

What a challenging time. We find ourselves on the front end of a global health crisis as a pandemic sweeps across Asia, Europe, and now the United States. Our lives have been disrupted in countless ways and activities as basic as meeting with friends, going to work, or even leaving the house have taken on a gravity that we would have thought impossible just weeks ago. Many of these adaptations, especially physical isolation in concert with radical changes to daily routines, present meaningful threats to our emotional well-being. The purpose of this article is to review some of these challenges and to offer strategies for maximizing psychological wellness while we collectively minimize our physical contact with others.

Be compassionate with your own reaction to the challenges in front of us. Appreciate the magnitude of what we are going through and recognize that uncertainty is the new normal. Humans prefer order and predictability; the spread of this virus is inherently disordered and unpredictable.

Tips for reducing COVID-19 related stress:

1. **Put your own risk in context.** It is important to recognize that, as a community, we are collectively taking dramatic steps to protect the most vulnerable subset of the population. This is a good thing, and it represents our best chance at reducing the ultimate cost of the pandemic. At the same time, our behavior shapes our thoughts and feelings, and these dramatic shifts in everyday life make us feel individually vulnerable, even if we are, ourselves, informed, prepared, and safe at home.
2. **Moderate your access to information.** The desire to stay up to date and connected is understandable. Many of us believe that the more data we have, the better decisions we will make, and the better off we can be. Still, the information on this virus is sometimes contradictory, often overwhelming, and always a challenge to our sense of well-being. Carefully assess how often it makes sense for you to bring yourself up to date and resist the urge to stay plugged in 24/7. The internet and social media may seem to be the only way to stay in touch right now, but it is best to consciously disconnect from sources of information that are more provocative than helpful.
3. **Establish and maintain healthy routines.** Make sure to get enough sleep, eat right, and engage in regular exercise. Workouts are especially beneficial because our bodies receive physical activity as the most natural remedy for stress (fight or flight). Avoid using drugs, alcohol, or other forms of numbing to

cope as they tend to make things worse over the longer term.

4. **Stay productive.** Vacations are wonderful, they give us a break from routine and a chance to relax. This is not a vacation, and prolonged periods of inactivity are a reliable drain on our mental health. Starting a project with tangible outcomes, learning a new skill, or just completing long overdue tasks will bolster our sense of agency, which is in especially short supply right now.
5. **Find connection.** Traditional emotional supports like extended family, friends, and social groups are less available right now, but reaching out, even virtually, is as important as ever. Many sources of help, from personal to professional, are transitioning to phone and/or online. You can help too. Providing comfort and assistance to those at particular risk (e.g. helping your elderly neighbor with shopping or accessing online resources) is a terrific way to connect, and a reminder that you can make a difference at this difficult time.
6. **Be Present.** This pandemic invites anticipatory anxiety like nothing in our collective memory. This future-oriented worry may initially mobilize us to make proactive changes in our behavior, but left unchecked, it diminishes our capacity to recognize the positive things in our lives right now. When you feel like you've lost your footing, an exercise as simple as focusing on the breath for three minutes can reground you.

Problematic reactions to crisis include:

1. Sleep problems
2. Irritability
3. Difficulty concentrating
4. Being on-guard or easily startled
5. Feeling disconnected
6. Diminished enjoyment from pleasurable activities

Don't hesitate to seek help if these reactions are intense, distressing, and causing more impairment than you can handle on your own.

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