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Caring for Ourselves and Others in the Midst of a Quickly Changing World

We are living a collective experience.

The Covid-19 crisis is an event that can be highly stressful and anxiety producing, bringing unexpected tension into our lives. It affects every member of our families, and all aspects of our day-to-day living. But we do have tools at hand that can help us reduce the stressors of everyday living through a pandemic.

It is natural and normal to have a response of fear when faced with something that is a threat. Fear is felt and experienced by each one of us in unique ways, but it produces some common effects in our bodies, minds, emotions, and sense of well-being.

It is also normal to be easily overwhelmed, to panic, to turn away, and to try to deflect or brush off a crisis. These are all ways of coping with the overwhelming. In the long run, avoidant choices take a toll on our bodies, emotions, and relationships. To regain perspective and focus, it is helpful to address our emotions gradually, at a pace we can handle.

In a time of ongoing stress, it is important to find rhythms of living that bring down fear and reduce its impact on us. These rhythms help us as we walk through uncertainty, and as we recover. An additional benefit of reducing stress responses during the COVID-19 crisis is that it strengthens our immune system.

During crisis, we have the opportunity to learn new things about ourselves and those around us: strengths we didn't realize we had, and limitations we would be wise to acknowledge.

This handout is intended to give you a general outline of what we are collectively experiencing during the Covid-19 pandemic, along with ideas and suggestions to start you on your way to naming your own unique experiences of this season. It is designed as a mental health first-aid kit, not to replace attention from a mental health professional, but to prepare you to manage your stresses as you find rhythms that are a fit for you during this time.

We can draw strength from the fact that we are not alone.

Everyone, the whole world over, is experiencing the effects of the pandemic. The presence of COVID-19, whether we become ill or not, touches us all.

While we cannot control our circumstances, we can still choose what to do with our fear and how we respond.

All of us share this experience with others, but the effects of this season—and our response to it—are unique to each person. There is no one right way to live through and respond to crisis. We each have to find the way that fits for us and our needs.

The journey begins with an acute crisis phase that includes:

- Absorbing that this is really happening and naming the experience
- Feeling the effects of it on our lives and naming the emotions it stirs in us
- Finding ways to respond to it, and care for ourselves and others

Once the acute phase of the crisis dies down, we will transition to:

- Assessing its impact on us
- Making meaning and sense of it
- Rebuilding life in a new way, that now includes the fact that we have lived through Covid-19

As unprecedented as this season can feel, we can use this process to walk through this experience. Yes, there is an end to the intensity of this season! And we will begin to rebuild life again, with new resilience.

What are the central fears we experience in the wake of COVID-19?

This is a season in which our lives have been disrupted, and we feel the sudden loss of our usual rhythms of life. Fears develop in response to this disruption. You may feel some or all of the fears listed below, and there may be fears particular to your story that also are touched by this change to our regular routines.

Fear of the Unknown

- This is an unknown virus.
- We don't know what will happen next or what we will have to face.
- We don't know how long this will last.
- We don't fully know how it will touch us.
- We don't know what life will look like on the other side of this season.

Fear Stemming From Loss of Control and the Inability to Plan

- We experience feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, or being stuck.

Fear of Loss

- We already feel the losses of events and activities we had planned.
- We fear the unknown loss that might come.
- We fear for loved ones who are vulnerable.
- We fear financial losses.

We can also absorb the anxiety that is present in public settings and it can increase our anxiety. Limiting trips to the grocery store and balancing alone time with together time can help counter this anxiety.

This experience affects each of us uniquely. Introverts may not feel so bad in self-isolation, which is likely harder for extroverts. Make sure you find a good balance for your needs, while respecting those of others around you.

How can we care for ourselves?

Gather Information That Helps You Name What You Are Experiencing

- It helps to be informed of what is happening and to hear what is next from trusted authorities. Learn what all the new terms mean: flattening the curve, social distancing, self-isolation, quarantine. Learn why practicing them matters.
- Pick 2–3 trusted sources for your information. Examples include government officials, health authorities, and the World Health Organization.
- Limit checking the news to what is actually needed for the day. Some days may require more checks than others, depending on how quickly the situation is changing.

