

Self-Care for Student Support Professionals during COVID-19

Student support professionals are carrying a uniquely difficult burden right now. While contending with your own uncertainty, stress, and worry, you are also tasked with supporting and guiding others through this difficult moment. This resource is for you. The following strategies can help you maintain your strength and resilience in the coming weeks.



Recognize & validate grief



Stay in the present



Separate out what you can & cannot control



Notice & manage your worried thoughts



Pay attention to joy



Find the right balance of structure & flexibility



Get active



Invest in social connectedness



Recognize and validate grief

Everyone around us is experiencing some form of loss right now. The many difficult emotions you may be experiencing – sadness, disappointment, anger, guilt, frustration, or loneliness – are normal responses to abnormal conditions. We are grieving; and with grief, it is important to take a compassionate approach to ourselves and those around us.

How can I practice self-compassion?

- **Recognize and name the emotions you are experiencing.** Check in with yourself, just like you would for a friend. Give yourself permission to feel your feelings, whatever they may be.
- **Guilt, especially survivor's guilt, is common during a widespread crisis, but it is not productive.**
- Practice self-kindness. Treat yourself the way you would treat a friend! **Kindness and compassion toward yourself is never selfish;** in fact, it will help you maintain strength and resilience, ultimately enabling you to be a more effective support for others.
- **Recognize the common humanity around you.** We are all in this together. Many people around the world are having the same kinds of experiences, thoughts, and feelings as you.

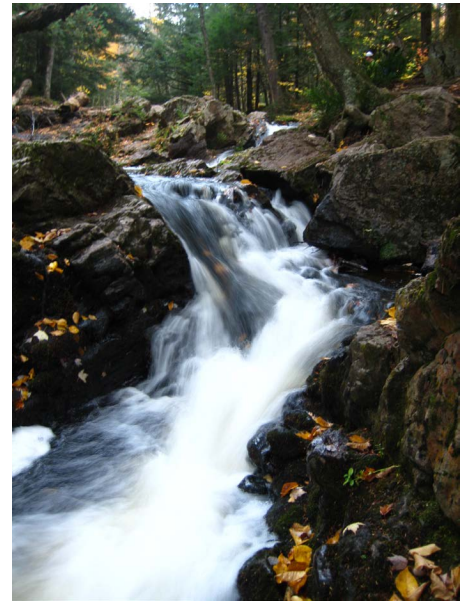
To practice a guided loving-kindness meditation: [Loving Kindness Meditation](#)

Top recommended reading:

- [That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief](#), Harvard Business Review

More resources on recognizing and validating grief:

- [Grieving the Losses of Corona Virus](#), New York Times
- [Exercises to aid in practicing self-compassion](#)
- [Self-Compassion break](#), 5 minutes
- [Be Kind to Yourself – Right Now](#), instructions for a loving-kindness practice



“He had to keep her calm, keep himself calm; panic, he knew, could spread between two people more quickly than any virus.”

- Anthony Marra, A Constellation of Vital Phenomena



Stay in the present

Across the world, we are experiencing uncertainty. When faced with uncertainty, our brains are designed to protect us from danger by increasing our attention to risk and threat. However, this worry can spiral, as we seek certainty

where it does not exist. When you find yourself overwhelmed by strong emotions, try to refocus your attention on what's going on in and around you in the current moment. Notice and attend to where you are and what you are feeling, without judgement.

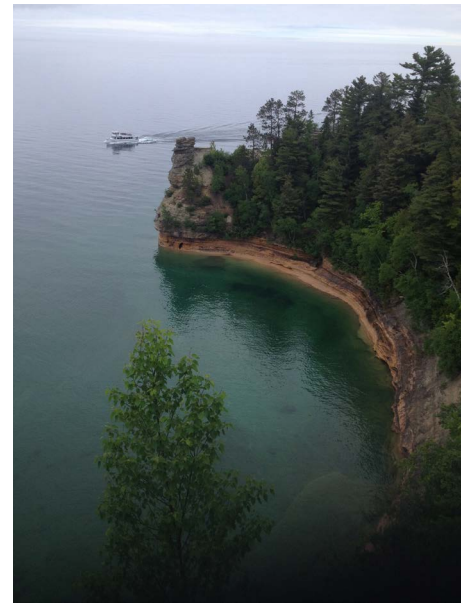
How can I stay in the moment when I'm having so many thoughts about the future?

