

KEEPING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

STRESSES IMPACTING US ALL:

- *COVID-19, anxiety about disease and the required extended social isolation
- *Economic distress/unemployment and unpredictability about recovery
- *Wildfires and resulting loss and destruction and poor air quality
- *Pain over racial injustice and the ongoing societal reckoning
- *Confusion over school reopening and parents' and students' anxieties
- *Election anxieties, compounded by worries about voting and mail uncertainties

During this period of time when our physical health (and that of others) depends on our adherence to staying apart physically, our mental health depends on our ability to pay attention to the key needs we all share.

The following core issues are critical to maintaining good mental health during this challenging time:

1. **DON'T TRY TO COPE. TRY TO ADAPT.** Rather than grieving for the way of life you lost, try to find a way to create a meaningful life in the here and now. How can you make the most out of each day? What deserves your focus?
2. **CONNECTION WITH OTHERS** – Turn outward, preserve and strengthen connections with those you care about. Find innovative ways to keep communications going. In times of difficulty, what is important is a sense of family and community and connection.
3. **MINDFULNESS/MEDITATION/PRAYER/REFLECTION** – Turn inward, engage in actions that bring a feeling of peacefulness and calmness. **GIVE THANKS** – Remind yourself what you're grateful for. If that's too difficult now, that's OK. Maybe tune into other positive emotions – love, hope, laughter, inspiration, creativity, pride.
4. **MOVEMENT/PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** – Get your body moving every day, explore whatever activities connect you with your body's strength and vitality and energy. Fight the impulse to do nothing.

5. **GET OUTSIDE** – Connect with nature, feel the sun and the fresh air. Look at the clouds or the trees. Open the window if working inside.
6. **STRUCTURE/CONSISTENCY/PREDICTABILITY** – Organize the day (ahead, if you can), stick to routines and bring order to the feeling of timelessness. Focus on things you can control.
7. **MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT – BE OF SERVICE** – Engage in acts of kindness; find ways to create a sense of purpose for yourself and bring happiness to others.
8. **GET BETTER AT SOMETHING** – Use the time to improve yourself or your life. Learn new things. Start a project. Prepare new recipes.
9. **CHANGE YOUR STATE OF MIND** – Keep things in perspective and identify any actions that can reliably help you to feel better – exercising, taking a bath, playing with a pet, calling a friend, watching a funny show. Focus on things that give you joy and meaning in your life. Moderate your consumption of distressing news and schedule news-watching for least disruptive time of day.
10. **BE KIND TO YOURSELF AND YOUR LOVED ONES** – Be forgiving of yourself and be patient and generous with yourself and others. Use humor. Set limits if you need to. Keep your perspective – larger meaning to this inconvenience and stress.

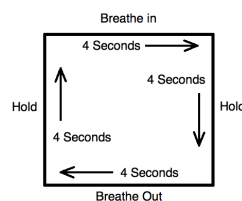
OVERALL GOAL AND CHALLENGE:

Move FROM:

Isolation, helplessness, powerlessness, unpredictability, immobility, pessimism and discouragement....

TO:

Connectedness, agency, empowerment, structure, predictability, movement, trust and hopefulness



Fred J. Piazza, Ph.D.

fredpiazzaphd@gmail.com

St Perpetua Town Hall – September 16, 2020

3 Minute Stress Resets

Cool Off

You can regulate intense emotions by lowering your body temperature. For example, you could create a mini-plunge pool for your face by filling a bowl with ice water and submerging your face for 15-30 seconds (or as long as you can hold your breath!). Other techniques include walking outside and focusing on the breeze across your face, splashing your face with cold water, sticking your head or hand in the freezer, or holding an ice pack to your face. The coolness will slow your heart rate and help blood flow more easily to your brain. This turns off the fight, flight, or freeze response of your sympathetic nervous system which is activated when you're intensely distressed. So cooling off your temp brings down the intensity of your emotional arousal and jars you out of being overwhelmed. You can also just put an ice cube in your mouth, or hold in your hand for the same effects.

Anchor Yourself

It's normal that when you're in a crisis to spend a lot of time ruminating and experiencing distressing thoughts. So instead, stop. Step back. Take a deep breath. Physically center yourself by digging your heels into the floor to ground you in reality. Then take a moment to observe – what am I thinking? What am I feeling in my body? What am I doing? Then ask yourself if your response is helpful, aligns with your values now or if it's stuck in the future or past. Taking that moment to step back to decide if our thoughts are helpful can get us out of rumination.

Music Medicine

Focusing on relaxing sounds reduces stress. One study compared a group who listened to [Weightless](#) (called “the world’s most relaxing song”) or prescribed a benzodiazepine. The music was nearly as effective in easing patient anxiety as the medication, with no side effects. Explore your music options and tastes. Make a playlist of songs that you find comforting when you need a break, and aim for the songs that lift you up (rather than those that mirror your feelings of stress or loneliness).

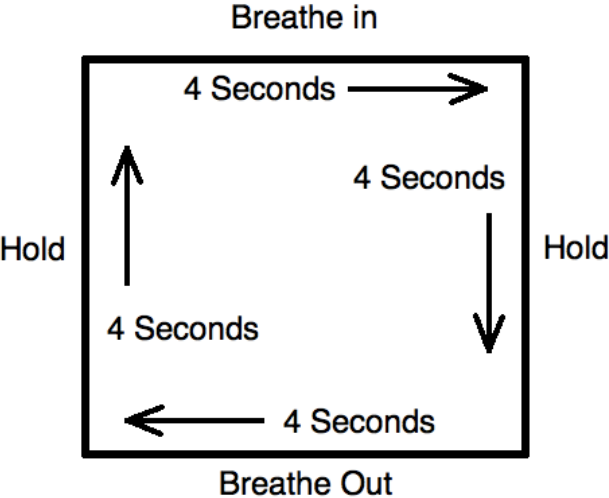
Intense Exercise

Run in place, do jumping jacks, climb several flights of stairs, or put on music and dance. This can burn off nervous energy, help clear your brain and can be especially

helpful when you're experiencing emotions that are overwhelming and you feel numb. Movement can help you start feeling sensation in your body again.

Pace Your Breathing

Adjusting your breath is something you can do whenever you're feeling stressed out to reduce that stress. Paced breathing helps communicate to your amygdala and your nervous system that you're not in any current danger, so it flips off the fight, flight or freeze response and activates rest and digest. It's physiologically impossible to panic if you're doing this correctly. Two parts to do this correctly – slow your breathing pace and initiate breath from your belly. Square breathing is one example to do this.



Take some time to reset when you're overwhelmed.