

numa

caring for the spirit in island health

THE RACE WE RUN

The [Barkley Marathon](#) is an ultramarathon trail race held each year in Frozen Head State Park near Wartburg, Tennessee. The grueling 160 km course (composed of five, 32km laps) must be completed within 60 hours. Over the course of the race runners climb an accumulated 16,000 meters (54,000 ft) and well over half of the races run, since the first in 1986, have seen no finisher. Stories abound of runners getting lost, becoming disoriented and even having hallucinations as they reach the later stages of this brutal race.

I think of the Barkley Marathon whenever anyone says that the COVID-19 pandemic is a “marathon and not a sprint”. This phrase was used during the early days of the pandemic when we realized we were in for a long haul and that we needed to pace ourselves for all that lay ahead. It was good counsel at the time.

The problem though is that the COVID-19 pandemic feels like it is turning into a Barkley



type marathon for health care workers. It is long, arduous and has steep learning curves. We can often feel alone and isolated as we run the laps of our work and feel cut off from the supports that helped us get through challenges in the past. In some ways running the course of this pandemic is even more challenging than a Barkley because we never really got to prepare for it, we don't actually know how long it will be, the course keeps changing and we have no idea where the finish line is!

In a race like this it is tempting to resign ourselves to just tough it out. To put our heads down, our foot to the path and just keep running. Some have said that health care has a problem with perpetuating this “tough it out” culture. We are all professionals and we all just need to keep pressing

**If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.**

African Proverb

on. We don't want to appear weak or unprofessional and so avoid voicing our fears and understanding our vulnerabilities. However, pressing on in this manner is simply unsustainable.

As we talk much about essential work and workers these days we also need to see that that caring for our hearts, and our co-workers hearts, is essential as well. Thankfully Island Health has worked hard to provide [psychological supports for staff wellness](#), but in a tough it out culture, many people do not access these supports. Recently a colleague shared with me how his co-worker asked him to join him in an upcoming webinar for managing stress during this time. Swamped with work my colleague declined the invitation. The next day my colleague asked his co-worker how the webinar was. His co-worker shared that he didn't attend it. It was then that my colleague realized that perhaps his declining to join may have been the reason his co-worker didn't take part in it. Perhaps his co-worker thought that he should be as tough and not need to take in such a webinar.

The truth is this race requires us to care for our hearts and our colleagues hearts. Spiritual Health Professionals know this full well. Times of uncertainty and fear are precisely when we need to turn inward and outward to care for those parts of ourselves, and others, which need tending. It is for this reason that Spiritual Health Professionals are available from 8AM-8PM across the island for support.

As I think of it more I don't think it is helpful to compare our current reality to the Barkley Marathon. The comparison of solo runners traversing extensive distances, scaling dizzying heights and pushing themselves to the limits of breaking where only a few will make it is not a helpful one for us as we run this pandemic race.

Instead another kind of race comes to mind. It is a race that each of us has probably run when we were children. It is the three legged race. Perhaps it is better to envision Island Health's 16,000 workers

caught up in a massive three-legged race where we are all bound to one another and required to lean on and support each other. Yes, three legged races can be awkward, disorienting and challenging but as even as we run in this way we know that we are connected and that someone will be there to pick us up when we fall. Running this pandemic race requires patience, deep compassion, and constant coordination - but when we race like this we will always win.

Are you struggling in this COVID-19 race? If so, Spiritual Health is here to support you.

Spiritual/emotional support for patients, families and staff is available from 8AM-8PM from Monday to Friday.

Call: 250-755-7691-ext. 54428

Any questions regarding Island Health's Spiritual Health program can be directed to Darren Colyn, Spiritual Health Leader at darren.colyn@viha.ca

NUMA (Greek for "spirit/breath") is produced by Island Health's [Spiritual Health](#) team to draw awareness to issues of spirituality in health care. The editor of numa is Darren Colyn, Spiritual Health Leader.

To read past issues of NUMA go to [Spiritual Health's Professional Practice webpage](#) and look under "Resources".

