

Managing Stress of COVID-19

If you find it hard to stay calm during this COVID-19 pandemic, you are not alone. From the constant news about the most recent death counts to border closings to the long lines at your local grocery store, it is hard not to feel the effects of this health crisis. No matter who you are, feeling stressed and afraid is a normal response to an illness about which there is still so much to learn and a health crisis for which the country seems unprepared. But even if you don't succumb to the coronavirus, the chronic stress that may result from constant fear and anxiety about the illness, and the social isolation caused by social distancing and quarantine, can cause physical symptoms of their own.

Common symptoms of chronic stress include headaches, insomnia, muscle tension, stomach distress such as heartburn and acid reflux, and joint pain. You may also experience behavioral symptoms, such as increased smoking, eating, or drinking, and emotional symptoms, such as irritability, anxiety, or depression. Furthermore, the demands of social distancing may mean that your usual stress management strategies, such as going to the gym or hanging out with loved ones, are no longer accessible to you. So here are some stress management techniques for getting you through the next few weeks until life goes back to some sense of normalcy.

1. **Breathe:** Taking slow, deep breaths is a great way to calm down your entire body and your mind. To do this, close your eyes and take in a deep breath through your nose on a count of five, hold for a count of three, then breathe out through your mouth on a count of five. Repeat five times. Do this any time you feel stressed, to start your day in the right mood, and to get calm at the end of your day so you can get a good night's sleep.
2. **Practice mindfulness:** Focusing on the breath is a simple start. You can also meditate, with or without a mantra. You can take some time to sit quietly and repeat affirmations that keep you thinking positively. For example, during these times when we have to be socially isolated, you could repeat several times, "This will pass," or "I will get through this," while sitting quietly with your eyes closed. And if you have not yet tried yoga, you can find lots of free yoga classes on YouTube to get started.
3. **Go outside.** If you are one of the millions of people now working from home, and the weather is amenable, find a spot outside to take the laptop and the phone calls. This will help keep the stir crazies away.
4. **Go on a media diet.** Yes, you want to stay up-to-date on the latest news about the virus or the stock market, but listening to the news all day every day is going to exacerbate any feelings of anxiety, stress, or sadness. Check the news and social media at set times of the day, and limit yourself to 15 minutes at a time. And when you get on social media, spend some time on things that make you smile or laugh and touch your heart in some way
5. **Exercise:** and do it outside. You need to exercise now more than ever. Take a walk, ride a bike, go for a run, take the yoga mat outside, or do some calisthenics in your backyard or on your balcony. Movement releases the pleasure hormone dopamine, which makes us feel good, and fresh air and sunshine are also great for boosting your mood. But remember to keep your distance. So go outside early in the morning or late in the evening, stay in your neighborhood, and forego public parks and trails.
6. **Show your love:** If you live with others, now is a great time to spend some quality time together. Bring out the board games and the puzzles. Have long conversations. Call that friend or cousin you haven't spoken to in months. Do mindfulness exercises together. Develop a schedule for calling your parents, children, siblings, or friends. And if you find yourself needing some personal space from the people you live with, then formally structure some alone time for everyone to reduce the stress of too much togetherness.
7. **Get your financial house in order:** Do your taxes. Go through your bank and credit card statements and cancel those unwanted subscriptions. Cancel travel plans. Make a budget. Manage your investments. If you have lost a job, or your income has been impacted by the economic impacts of COVID-19, now is the time to make a financial plan for getting through the next three months.
8. **Get creative.** With all this time on your hands, you can skip the binge-worthy series on Netflix and start that art or crafting or household project you haven't had time to do. Indulging your creativity is an excellent

distraction and a great way to de-stress. Knit, paint, sew, or create a photo book of your last vacation. Paint a room or some furniture.

9. Write. If you were not someone who journals, now is a good time to put your feelings and thoughts down on paper. This is a historic time, and this won't just help you process your emotions in the present but help you put this time in context later. You can also express your creativity through poetry. Now is the time to learn a language, build professional skills, or learn a new hobby. If you had a trip planned that you had to cancel, maybe you want to learn a new language to help you when you do finally get to travel again. If you already have a hobby, you can build on the skills you already have. Maybe your job loss has inspired you to change careers, and you now have time to learn a new skill. There are lots of free classes on YouTube, and you can also explore classes on a learning platform like Coursera or Teachable, etc.
10. Be grateful. It can be easy to focus on all the negatives that result from dealing with a pandemic, so being deliberate about being grateful is a great way to counteract the negativity. Start and end each day by stating—or journaling—at least three things you are grateful for. Research shows that this reduces stress and increases feelings of optimism.

If you have any questions or need supportive, confidential counseling please don't hesitate to contact me at (808) 341-5426. I am working from home, but still available to assist with anything you need via Zoom or Face-Time.

Aloha & Take care,

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