

Strategies And Tools For Dealing With Stress During The Coronavirus Pandemic

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The logo features a grid of small squares on the left and right sides. In the center, the text reads "Office of Intramural TRAINING & EDUCATION" with "TRAINING & EDUCATION" in a larger, bold font. Below this, it says "NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH".

Let's Take a Collective Deep Breath

① inhale - feel the belly expand first.

② inhale - feel the chest expand after the belly.

③ Pause the breath before exhaling.

④ exhale feel the belly contract first.

⑤ exhale feel the chest contracting after the belly.

⑥ Pause the breath before inhaling.

<https://pureleadership.wordpress.com/2011/01/31/spiritual-toolbox-taking-a-deep-breath/>
Zaccaro, A., Piarulli, A., Laurino, M., Garbella, E., Menicucci, D., Neri, B., & Gemignani, A. (2018). How breath-control can change your life: a systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing. *Frontiers in human neuroscience*, 12, 353.

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Anxiety vs. Stress

■ Clinical Anxiety

1. The presence of excessive anxiety and worry about a variety of topics, events, or activities. Worry occurs more often than not for at least 6 months and is clearly excessive.
2. The worry is experienced as very challenging to control. The worry in both adults and children may easily shift from one topic to another.
3. The anxiety and worry are accompanied with at least three of the following *physical* or cognitive symptoms (In children, only one symptom is necessary for a diagnosis of GAD):
 - Edginess or restlessness
 - Tiring easily; more fatigued than usual
 - Impaired concentration or feeling as though the mind goes blank
 - Irritability (which may or may not be observable to others)
 - Increased muscle aches or soreness
 - Difficulty sleeping (due to trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, restlessness at night, or unsatisfying sleep)

■ Colloquial anxiety

- “I am feeling anxious about the situation.”

■ Stress

- What we feel in the presence of a stressor (not always negative - eustress)



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Stress vs. Distress

Stress

“Stress denotes a real or perceived perturbation to an organism’s physiological homeostasis or psychological well-being.” The body then responds through a myriad of behaviors and physiological mechanisms to get things back to normal. This includes behavioral reactions (getting angry, trying to control things, avoiding situations, shutting down, overactivation, self-soothing, interacting with others, taking a break, etc.), and physiological symptoms such as “activation of the sympathetic nervous system and adrenal medulla, secretion of stress hormones (e.g., glucocorticoids and prolactin)...”

Distress

“Most definitions characterize distress as an aversive, negative state in which coping and adaptation processes fail to return an organism to physiological and/or psychological homeostasis (Carstens and Moberg 2000; Moberg 1987; NRC 1992). Progression into the maladaptive state may be due to a severe or prolonged stressor or multiple cumulative stressful insults with deleterious effects on the animal’s welfare.”

National Research Council. (2008). *Recognition and alleviation of distress in laboratory animals*. National Academies Press.

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What Moves Us from Stress to Distress

- Duration of stressor
- Intensity of stressor
- Predictability of stressor
- Control of stressor
- Intolerance of Uncertainty
 - Higher when we have anxiety

“Numerous studies indicate that, in animals that can predict the onset of a stressful stimulus or control its duration, the behavioral and physiological impacts of stressor exposure are attenuated.”

National Research Council. (2008). *Recognition and alleviation of distress in laboratory animals*. National Academies Press.
 Carleton, R. N., Mulvogue, M. K., Thibodeau, M. A., McCabe, R. E., Antony, M. M., & Asmundson, G. J. (2012). Increasingly certain about uncertainty: Intolerance of uncertainty across anxiety and depression. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, 26(3), 468-479.

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What are Mental Models?

What are Mental Models made of?



“Mental models are deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. Very often, we are not consciously aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behavior.”

- Peter Senge

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-02/ufmcs-red-team-central/w/resources/22113/mental-models-intuition-and-decision-making/>

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This is an Unprecedented Time

- We don't have a mental model for this one yet, so our brains might be working hard to get back to homeostasis by creating a plethora of scenarios (racing thoughts).
 - Our brains are also wired for a negative bias, meaning that a lot of the scenarios we have will cause more anxiety.