Strengthen Your Resiliency

In non-crisis life, we go about our lives with the reality that we don't have full control, but we are able to plan and live because we also have a muscle of resiliency. In times of crisis, that muscle is overwhelmed and we need to strengthen and build it up. As we do that, we regain perspective, reduce fear, and we find a way through the current challenges that fits for us. You can strengthen your resilience by:

- Staying grounded in yourself
- Supporting the people around you
- Staying connected

Recover Your Sense of Grounding

Being grounded means being aware of and present to what you're living in this moment. It includes the awareness of who you are (with your strengths and weaknesses), how you're doing, and what you need, whether literally in the moment, or in the day, week, or season you are experiencing.

In continually shifting circumstances, we need to keep grounding ourselves in order to absorb and find our footing in each new level of the reality we are living.

Grounding begins by creating a structure based on a rhythm of living that includes all the elements we need to reduce stress.

- Build a routine that is flexible and can be adjusted, and that takes into account how, when, and where you do life. Include variety and flexibility with choices for play and downtime.
- When so much is changing so quickly, set out a structure for the day or the week, and then regroup to see what's working. The steady anchors that provide structure are sleep, eating, exercise, work, or school.
- Maintaining the same core elements in your crisis routine as you would in regular life can help restore a steadiness to living.
- Set up regular check-in's with yourself, perhaps along with mealtimes. Ask how you are doing, what you need.

Write out a schedule that works for you. When you feel thrown off, it can remind you how to get your footing again.

How can we establish a regular rhythm of care?

Care for Your Physical Body

- **Sleep at regular times.** This allows your body and mind to rest and absorb the new.
- **Eat nutritious foods.** These foods can reduce the levels of cortisol in your body while restoring the energy burned up by stress.
- **Exercise.** Whether walking, running, cycling, or dancing, bilateral movement has been found to calm the mind.
- **Do deep breathing exercises 2–3 times a day.** This reduces cortisol and helps clear the mind to regain focus.
- **Stay hydrated.**

Care for Your Whole Self

Activities that engage your five senses (taste, touch, hearing, seeing, sensation) will reduce stress, bring in calm, and restore your mind. Keep a balance of activities that stimulate the senses, especially if you are doing a lot of digital work.

- **Bring beauty into your home.** Light a candle, buy some tulips along with supplies at the grocery store.
- **Do organizational tasks or household chores.** These can calm the mind when you can't focus.
- **Go for a walk outdoors,** in nature, where you can get some sunlight with its Vitamin D.
- **Bond with your pets.** Take your dog for a walk, curl up with your cat
- **Balance time on social media with time doing non-digital.** If you need to mute things on social media, do.

- **Do small check-ins with yourself throughout the day.** Ask: How am I doing? What am I feeling? Do I need to take care of these feelings? Is there something I need to do for myself? Do I need to connect with someone? Do I need some alone time?
- **Reflect.** Put words to what this experience is that you're in the midst of living. Making sense of it will be easier to do towards the end of the experience, but naming it along the way and noticing it will help in the process, and you will catch small glimpses of what it means to you as it's happening.

Care for Both Your Own Wellbeing and Others'

In the face of so much we can't do, caring for others is something we can do. We are all living this together—even people who are strangers to us. You don't need to take care of everyone, just one or two. You will have less resources for giving out right now, but if everyone takes care of one or two others, then no one is in need.

- **Connect with friends and family, whether in person or online or by phone.** Talk about your experience and feelings. Listen to others without giving advice or passing judgment.
- **Share heartwarming stories.** Affirm the things that are hard and acknowledge the shared experiences.
- **Laugh, cry, sing, dance, play, and do things together.** Text or message a funny photo or video to someone.
- **Connect with faith communities and your own faith rituals.** Spirituality is known to be of particular importance and helpful for grounding ourselves in something bigger than ourselves, and being part of a larger story. It helps us reflect and absorb in a time like this. Our own spirituality can be challenged by our circumstances, but as we wrestle with it, it can be a place of growth.
- **Post a photo, or a thoughtful or meaningful quote on social media.** Maybe someone needs to be reminded of it. Remember, you may need to limit time on social media, so offer the same to others. Post one meaningful thing a day instead of 10.
- **Ask how someone is doing.**
- **Offer practical help**—like getting groceries—to the single parents or elderly or sick in your community.

- **Be aware of who is vulnerable around you.** Check in with them, make a plan to regularly call the person you know is living alone.
- **Smile and be kind** to the cashiers and customer service people at the grocery store.
- **Do something kind for a front line worker.** Our health care workers and essential services are being stretched right now, and will be for the next while.