- Emotions are like waves. They come on, peak, and slowly roll out. **Practice riding the waves of emotion and learning to tolerate them instead of fighting them** or letting them overwhelm (or drown) you.
- Notice and name your feelings, and remind yourself that **each feeling is temporary**, even if the circumstances remain unchanged. Focus on accepting your feelings and your strength to tolerate them.
- Do not try to plan for the next week or month or indefinite future; take on **one moment at a time**.
- When all else fails, simply **focus on your 5 senses to ground you** in the present. Listen carefully for very subtle sounds, look for all the colors in the rainbow, notice how your feet or fingertips feel, attend to a subtle taste in your mouth or scent you can find.

To practice a guided 5-senses meditation: [Engaging Your Senses](#)

More resources for using mindfulness to stay present:

- [Getting started with mindfulness and mindful meditation](#)
- [Free online 8-week mindfulness course](#)
- [Hope in Uncertain Times](#), Oprah and Deepak Chopra's free 21 day meditation program
- [Power Up](#), a set of audio tracks to guide you through various mindfulness practices



“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

– John Kabat-Zinn



Separate out what you can and cannot control

The human mind seeks certainty and control, yet these may be impossible in the current environment. Practice acceptance of your circumstances as well as the emotions you experience. Making peace with what is out of your control can create mental energy for you to plan more productively for what is within your power.

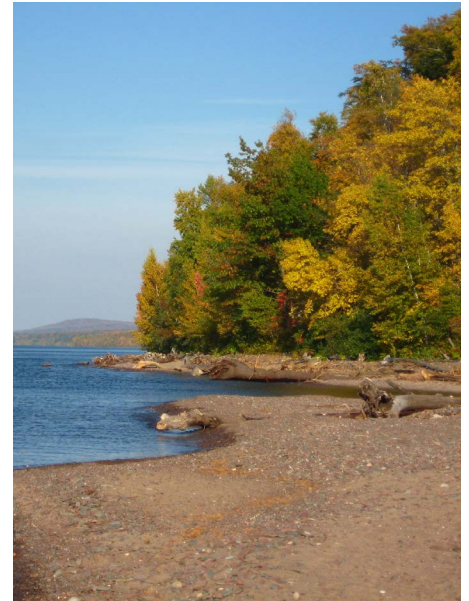
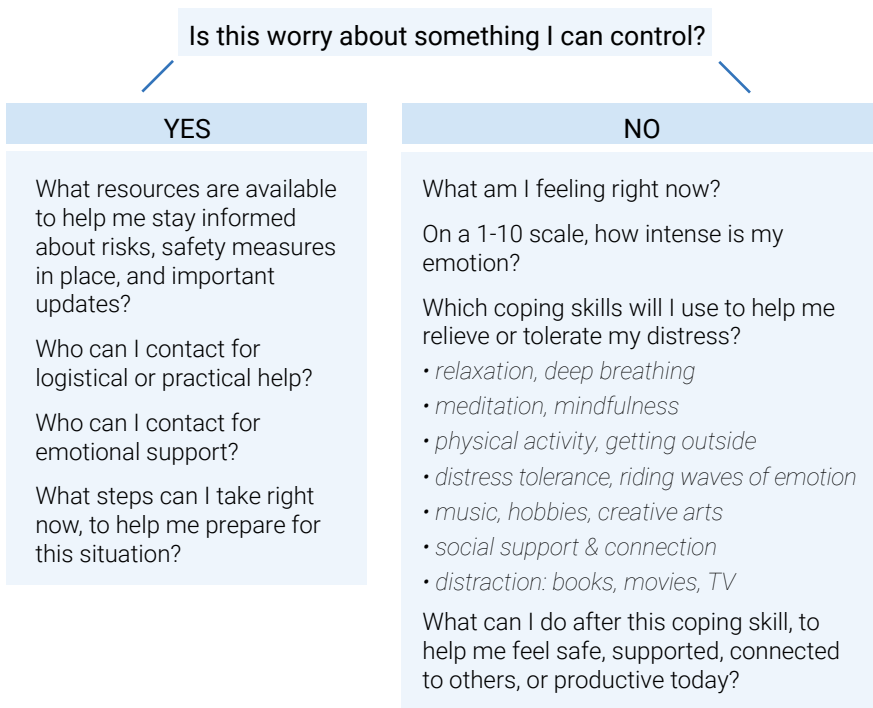
What kinds of things can I control during this uncertain time?

