation Z, escapism is becoming increasingly common as a coping strategy. During COVID, the people of the world have been challenged in every aspect, but escapists will prevail. As Grace Pulliam writes, “(escapists) will always be chasing what’s outside of our reach; that’s what drives us forward.” (Pulliam, “Opinion: Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society, Individuals Alike as a Coping Mechanism.”). Escapists will always advance the world through art, music, and literature. As Pulliam says, they are continually reaching outside of their limits and creating new artistic versions of reality for all to consume (Pulliam, “Opinion: Escapist Fantasies Benefit Society, Individuals Alike as a Coping Mechanism.”). Escapism becoming more prevalent represents the shift between generations as the young rise to inherit and shape the earth in their own way. Everyone deserves to escape from the world every once in a while.

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