

COVID19: Tips for Stress Management and De-escalating Anxiety

Overview:

We are all dealing with stress related to the current COVID19 crisis. There is constant change, uncertainty, and we don't always feel we have all the tools we need to meet the challenges.

Below are some practices, tips, and resources for taking care of yourselves, patients and each other during time when we feel stressed and anxious.

Relaxation Practices:

Our "fight or flight" stress hormones stimulate the autonomic that feels like anxiety or panic. The bodily sensations signal the brain to activate vigilance in the form of excessive worry. It also triggers our tendency to *overestimate* danger and *underestimate* our own ability to cope and respond. All of this is functional when there is a tiger in the forest, but rarely in the modern day-to-day. Some high-yield practices to reduce and cope with anxiety include:

- Sleep – prioritizing good sleep when it is possible decreases vulnerability to anxiety and increases ability cope. You can look up tips for sleep hygiene here: https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/sleep_hygiene.html
- Controlled breathing may be the single most effective measure to counter the biology of fight or flight. The essential components of relaxation breathing are a *slow rate* – slower than you normally want, and *diaphragmatic* – breathing fully, as if down to the belly. To be effective, continue for a full minute twice a day, plus every time you think of it.
 - One way of practicing is to count 4 slow beats on every in-breath and every out breath.
 - Also see headspace resource at end of document for more guided meditations including a 1min. breath practice.
- Physical activity or exercise is the overlooked powerful medicine.
- Enjoyable activities are critically important. Schedule at least one thing every day, and also pay attention to tiny, momentary pleasures. It can be brief.

Remember - because relaxation in the face of stress is literally counter-instinctive, *scheduled, purposeful effort* is needed.

Distress Tolerance:

Distress tolerance skills allow us to manage in the short term and tolerate discomfort without expecting relief (although you may experience some relief). They are meant for short term management and could be used during the workday to help cope. The idea is to turn momentarily away from the stress of the crisis.

Improve the Moment from DBT:

- **Imagery:** close your eyes and visualize a beautiful place

- **Meaning:** Connect with what is most meaningful to you – look at a picture of your dog, or ask how am I acting in line with my values in this moment?
- **Prayer** – prayer is a form of mindfulness and self-soothing
- **Relaxation** – see above
- **One thing in the moment** – taste a bite of chocolate, smell lavender scent, listen to a song
- **Vacation** – reading a poem or looking at a beautiful picture , singing, dancing or doing something you love that you can do in the moment can be a vacation.
- **Encouragement-** talk to yourself like you would a friend

Reducing Worry: Trying to “not worry” can make worry worse. While it may be counter-intuitive confronting worry directly can help. Ask yourself: What is the worst that might happen”? In a sense, this allows your mind to do what it is trying to – jump to catastrophic assumptions. It is better to meet and respond to fears than try to push them out. Then, you can form responses:

- “If my worst-case scenario should really come to pass, how will I cope?” List *all* that you can do, including what we all hope for on the eventual day we take our last breath – peaceful acceptance.
- “Meanwhile, what can I do today to avert the worst chain of events?” Among the many the responses to this question, panic and sedation are never on the list.

Emotions - Name it and Tame it: Naming emotions can turn down the volume on anxiety and also expand your awareness of the positive emotions you may be experiencing like feeling cared for or grateful to peers and co-workers. Simply try employing your whole vocabulary, e.g. with this list - <https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory> - to find exactly the word to identify what you feel at any moment.

Discover Opportunity: Highly disrupted times are often when communities coalesce. Amidst stress, pain and loss, our shared purpose in confronting adversity also gives rise to sudden leaps of innovation. We may experience profound collaboration and witness – or model – grace, citizen leadership and quiet acts of unsung heroism. This is such a moment, when we may seek and seize our opportunities to shine.

On-line Resources:

- For one minute breath focused meditation and other helpful mindfulness exercise try this free access to the Headspace App: <https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>
- For a very short video to help you with abdominal breathing see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UB3tSaiEbNY>
- A good app for breathing and relaxation is Breathe2Relax: <http://t2health.dcoe.mil/apps/breathe2relax>
- For a “Relax in a Hurry” see http://www.mbmi.org/basics/mstress_RIAH.asp

- The Corona Virus Sanity Guide: <https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide>
- For a brief vacation join YoYo Ma in “Songs of Comfort”:
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/yo-yo-ma-on-encouraging-songs-of-comfort-amid-global-crisis>

A few useful brief articles on managing anxiety and stress:

- The value of accepting anxiety: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/going-out-not-knowing/202003/feeling-anxious-course?eml>
- https://rightasrain.uwmedicine.org/mind/stress/coronavirus-anxiety?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTm90VHb1Z5aXA4cVdWZk8xcE85TnU4S2IreUdqSX11eGhUXC9WZIBLZFBDeCt3ZW90eFZicW1YTHRcL2VmNkVCIn0%3D
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/anxiety-zen/202003/19-ways-support-your-mental-health-during-covid-19>
- How to watch videos and movies together while social distancing:
<https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/24/21191503/netflix-party-stream-movies-tv-chat-watch-friends-social-distance>

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