

Caring for Your Mental Health During COVID-19

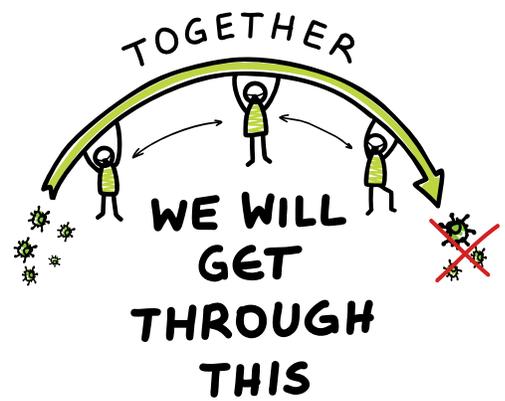
COVID-19 has disrupted every aspect of our lives, causing an increased degree of stress for all of us. Stress can wreak havoc on our physical and mental health, especially when it is prolonged and especially when we are isolated from those we may normally consider sources of social support and care. Being Less connected, having less structure, being limited in our freedoms, and having fewer options and choices means a feeling of (and to a degree, yes, a reality of!) less control. AND the good news is we still can control a lot!

Remember that we are wired to respond physically to external stressors (our fight, flight, or freeze response system) and we are certainly facing a genuine threat to health but also our way of life—so under the circumstances, you're supposed to feel some anxiety right now. So the goal isn't to NOT be stressed (phew, that's good news!). Instead, it's about limiting our anxiety as much as we can by keeping perspective on facts not fears, choosing to focus on what you can control and not what you can't, and practicing other distracting and stress mgmt strategies. Sometimes when facing new situations we forget about the tools and strengths we have learned along the way from other challenging times and so we feel helpless. But we are not helpless! Here are some ideas or, more likely, some *reminders* of what you already likely know about how to care for your mental health.

GET STRUCTURED! First, one of the best ways to manage stress from the outside is to have a sense of structure or routine to how you move through your days. To go from having to report to work or school at a particular time and now not makes things feel open ended, blurring one thing to the next. It certainly makes everything feel unending, which is the last thing we need right now. So set specific scheduled activities during the day, that have a predictable start and end time to help life feel as compartmentalized as a work or school day normally would. It also gives us a sense of purpose, which may be sorely lacking if we don't create this for ourselves. The schedule should include the kinds of activities you normally do, which most likely already include some really helpful **STRESS RELIEVING TIPS** as well, such as:

- **Exercise/movement.** It is well-understood that exercise and movement is excellent for physical and mental health. If you are used to playing traditional sports and now can't meet up with teammates, be sure to still spend an hour practicing skills of that sport (e.g., shooting hoops, throwing a lax ball against a wall, soccer dribbling, etc.). Running and even long walks are excellent cardiovascular options, as are low-impact activities like weights, stretching, pilates, and yoga (my favorite app is Down Dog, which is free right now for everyone!! It's never the same workout twice, as long or as short as you'd like).
- **Creative time.** Let your mind and bodies create, which has been shown to reduce stress (e.g., coloring, art, poetry, cook or bake, knitting/sewing, make music, even fun dance moves).
- **Mental stimulation.** Spend time on academics or learning (with AND without electronics) to help your brains feel productive and keep us connected to the student/employee identity we nurture every day. Activities such as logic puzzles and brain teasers count, too (e.g., Sudoku, Wordscapes, or a crossword app), in addition to researching topics in science or social studies that we need to for school or just because we have always wanted to know more about them.
- **Quiet time.** Turn inward and recharge, which can include daydreaming, watching the trees blow or other moments of mindfulness. Keep a puzzle on the dining room table to turn to when you need a distraction and a sense of productivity.
- **Outdoor time.** Get fresh air and sunshine, which have been shown to decrease stress and improve mental health. If you go for a hike, it's a two-for-one (exercise, afterall 😊).
- **Chores.** It's important to still feel a sense of shared responsibility in your home and family (this goes a long way for sustaining a sense of purpose in daily life).
- **Pets.** Spend time with your furry or feathered friends, benefitting from the company and calming effect they (usually) have..
- Have **set meal times**, to make sure that we give our bodies the sustenance we need but also avoid overeating out of boredom or stress. Planning meals allows us to make healthier choices to include vegetables and fruits, rather than always just going for take-out.
- Similarly, maintain a typical (or perhaps even healthier now?!) **sleep schedule** so both your body and mind stay healthy. Oversleeping can exacerbate a sense of boredom, stagnation, and purposelessness, so don't just lounge around all day (as tempting as that may be).
- **Limit the news!** Ask friends and family to let you know if anything significant happens but otherwise give yourself some hours and maybe even whole days when you don't check the news. This is hard, since we're constantly looking for reassurance when we are anxious or stressed but right now that's pretty hard for anyone to give us, so we won't yet relax anyway. If we can decide that we don't need that and **accept** that it's OK to not have that right now, we can get the space we might need from the stressors themselves.

