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Looking ahead

It is healthy to contemplate good times ahead. In fact, it makes living in the present that much easier. Discover five ways to create certainty in an uncertain future.

Words MARIE ROWLAND

From ancient philosophy to New Age thinking, it is drummed into us that if we're to have any shot at happiness we must live in the moment. Ruminating on past events or fretting about what is yet to unfold is a recipe for emotional disaster. In either instance, we can't change what has happened nor control what will happen. So the only time where we have any agency is in the here and now. But living in the present doesn't mean we can't experience the pure pleasure of looking forward to something. We all know the thrill of planning that perfect getaway, the buzz of buying tickets to a concert or even getting excited about that date on Saturday night. It is actually healthy for us to plan or contemplate good times to come. In fact, it makes living in the present that much easier.

Being present in the future

In recent times, it has been almost futile to make plans because chances are they were scuppered. Just about every person living in the age of COVID-19 has had to put their life on hold. Holidays were cancelled, concert tickets were refunded and forget the feel of the heaving crowd at a sporting event. And it was the little things that really hurt, like not being able to meet a friend for a coffee or going to your favourite gym class. Disappointment became a way of life, and even now we are all on tenterhooks, dreading the catchcry word of the 2020s:

"Lockdown". For many, it was more than just disappointment but genuine heartache or grief as families were separated and loneliness became a way of life.

However, it has taught us to preserve the precious time we have and to live in the present. And for many of us,

Studies show that researching a destination, booking a flight and counting down to a holiday can not only lift your spirits but actually raises oxytocin levels.

the enforced slowdown and the shift sideways has been good for us as we have been able to savour the moment, encouraging us to live more mindfully. Many people have said that they relished the slower pace of life. But it has also sent some of us stir-crazy. It felt as though time stood still, locked in home detention as curfews and closed borders curtailed our daily routines for long periods of time. Being in the present is undoubtedly a good thing, but the fear of more shutdowns has resulted in many of us abandoning the mere act of planning or even musing about future adventures.

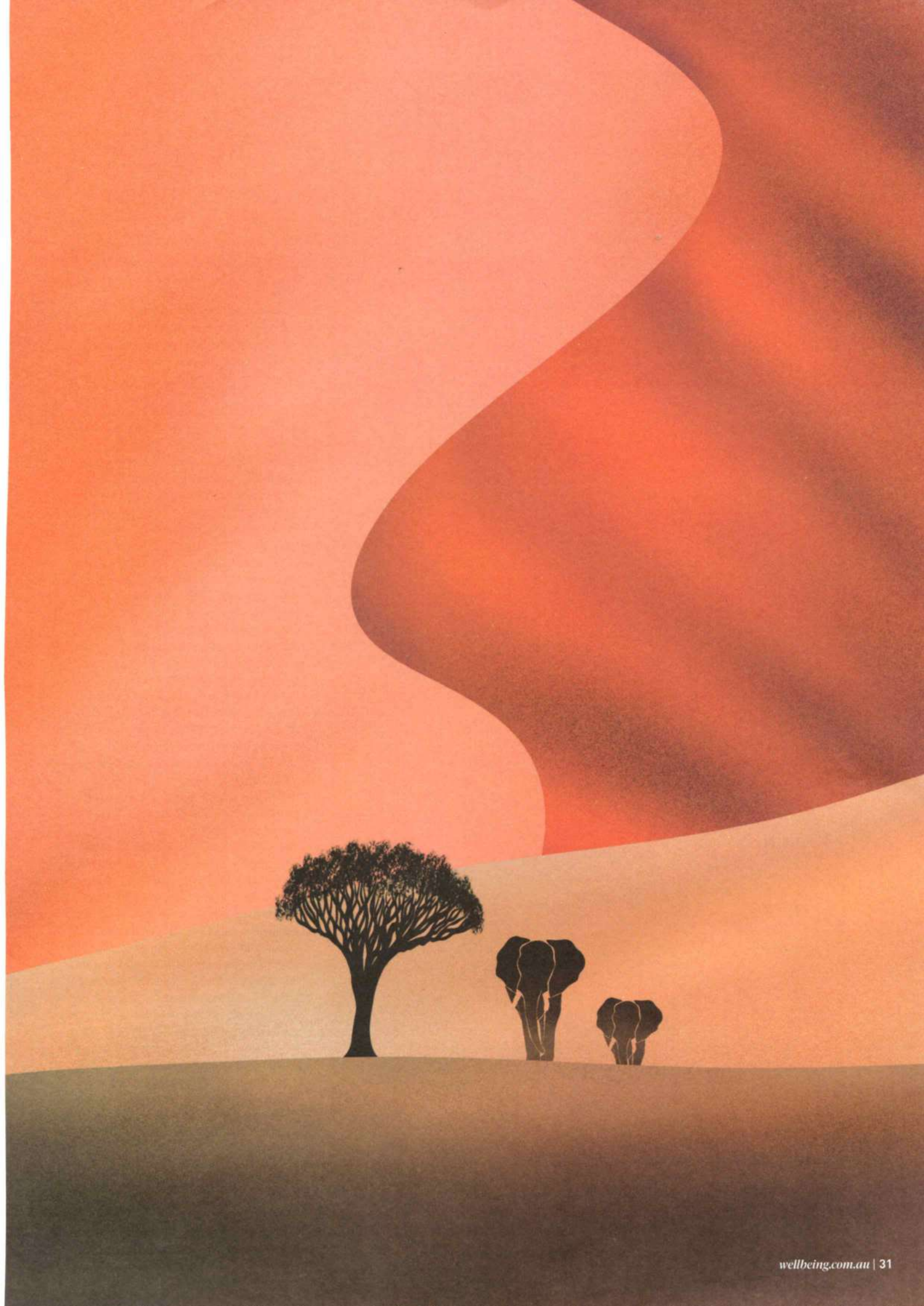
In fact, our adventurous spirit was completely curbed as we succumbed to resignation about an uncertain future.