- Steps you take to stay healthy
- How you cope
- How you treat others
- What you eat and drink
- How much help/support you seek
- Time you spend worrying
- How you support your community
- Amount of news you consume

Finding peace with what you can and cannot control

Worry often focuses our attention on the future: an unknown outcome, or danger or distress that we anticipate. One way to manage these worries is to focus on one worry at a time, and identify whether it is about something you can control or not. Once a worry is categorized, you can approach it more effectively:

1. Worries about things you can control can help motivate you to make a plan or take action.
2. Worries about things you cannot control are depleting. Use a coping skill to manage these worries instead.



“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

-Martin Luther King



Notice and manage your worried thoughts

When faced with stress or uncertainty, our brains are designed to focus on warning signs of danger. This “fight or flight” response makes us feel uneasy and tense. You can calm this stress response by identifying specific worried thoughts and focusing on more helpful thoughts instead.

Sometimes my thoughts are racing - how can I control them better?

Step 1: Identify your thoughts

Ask yourself: What would my worried thought say, if I wrote it out as a complete sentence? You can also try using one of these prompts: I won't be able to... My loved ones will... I fear that... I can't cope with...

Step 2: Examine the facts

Try to determine if your thought is fully true, partially true, or not really reasonable. Also, even if your thought is true, try to evaluate how helpful or productive it is.

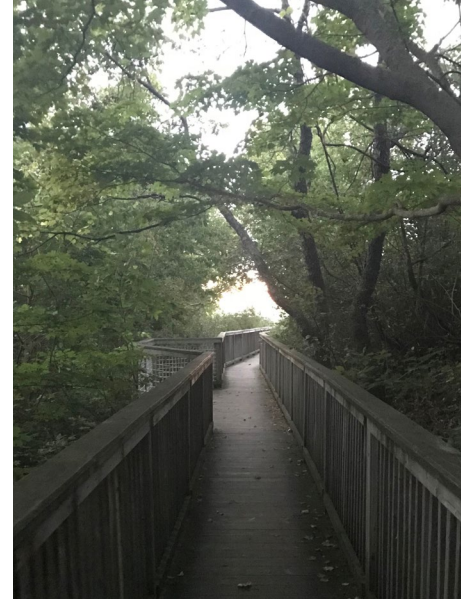
Ask yourself: How do I know this is true? What is the evidence? Is there any evidence that this thought is not true? Even if this is true, is thinking about this helpful to me right now?

Step 3: Try to come up with a believable, but less worried thought

Ask yourself: What would I tell a friend who was having the same thought? If this worried thought came true, how would I cope?

More resources for managing worried thoughts:

- [Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty](#), a free guide from Psychology Tools available in more than 20 languages
- [COVID-19: 5 Tips to Face Your Anxiety](#), interactive modules to help manage anxiety
- [TRAILStowellness.org](#), handouts, worksheets, and videos on challenging unhelpful thoughts



“I am the master of my fate and the captain of my destiny.”