Which brings me to the tried and true strategy of **DISTRACTION!** — truly putting your mind on something else entirely, such as movies/shows, games (video or good old board games), reading, watching cooking shows or Lego Masters, cleaning out your closet, rearranging your room, etc). Just remember to keep the tool of “escape” in moderation so we don’t neglect the other healthy stress management tips (eg, gaming or binge-watching for 20 straight hours and forgetting to eat, shower, and get some fresh air).



STAY CONNECTED! One of the most important things to include is staying connected with other people. Not just the people you live with (and will probably get kinda sick of at some point), but most especially the people that you usually see but now you can’t. Technology allows us to watch a show or movie simultaneously with a friend (Netflix Party, or FaceTime while watching the same thing together) or “meet up” for coffee, even if through a screen. FaceTime is an amazing thing, but so is a good old-fashioned voice to voice phone call. When was the last time you talked to your favorite aunt? Or checked in on your grandfather, who’s probably feeling even more isolated than you are. But we want to make sure that when we call our grandfather that we don’t talk only about how sad, frustrated, or anxious we are in our current situation. While that is important to name, monitor, and validate for each other, use this time to let positive memories and connections lift your mood and keep you tethered. When we reminisce about stories we lived in a happier time, it reminds us of the balance in life, which includes love and laughter. It helps us draw from strength of family and persistence, reminding us of our resilience.

And be sure to include conscious moments of optimism and faith, where you remind yourself about what’s bigger, beyond ourselves. And that all things are temporary and we will get through this, even if we can’t yet know when. And that that’s okay.

There is also this really helpful resource through our on MB library, that includes facts and tips for coping (thank you Jason and Anne): library.mosesbrown.org/coronavirus

In the meantime, if your stress level is something really challenging to manage, or you already struggle with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues, be sure to turn to professional help. In Rhode Island (and I believe other states), insurance companies are required to cover teletherapy (videochat or even by phone) so that people can still “see” their counseling providers right now.

If you don’t already have a provider you can find one through a few websites, or contact me for local resources:

nami.org
apa.org
abct.org

zencare.co
psychologytoday.com

Also, online therapy is becoming more common, with talkspace.com as one of the most popular options.

Remember that you are NOT alone right now, no matter how isolated you may be. Reach out to friends, families, advisors, and us—MB’s mental health care team,

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APP SUPPORT

MoodKit	Panic Relief
Mindshift	Self-Help Anxiety Management
Happify	Worry Watch
Calm	Breathe2Relax
Headspace	

There are also a number of apps that support mental health through researched counseling techniques. I have not vetted all of these personally and am not specifically endorsing or recommending one over another, see this review by the Anxiety and Depression Assoc. of America: adaa.org/finding-help/mobile-apps.

If you find yourself really overwhelmed and in need of urgent support, remember these hotlines for immediate support:

Crisis text line: text home to 741741

National suicide prevention hotline:
1 (800) 273-8255

Also, Rhode Island has a program for those 18+ who are going through a mental health or substance use crisis. It is called BH Link. The website is bhlink.org. There is also a 24 hour hotline. The phone number is (401) 414-LINK/ (401) 414-5465.