- New things, even good things, make us feel stressed and anxious
 - When new or stressful situations arise, we use mental models to think through the situation

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Current Stressors

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| ■ Uncertainty | ■ Isolation |
| ■ Scarcity | ■ Decision Fatigue |
| ■ Balancing Work and Family | ■ Lack of Control |
| ■ Health and Safety of Yourself and Loved Ones | ■ Information Overload |
| ■ Finances and Job Security | ■ Disappointments and Cancelations |
| ■ Expectations from Supervisors | ■ Changes |
| ■ Impacts on Future/Career | ■ Productivity |
| ■ Unpredictability | ■ Length of The Outbreak/Isolation |
| ■ Helplessness | ■ Differences in Beliefs |
| | ■ Others? |

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Strategies for Resilience and Stress Management During COVID-19



<http://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311?pg=2>; <https://home.hello-driven.com/6-domains-of-resilience.html>

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Strategy 1: Setting Boundaries



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Boundaries

- “Boundaries” are thoughtful and intentional ways of setting limits with others (and ourselves) with the aim of preserving and enhancing our mental health
- This is a new situation, so we may need to set new boundaries, and they may take some tweaking:
 - Media consumption
 - Work demands
 - Email/time on the screen
 - Ending worktime
 - Family/friend demands
 - Routines/schedule
 - Saying “no” to requests
 - “Checking”
 - Setting “rules” for ourselves



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Strategy 2: Controlling What You Can



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Cannot Control

- The way others are responding and the speed at which a vaccine is made
- Duration of self-isolation

Wish to Control

- Behavior of others
- Interactions with others
- Length of self-isolation
- Items from your red circle

Can Control

- Things we have a realistic shot of managing
- Our own thoughts and behavior
- Our own reactions to others
- Routines/ Boundaries

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Controlling What You Can

- Be aware that the things you wish you could control (but can't) are often the areas that tend to increase anxiety and may even cause you to feel **helpless or hopeless**
 - **The yellow category might be the ones we keep spinning around in our heads to see if we can come up with the resources to match the stressors!**
- There are going to be things, FOR EVERYONE, that we can't control or predict, or solve
- There also are many things you can control, risks you can minimize, and outcomes you can influence

Learning the difference and spending your limited energy, focus and time on those within your sphere of control is an integral part to managing your anxiety.

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Control What You Can

- What are your fears?
 - When distress and anxiety begin, we often find our thoughts running on hyperdrive. Thinking is what our brain is made for! Parse out the worries you can have agency over.
- What if we get stuck
 - When we get stressed, we often take the data we have and try and run it through as many hypotheses as possible

But sometimes our negative biases ignore critical data!

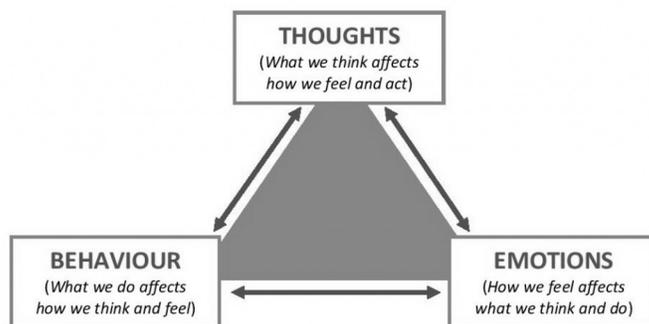
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Strategy 3: Helpful Thoughts



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Using Helpful Thoughts To Impact Our Feelings and Our Actions



<https://beckinstitute.org/cognitive-model/>

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Thought: My CV is ruined because my Post-Doc ends and people are going to think that I didn't do anything in the last 3 months.

Behavior: Stay in bed, overeat, isolate, avoid emails

Feel: Panicked, stressed, worried, sad, angry, overwhelmed, etc.

Unhelpful Thoughts

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Thought: Everyone is having to stop right now, and this is easily explainable to my next employer. I wish it was different, but I can only focus on the work I can do.