— Nelson Mandela

Example worried thoughts about COVID-19	More helpful coping thought
<p>"I am going to get very sick or die."</p> <p>"Someone I care about is going to get sick and die."</p>	<p>"This virus is still very rare, much more rare than flu."</p> <p>"There are many important and effective steps people can take to protect themselves and stay healthy."</p> <p>"The vast majority of people who get this virus recover without becoming critically ill."</p>
<p>"I won't be able to cope with the emotional effects of this situation – the fear, sadness, or isolation will be overwhelming."</p>	<p>"I have experienced difficulty in the past. I am strong and can get through even very difficult situations."</p> <p>"I know many people who have experienced significant hardship and survived. I can reach out to them and learn more about what steps they took to get through it."</p> <p>"I can still communicate with my family and loved ones by phone, video calls, texts, emails, and even sending letters or packages."</p> <p>"I'm not alone – people all over the world are going through exactly what I'm going through right now."</p>
<p>"My family can't afford this situation – we are not going to be able to pay for anything."</p>	<p>"This situation is unprecedented. All branches of government are passing emergency assistance bills and putting other measures in place to help people get through this."</p> <p>"There are a lot of services working right now to help families pay bills, find food to eat, and keep their homes. I can learn more about these resources."</p> <p>"This won't last forever. It will be very hard to be financially unstable, but I am resourceful and have people I can turn to for help if I need it."</p>
<p>"I am failing at keeping up with all the demands right now: work, family, finances, household responsibilities, and more."</p>	<p>"I am doing the best I can right now. It's okay if I can't get to everything or if I make mistakes. This is not the time to be perfect."</p> <p>"Everyone is trying to juggle many responsibilities right now. I'm not alone in feeling this way. I can ask other people how they are managing and try some new strategies."</p> <p>"This is a totally new situation and it will take time to figure out how to make it work."</p>
<p>"If I leave my house, I will become sick. I am trapped."</p>	<p>"The best health information right now advises people that it is ok to leave their houses to get exercise, groceries, and other necessities."</p> <p>"I can leave my house to go for a walk, go for a drive, ride my bike, sit on my front steps, and just get fresh air. Getting out is good for my mental and physical health."</p> <p>"When I go out, I can take precautions and follow guidelines about how to be safe by staying over six feet apart from others, washing my hands regularly, not touching my face, and more."</p>



Pay attention to joy

It can be hard to notice good experiences when we are in the midst of significant stress. It is also common to feel guilty about things that are going well, when we know that others may be suffering more severe hardship.

However, by focusing on joyful experiences and practicing gratitude, you can significantly elevate your mood and strengthen your ability to be emotionally available for others.

How can I practice paying attention to positive experiences?

- **Recognize the things in your life that are going well**, no matter how small they might be. Start by listing 3 things that you are grateful for in this moment.
- Give yourself permission to see the silver lining and focus on the good. If you are feeling guilty for something that is going well for you, or some way in which you feel more fortunate than others, **try to shift your guilt into gratitude.**
- Take time to savor the things that you do enjoy. **Using all five of your senses, take time to relish activities that sooth you or bring you joy**, even if they are as simple as breathing in fresh air, taking a warm shower, or lying still for two minutes.
- **Establish a regular gratitude practice.** For example, every night before bed, write 3 unique things that you are grateful for or 3 parts of the day that went well, even if they were small moments.

To practice a guided gratitude exercise: [Gratitude Meditation \(Strengthen Happiness\)](#)

More resources for paying attention to positive experiences:

- [Private Gratitude Journal](#)
- [The Gratitude Experiment](#)
- [The Science of Gratitude](#)



“It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.”