For some, these prolonged confinements have had detrimental side effects on our sense of hope and wellbeing and, in some extreme cases, people's mental health significantly deteriorated. We lost the capacity to look forward to better times. But knowing that good times do lie ahead can be the very antidote to feeling that life is just one continual Groundhog Day.

Life has been a real fizzer of late, so the buzz of planning ahead has a role to play in optimising the present. Studies show that researching a destination, booking a flight and counting down to a holiday can not only lift your spirits but actually raises oxytocin levels. Who would have thought those happy hormones would go ga-ga over going to la-la land? To have experiences to look forward to is effectively an act of optimism. Thinking about the future can make you happier in the present.

Anticipation emancipation

The feeling of anticipation cuts both ways. It can have a sense of foreboding, but it can also be the delightful feeling of waiting for something exciting to happen. Just as nostalgia or wistful reflection is a happy stroll down memory lane, anticipation is the feeling of putting a positive spin on what is ahead.





*Anticipatory anxiety is
neutralised by delayed
gratification.*

In the challenging times in which we live, the power of positive anticipation can help with the drudgery of now. It can also alleviate stress. It is all about seeing light at the end of a very dark tunnel and applies to a variety of situations. For someone going through a tough time like a separation or even having to get an operation, the other side of these often traumatic events is recovery and renewal. New mothers certainly know that feeling as that first contraction hits. While there can be loads of pain, the gain is a bouncing little cherub. Knowing that there is something meaningful to come makes the struggle getting there a little more tolerable.

In a 2007 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, titled "The impact of anticipating positive events on responses to stress", US researchers Van Boven and Ashworth wanted to ascertain if looking forward or anticipating an event outweighed the pleasure of looking back on happy events. In both instances, life is viewed through rose-coloured glasses, but which tint was rosier? As it happens, future-musing pips out going down memory lane in creating more positive emotions.

Following on from these insights, in a 2010 study on tourism and happiness researchers deduced that holidaymakers reported a higher degree of pre-trip happiness than those who had no plans. The anticipation of going away had a positive effect on emotions, and interestingly those people who went away and had a relaxing, stress-free holiday experienced a boost in happiness post-return. A bad holiday in fact can have a negative effect on a traveller's equilibrium. With that said, studies also show that the happy hormone feeling only lasts three or four weeks after returning home. So it makes sense to start planning your next trip within a month!

Counting down to a holiday is as much fun as the holiday itself. In fact, anticipation can be better than a disappointing holiday. When take-off day gets closer and closer, exponentially you get happier. This is not like waiting for the bathroom at a busy shopping mall where waiting is tedious, but rather it is that "can't wait for it to happen" feeling of delayed gratification that incites all those happy hormones which are kept joyfully at bay until take-off. We see this phenomenon of excitement build-up at

Christmastime. Putting out the lights, the tree and decorations, planning the menu, buying and wrapping the presents is often more exciting than the actual day which can actually be stressful or anticlimactic.