A challenge for essential workers is that you will need to be extra diligent in pacing out your giving out and guard your times to restore and replenish so you can give out again. The same challenge goes for parents with kids home full-time.

Connect with the World

People around the world have been living this new reality since COVID-19 broke out in China in December. The stories that are emerging of how others are responding to their realities can be both heartbreaking and heartwarming. Make sure to keep a balance of both. We are interconnected as a world, and we are all experiencing this together. We can learn from other cultures and their responses to crisis. Think of the singing balconies in Italy, the many musicians playing online concerts, digital exercise classes, families having picnics on adjacent rooftops in China, and Canadian ‘caremongering’.

Identify Your Unique Challenges

A unique challenge for couples, families, roommates, and community homes is not enough alone time. When the usual rhythms of solitary and communal time are disrupted, make sure you are giving each other space for alone time and together time as needed, especially in self-isolation or quarantine times.

A unique challenge for people living alone is too much alone time. Find ways to fill your homes with sounds of voices and music. Set up regular times to connect and chat with someone else, whether that is on a video chat or the phone. Don’t wait for someone to call you, although that would be nice. Think of someone else who might need a call, and call them.

Parents face several unique challenges. You need to make sure you are meeting your own needs so you can meet your children’s needs.

Talk about COVID-19 with your children, answer their questions, and listen to what they are concerned about. Don’t overload them with more information than they can handle.

In the face of so much we can't do, there are still things we *can* accomplish.

With the disruption of routine comes confusion over how to move forward. Here are some suggestions for ways to address the uncertainty of new schedules.

Work or School Time

When you are required to do school or work at home, schedule specific times. Designate a work space that you can move away from.

Productivity often increases when you do work away from your bed, dressed in your regular clothes. Separating your work and rest spaces (if possible) also means you rest better during sleep.

Playtime or Downtime

Bring variety into your schedule by offering yourself a choice of several activities. Try to create a balance between virtual and real-world options. The opportunity to explore new things online is good, but our minds and bodies also need us to engage the sensory world.

- **Laugh.** How many things can I do with that toilet paper?
- **Watch shows or movies,** but try to limit binge watching.
- **Check out the many free things being offered online.** Some companies are offering unlimited data. Parisian and Italian Museums have made art available online. World-class museums are offering free virtual tours.
- **Take time to learn something new.** Broaden a current hobby or try a new one. Ivy League schools are offering e-courses for free. Scholastic is offering free materials for kids.
- **Read.**
- **Try out new recipes.**
- **Do a puzzle, play a board game, do a crossword puzzle or word game.**
- **Make something:** knit, sew, build, craft. Repair or fix something.
- **Sing, listen to music, play an instrument.**
- **Create.** Try a new medium. Find a new way to express yourself.

A challenge is to avoid getting caught up in addictive games. These numb and increase your stress. If this is a struggle for you, try to connect regularly with others and do things that are non-digital.

An important note about anxiety.

For those who struggled with anxiety and depression before this event, a crisis like this can heighten anxiety further.

Anxiety UK offers this “Apple” tool to help lower unusually heightened anxiety:

- **Acknowledge.** Notice and acknowledge the uncertainty as it comes to mind.
- **Pause.** Don’t react as you normally do. Don’t react at all. Pause and breathe.
- **Pull back.** Tell yourself this is just the worry talking, and this apparent need for certainty is not helpful and not necessary. It is only a thought or feeling. Don’t believe everything you think. Thoughts are not statements of fact.
- **Let go.** Let go of the thought or feeling. It will pass. You don’t have to respond to it. You might imagine it floating away in a bubble or cloud.
- **Explore.** Explore the present moment because right now, in this moment, all is well. Notice your breathing and the sensations of your breathing. Notice the ground beneath you. Look around and notice what you see, what you hear, what you can touch, what you can smell. Right now. Then shift your focus to something else—on what you need to do next, on what you were doing before you noticed the worry—mindfully and with your full attention.

One last note: These tools are always useful for reducing stress of any kind but they have been tailored for the unique nature of the COVID-19 crisis. As life returns to regular rhythms and quarantine measures are removed, if you find your anxiety is not coming down with all these tools, please find and speak to a mental health professional who can help you with your particular needs.

Sources

World Health Organization

Dr. Christine Moutier, psychiatrist interviewed on CNN

Anxiety UK

Traumatic Stress literature