

Managing Stress During a Pandemic

The COVID19 pandemic is an incredibly difficult time for many healthcare workers. Worries about our patients, ourselves and our families, and the world are placing a heavy burden on our shoulders. Taking care of ourselves becomes even more important during these stressful times. This page has ways to help manage your stress, but it's like all prescriptions—it doesn't do much good if you don't take it.

It is normal to feel worried, stressed, and anxious during such an extraordinary time.

Please take a little time for yourself to lower your stress, be healthy, and restore some of your energy.

1. Be gentle with yourself and others.

- a. There's a wide range of "normal" responses to difficult events/times—temporary changes in mood, energy, relationships, sleeping and eating patterns and more can all be normal. We all respond differently based on the nature of the event, our own history, and our health. Having a hard time right now doesn't mean you are weak or bad at your job—it just means you're human. Be patient, be kind, and be honest about how you're doing.

2. Get some exercise

- a. Walk or run, do yoga, play ball or swim. Get outside if possible. Exercise can really help with stress. If you don't have a regular exercise routine, start small. You don't have to run a marathon or climb Pikes Peak. Just go for a walk, stretch a bit, ride your bicycle around the neighborhood. Even when you feel out of energy and tired, going for a short walk can feel surprisingly good.

3. Talk to a supportive person

- a. "Trouble shared is trouble halved" is an old saying but still true. Talking to a family member, friend, co-worker, minister, or counselor can really help. It often just feels good to say out loud all the things that are worrying us. If someone is sharing their concerns, give the gift of just listening. You don't have to solve their problems, just listening carefully is enough, and don't offer advice unless it's asked for. Be a good friend. If you can't talk to someone, journaling can be helpful too. Just let it out somehow.

4. Relax your body

- a. Find some ways to relax your body. Listen to quiet music, take a warm bath, lie down and starting at your feet and working up your body, tighten muscles and then relax them. High stress events tend to create a tense body—relaxing our bodies helps to relax our minds and our spirits.

5. Breathe

- a. Deep, intentional breathing releases stress and helps us settle down. Take a few minutes to sit in a comfortable chair or lie down in a quiet environment and just take deep easy breaths. Pay attention to where you're holding tension in your body and let your breathing help relax those areas. Try Box breathing/Navy Seal breathing. Breathe in for 4-5 seconds, hold for 4-5 seconds, breathe out for 4-5 seconds, hold for 4-5 seconds, repeat. Do this to relax and especially if you feel yourself getting worked up.

6. Check in with co-workers

- a. Caring for our co-workers is part of helping them and us with stress. Check in, listen to what they have to say, and share some of your feelings with them. We need each other more than ever.

7. Eat well

- a. Food fuels our bodies and minds. Our bodies tend to crave junk food when stressed—make sure to feed yourself some good, nourishing food. Some chocolate therapy is fine, but eating just sugar won't help. Be careful of excessive alcohol (or any substance) use. Numbing the pain isn't a useful solution.

8. Sleep

- a. Give yourself time to rest your body and mind. Sleep can be hard during stressful times. Try to maintain a normal routine. Avoid caffeine and other stimulants. Avoid computers/tv's an hour or so before sleep. Dim the lights: Try turning down for an hour before bed. Try some white noise. Breathe deeply. Talk with your PCP if sleep continues to be a problem.

9. Connect & Disconnect

- a. It can be easy to withdraw during stressful times and “social distancing” doesn’t make it easier, but everyone needs healthy supportive relationships. Be with friends and family. Connect or reconnect with a spiritual community. Disconnect from media coverage and limit social media time.

10. Be Mindful

- a. Mindfulness practice encourages us to be present to this very moment—not lost in the past or anticipating the future. Apps like Headspace or Insight Timer can get you started. As John Kabat-Zinn, a famous mindfulness teacher, says, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” Mindfulness helps us learn to adapt to and accept events out of our control and our own feelings and thoughts by focusing on what is happening in this moment.

11. Consciously Build Resiliency

- a. The work we do in healthcare can be incredibly stressful. Stress management and self-care is not an optional activity for us. Be intentional about taking care of yourself.

12. **GET HELP** if you or someone you work with is having thoughts of suicide or harming others or just really struggling. Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department. Call a crisis line like the ones listed below. **Help is available and effective. Things can get better if you get some help.**

Reach out if you or a colleague needs help. You have a personal & professional responsibility to yourself, your loved ones, patients, and colleagues to care for yourself and them in a compassionate sustainable way.

Resources during the pandemic or if you just need help.

1. **If you feel you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911.**
Call or get to EMS, fire, police or the nearest hospital emergency department.
The first step is often the hardest one, just make the call. Don't delay, get help now.
2. Colorado Crisis Line (free & confidential): 1-844-493-8255 or Text “TALK” to 38255, Suicide Prevention Hotline 800-273-8255. Disaster Mental Health Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746
3. Read about stress management and traumatic stress recovery.
 - a. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
 - b. <https://covid19.colorado.gov/reducing-fear-and-taking-care-yourself>
 - c. www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx
 - d. www.bt.cdc.gov/masscasualties/copingpub.asp
 - e. www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/stress-management/basics/stress-basics/hlv-20049495
4. Spirituality helps some folks. Talk with clergy from your spiritual community.
5. Resources from specific facilities/companies