Don't stop thinking about tomorrow

Iconic British-American band Fleetwood Mac penned this song which became the anthem of the future President Bill Clinton's White House campaign. It doesn't at all exalt the virtues of being in the present, but rather is all about shaking off the past in anticipation of a brighter tomorrow.

"Don't stop thinking about tomorrow, Don't stop, it'll soon be here. It'll be better than before, Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone." Anticipation is good motivation. It can also be a distraction from the ills or ails of the past. The song extolls the virtues of being future-focused.

Humans are designed to be future-oriented, and while this can take us out of the present moment, it can also be a helpful cognitive tool. Planning and setting goals give us the motivation to get things done. It makes sense that those things need to be done in the present in order to secure a bright outcome. Farmers plant crops to ensure a bountiful harvest, students study for months before final exams in hopes of gaining great results and brides plan for their big day to attain their dream wedding — some plan their day even before they have found their Prince Charming.

Of course, there is the dark side to anticipation when we allow negative projections to overtake best possible outcomes. Planes do crash and pandemics can happen as we have all found out, so the best-laid plans definitely can and do go awry. The opposite of anticipation is dread; when we live in uncertain times or are prone to high anxiety then it is easy to succumb to pessimistic thinking. Uncertain times call for certainty when it comes to planning for good times ahead.

The little things

Looking forward to that morning coffee may not be something you would declare as a major moment, but freshly brewed coffee with a croissant can be the making of a day. In a life where nothing can be predicted, the little things can make a big difference.

In fact, the little things that bring a smile to your face or make you feel warm and fuzzy inside can compensate for those things in your day that are not fun, like waiting in line for a COVID test or, even worse, waiting for your results. It is not

5 ways to create certainty in an uncertain future

1 Plan things that cannot be undone. Do you remember what it was like waiting for the next instalment of your favourite show before bingeing became a way of life? Well, you can recreate that feeling by previewing what is coming up on your favourite streaming platform and organising a family movie night or a date night for when it drops. All you need is popcorn!

2 Be creative. You love that sexy Spanish restaurant in town but you're in lockdown. Many amazing delivery services have sprouted during this pandemic, so why not set up your own in-house tapas bar by ordering in all the right ingredients and then find that perfect Latin playlist to set the scene?

3 Write down three things you are really looking forward to. Then go one step further and plan them.

4 If you have something fun to look forward to after experiencing a stressful event it can alleviate the anxiety of the event itself. So if you have a tough job interview or a performance review, organise to go out to dinner or a drink with someone who you know can make you



laugh no matter what. Anticipatory anxiety is neutralised by delayed gratification.

5 Swap the "what ifs" with "whatever". We all know that things do go wrong so we tend to anticipate the worst with all the what ifs that can go wrong. By just saying "Whatever" means that you will accept whatever happens. This is the antidote to crushing disappointment. Accepting that things can go wrong in life can ease the upset.

about being present, it is about making life more palatable. In that moment there is uncertainty, but if you have a plan then you also create an orbit of control. If you know you're picking up your favourite Thai after being in a queue for an hour, the knowledge of that little treat can take that the edge off the interminable present. This is called "proactive coping", which is the act of anticipating stressful situations or potential stressors and making provision for them by planning something to mitigate them. We can act now or in advance of a situation by having something to look forward to in order to prevent feeling upset afterwards. Anticipatory anxiety is when we feel anxious about something before it happens, so proactive coping is a way to mute or lessen its impact. It actually helps us move on from a bad situation more quickly.

Present tense, future calm

Living in the moment is a choice. We can choose to be present and make the most of the moment, but we can also do two

things at the same time. We can live in the present while keeping an eye on the prize in the future. When we look forward to something we have manifested or designed either in the short or long term then we choose to not wait for good things to happen to us. We are making our life. We can look forward to something or know that something good awaits us even though we are living in the present moment.

It is not about living in the future, but rather living in the moment looking forward to a better future. We don't want to be blindly positive but we can afford a little optimism. Sometimes it can be things that have nothing to do with our own making that can put a little spring in our step.

It is one thing to live in the moment, but it is just as much fun to love the moment yet to come. 🍌

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