— Aristotle

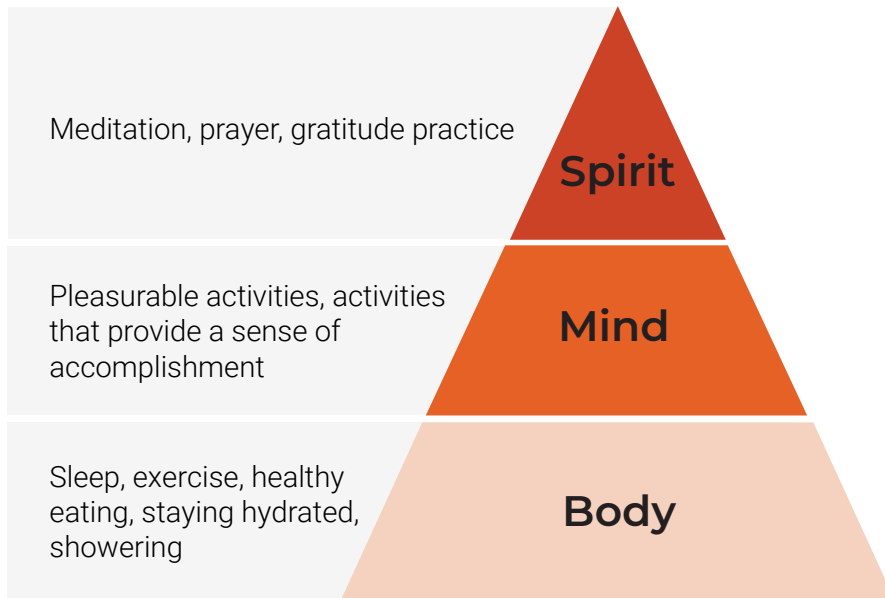


Find the right balance of structure and flexibility

Everyone is experiencing significant disruption to former schedules. However, a framework for structure can help maintain and cultivate habits that promote health and reduce vulnerability to exhaustion and hopelessness. Take some time to create a schedule that feels feasible while also prioritizes your physical and mental health.

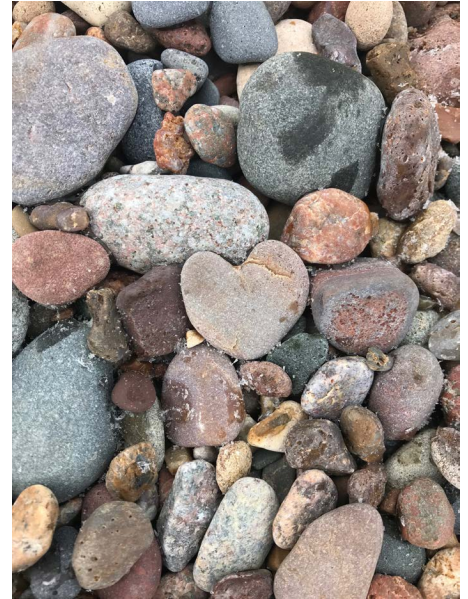
What should I include in my routine?

- **Your first priority should be your basic, physical needs.** Schedule time for sleep, exercise, nutrition, and basic self-care.
- **Next, build in time each day for taking care of your emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs.** Schedule even short periods of time for physical or mental breaks, social connection, meditation, or prayer.
- Finally try to **make time for activities that bring you joy and comfort.** If possible, prioritize at least one small enjoyable activity each day. During this planned activity, try to use mindfulness to stay present and focused on your experience, so that you are able to notice and relish it to the greatest extent possible.



More resources on maintaining routine:

- [Stay Calm and Create a Daily Routine During the COVID-19 Crisis](#)
- [Creating Impeccable Structure for Your Life](#)



“I do my best because
I’m counting on you
counting on me.”

— Maya Angelou



Get active

Staying active is one of the most effective ways to stay mentally healthy and to cope with worry, sadness, and isolation. If you are not used to being physically active or if you have health conditions that make it difficult, physical activity may feel hard. It's okay if you can do only a little bit – this is not a competition with anyone. Setting and tracking goals for physical activity can help you get started, and achieving even small goals can be empowering.

