

# Taking Care of Your Mental Health During Uncertain Times

During this time of public health crisis, people across all communities are feeling the stress of the health threat: concerns about becoming ill, uncertainty about the future, possible financial strain, and dramatic changes in daily routines. Individuals respond to stress in different ways and some, especially those with mental health conditions, are prone to negative impact on their mood, anxiety, sleep and overall well-being.

This is a critically important time for everyone to take extra care to protect their mental health. Here are some practical tips to help you be as proactive as possible about your mental health.

## **Take care of your mental and physical health: the two are interrelated and we know that taking care of our physical health can also support our mental health**

- Be vigilant about getting good sleep. This is a time to worry less about getting things done, and more about making sure you are getting enough sleep and rest. Sleep is restorative and important to our health, and we all want to help our immune systems right now. Basic sleep hygiene rules include: not using sedatives or alcohol to sleep, avoiding stimulants such as caffeine close to bedtime, keeping to the same sleep hours, establishing a relaxing bedtime routine, and making sure that the sleep environment promotes restfulness.
- Try to move your body as much as possible throughout your day. This includes stretching, finding yoga videos online, walking around your house or property, dancing, and playing active video games. Since you may not be able to access your gym or engage in your usual activities, this may require some creative thinking. If you find a good resource online that works for you, share it with your colleagues.
- There are many meditation and breathing apps. A simple breathing exercise encourages inhaling for four seconds, holding the breath for seven seconds, and exhaling for eight seconds (4-7-8 for short).
- Drink water regularly and limit alcohol intake. Alcohol can worsen depression over time.
- Follow doctors' orders to take prescribed medication on time. Check in with your pharmacy to see if they have contact-free pickup and/or delivery services if needed.

## **Do your best to stay focused on what you can control**

- Engage in activities you don't normally have time for: play that instrument that's been sitting in the corner gathering dust; research online videos on things you've always wanted to know or found interesting; journal; watch nature videos; fold your laundry; meditate; or play with your pets.

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- Limit news intake (including news on social media) if it is making you feel more anxious than connected. For example, turn off TV news and limit your intake to two 15-minute periods a day and read news from trusted sources in addition to what you find on social media.
- Stick to a daily routine. If you are working from home, don't work from bed. Get up, get dressed and shower at your usual times. Have meals when you usually do, and put the kids to bed on time.
- Make your environment safe and comfortable. Now is a good time to check your environment to see what might help you feel comfortable and safe. Pull out "creature comforts" like favorite blankets, scented candles, etc. It's also a good time to make sure your environment is safe. Make sure medications, firearms, and other items that may be accessible are stored securely.

## **Stay connected**

- Reach out to others when you are feeling lonely. Use technology and find creative ways to stay connected. Start group text chats with friends and family to check in with each other regularly. Talk about things other than current news. It's okay to limit talking about things that increase your stress, but it's also important to seek reassurance from others when you need it. Organize a virtual coffee break with your coworkers via online chats or video calls. Write that letter to your elderly relative or, better yet, call them. Invite friends to a virtual dinner party using video chat.
- Check to see if your therapist is providing telehealth services. If you are in mental health care, many therapists are able to provide online telehealth services on the phone or online. If you are not in therapy, but are thinking that it could be helpful, there are resources available. You can reach out to your employer's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or use one of the resources listed below.
- Check in on your older neighbors: leave a note that lets them know you are available via phone or to help with a small errand (if safe for you). Many cities are organizing support resources for older adults, some of whom do not have access to the Internet. Write some down and leave that with a note for your neighbor with information on how they can access the service.

## **Supporting Youth During Uncertain Times**

- This is a time of uncertainty for youth and young adults, who may not have the life experience to know that this will pass. In addition, their schedules are disrupted: they are having fewer opportunities for socialization, and events they may have been looking forward to (such as graduation, sporting events, or school dances) may be canceled.
- It is important to listen to their feelings about what is happening, reassure them, and remind them that we are all in this together. It is also important not to minimize their disappointment but to hear and to validate it. Instruct them about the importance of universal precautions (such as washing hands) and explain that we are taking these measures so that we may help others who are more vulnerable to stay healthy.
- Create "virtual opportunities" for socialization for them whenever possible. Online chats or video calls with friends are great examples.
- For youth and young adults who have existing mental health issues, current uncertainty may make things worse. Encourage them to continue to take care of their health (regular sleep, eating, and exercise), make sure they are taking medication if prescribed, and be in touch with their mental health provider if needed, especially if you think their mental health symptoms may be worsening.

# Mental Health Resources

## Find a Mental Health Provider

- Contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other mental health services provided by your employer.
- Visit [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov) to locate behavioral health treatment services.
- Visit [mhanational.org/finding-help](https://mhanational.org/finding-help) to find mental health resources and support services.
- Call the National Helpline at **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** for treatment referral and information, 24/7.

## Crisis Resources

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** for free and confidential support 24/7.
- Reach out to the Crisis Text Line by texting "TALK" to **741-741** for free and confidential support 24/7.
- Call the Disaster Distress Helpline at **1-800-985-5990** for immediate crisis counseling related to disasters, 24/7.