Behavior: Healthy coping, working on what you can

Feel: Uneasy, uncomfortable, relieved, motivated

Helpful Thoughts

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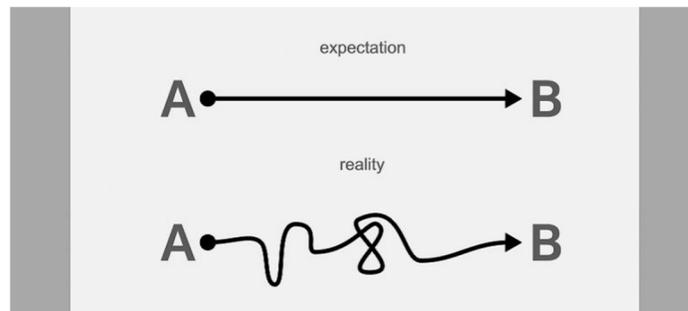
Types of Unhelpful Thoughts

- **All-or-nothing thinking:** Our performance is either perfect or it is a complete failure
- **Catastrophizing:** We exaggerate the implications of a setback or mistake, or imagine the worst will happen
- **Mind reading:** We make assumptions about what someone else is thinking
- **Fortune telling:** We predict the outcome of an event before it happens
- **Discounting the Positive:** We disregard the positive evidence and focus on the negatives
- **Over-generalization:** We take one negative event and see other similar events through that lens

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Strategy 4: Setting Reasonable and Realistic Expectations



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Reasonable Expectations: Career

- How much can I get done in this period?
- How fast can I answer emails?
- How much of my time should be “productive?”
- What happens if I am less “productive” than I want to be?
- Should my priorities shift or change right now?
- Can I change my definition of “productive” at this strange times?
- Is it reasonable to expect I will feel as useful as I did when I was in the office for 8-12 hours a day?
- How do my expectations align with my supervisor’s expectations of me?
- Can I take a little more time to respond to emails?
- Can I say no to things if it feels like it is too much for me?
- How much can I reasonably expect to help the anxiety of others (family members/bosses) while I am working on my own stress?
- Do I have to strive for “perfection” at this time or can I adjust for now?
- Can I remember that everyone is going through this, and people who are in charge will be aware and work with me?

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Reasonable Expectations: Family

- What can I really expect of myself as a parent/sibling/partner/adult child/friend right now?
- How much can I expect from others?
- How much can I give to my kids and my career at the same time?
- What are my expectations for myself when I am parenting right now? Are they reasonable?
- How can I best solve conflicts given the stress that everyone is feeling?
- What boundaries do I need to set?
- What would I say to a friend right now?

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Reasonable Expectations: Self

- Should I be taking on new challenges right now?
 - Intense/new exercise routines
 - Challenging diets
 - House renovations
- Can I remember that this is not permanent, and though it might be longer than I prefer, it will pass and changing my expectations now doesn't mean they will stay this way?
- Can I be kind to myself the way I would be kind to a friend?
- Do I need a schedule, or is it okay if I don't have one?

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Strategy 5: Separating “Work” from “Home”



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Work From Home: Separating “Work” from “Home”

- How can you physically or mentally separate work time from home time?
 - Different rooms
 - Set times
 - Sensory separations after work
 - Go for a walk
 - Cook
 - Take a shower
 - Change clothes
 - Walk around the block for a “commute” if possible
 - Shutting off your computer
 - Turning off the “pings” if possible

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Strategy 6: Reducing Information Overload



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Information Overload: There are Choices

- Ask yourself: Do I feel better or worse after I check the news? How long does it take me to recover from reading the news?
 - Instead of overconsumption, put yourself on a media diet:
 - Chose where you are getting your information
 - Chose how often you would like to check on information
 - Chose who you talk to about the articles you have read
 - Ask those around you to slow down on the info they send you/questions they ask you (Boundaries)

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Strategy 7: Managing Stress of Differing Beliefs



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Differing Beliefs

- What can I do if the people I live with have different beliefs about self-isolation than I do?
 - Washing and cleaning routines
 - Discussions
 - Family/roommate meetings
 - Requests for respect
 - Support from universities
 - Picking your battles
- What can I do if I become upset when I see people in media with differing self-isolation beliefs than me?
 - What can you control?

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Strategy 8: Tolerating Uncertainty



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Tolerating Uncertainty

Stress of uncertainty is to be expected. Be mindful if it overwhelms you and gets in the way of doing things you want to do or need to do.