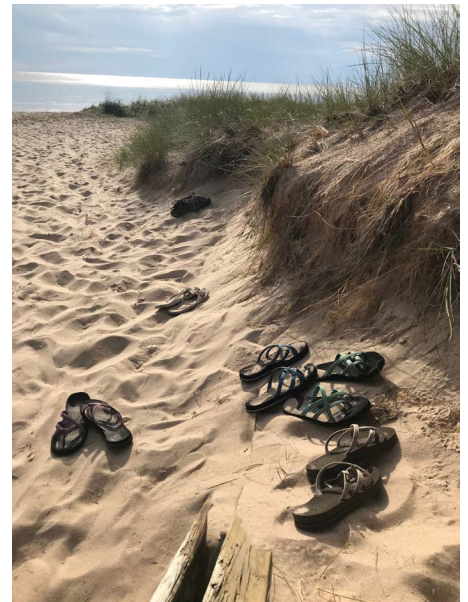
How do I incorporate more activity into my day?

- **Start where you are, recognizing that your resources and energy may be depleted.** The purpose of physical activity is to get your heart rate up for 15-30 minutes day, not to compete with anyone else.
- **Don't wait to feel motivated.** Stress and worry can create fatigue and lower motivation, making exercise feel impossible. Commit to your physical activity each day, knowing in advance that you might not feel like doing it. Trust that once you get going, the energy will find you and you will feel better!
- Identify a time and space that you can realistically dedicate to physical activity. **Don't let perfect be the enemy of good enough:** even 15 minutes of movement right at home is beneficial.
- **Get creative.** You can't go to the gym, but you can go outside! Home exercise programs and virtual yoga and dance classes are also widely available right now and many of them are free.
- **Be consistent.** What we do every day is more important than what we do on any one day. Stick to your plan 5 to 10 times and you will see that it starts to feel more like a habit!

To plan activities: [TRAILS Behavioral Activation Planning sheet](#)

More resources on getting active:

- [Behavioral Activation](#), Rationale for physical activity
- [25+ Free Live-Stream Fitness Studios and Gyms offering Live-Stream Workouts](#)
- [Hundreds of workouts from celebrity trainers and fitness experts streaming free](#)



“Each morning we are born again. What we do today is what matters most.”

— Buddha



Invest in social connectedness

To ensure public health, it is necessary that we follow guidelines regarding physical distance from others. However, while we follow [CDC recommendations on social distancing](#), we must also prioritize social

connection. Social support is critical for getting through difficult experiences and can help instill hope in ourselves and others during times of difficulty.

How can I invest in social connection when I'm not able to be around other people?

- Go outside for a walk or sit on your front steps or apartment balcony, and **greet other people you see**. Seeing other people will remind you that you are not alone, even as you follow distancing recommendations.
- **Write old fashioned letters**. Receiving a letter can bring so much joy; if you're feeling like too much of your day is spent in front of a screen, unplug for a few minutes and write someone a postcard or letter instead.
- **Schedule a regular phone call or video chat with friends or family**. Use Facebook messaging, FaceTime, Zoom, Skype, or another free video call service to talk with friends, family members, or even your neighbors. Make this a regular part of your routine! Regular connection can help you and your loved ones maintain hope.
- **Use social media wisely**. Social media can help us feel connected, but it can also be a source of upsetting news and misleading information. Use social media to build connections with people who help you feel good, while limiting time spent scrolling through content that makes you feel excluded, anxious, or excessively upset.
- Try thinking about the **global sense of community** that can be felt during this time. Everyone around the world is facing the same public health threat, and everyone is getting through it to the best of their ability. You are far from alone.

More resources on maintaining social connection during COVID-19

- [Don't Call it Social Distancing](#)



“Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow.”

— Swedish Proverb