- Focus on your daily routines
 - Writing them down helps!
- Try not to overconsume media
- Do at least one or two things each day that help you feel calm
- Talk to others
- Know that this will pass
- Volunteer or help a friend (helps with feeling powerless or helpless)

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Strategy 9: Relax and Rest

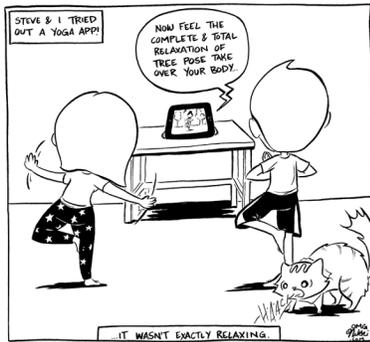


Image left slightly altered



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Give Yourself Permission to Relax

Know the difference between relaxing that rejuvenates us and numbing that leads to avoiding emotions and feeling worse afterwards



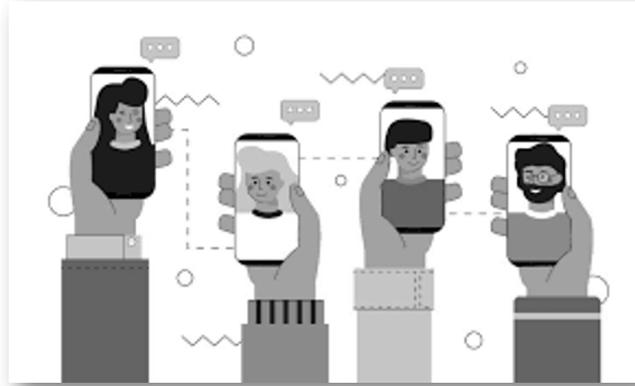
Healthy Self-Soothing/Distractions

- ✓ Reading
- ✓ Writing
- ✓ Walking
- ✓ Talking to a helpful friend/family member
- ✓ Playing with pets
- ✓ Cooking
- ✓ Artwork/music
- ✓ TV/Movies/Video Games
- ✓ Volunteering
- ✓ More?



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Strategy 10: Reach Out and Connect with Others



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Know that you aren't alone

- Physical distancing vs. social distancing
- Helpful friends and family
- Using technology to your advantage



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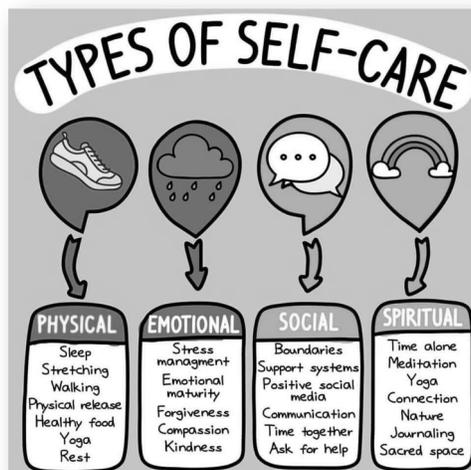
Know that you aren't alone

- University and Training Institute Resources
 - EAP or Student Health Resources
 - Private therapists are working through telehealth
- National Resources:
 - SAMHSA's National Helpline – 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
 - Teletherapy is widely available through HIPAA compliant means, and insurance is increasingly covering this.

Everyone is aware of this, so higher ups are thinking of solutions. You are not alone.

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Strategy 11: If Nothing Else...



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If Nothing Else....

- Sleep
 - Routines, turn of electronics, meditate, write down worries, change your routine 10 minutes at a time
- Exercise
 - Free classes online, walks, be gentle on yourself
- Nutrition
- Mindfulness
 - Recognizing your feelings (disappointment, overwhelmed, sad, worried) without judging them
 - “How do I feel?” instead of “How should I feel?”
- Healthy Relationships
- Mental Health
 - Reach out <https://www.stresshealth.org/what-can-i-do/>



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Conclusion

- This is an uncertain and unprecedented time.
- Distress is to be expected, be kind to yourself the way you would a friend.
- Focus on the green circle (What can we control each day, or each hour).
- Find the things that sooth you and prioritize them in your schedule.

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