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Anxiety and Stress During COVID-19

Managing anxiety and stress during the COVID-19 crisis may feel like an insurmountable task. Everything is askew. Our world has been shaken, shut down and isolated. Shelves are depleted, stores and restaurants closed, livelihoods may be impacted and social distancing has removed us from our regular connections of work, home, school and social gatherings. With a pandemic crisis of this magnitude it is normal to be feeling a level of stress. You may be worried about what will happen to yourself or to your family. You may feel unsafe, lonely, confused or are having trouble sleeping. You may be experiencing troubling thoughts and emotions or feelings of helplessness. Unfortunately, stress can actually break down our immune system and we become more susceptible to viruses. I hope to provide you with some practical ways to reduce stress, boost your health and manage during this difficult and trying time.

One of the reasons COVID-19 crisis impacts us is related to, how we as humans build maps in our mind on how life is supposed to be. Our maps involve many things. Some of which include: who we will see, how life works, where we go, what we do and how we go about it. When our maps and life structure are disrupted during a crisis such as COVID-19 it impacts the way we move through our world. Our brain registers an error message: “WHAT THE HECK”! Adrenaline and Cortisol releases in to our system. The threat to our system responds by going into survival mode: fight, flight or freeze. Our brains respond with all sorts of alerts/ideas/worry and it may become difficult to concentrate. Loss of ability to concentrate and other stress symptoms may manifest, such as heart palpitations, chest constriction, difficulty breathing, panic, irritability, nausea, fear and feelings of a loss of control. The great thing about our threat system is, it is designed to help us thrive and survive. But sometimes we have to settle and calm the system and get it back online. There are key things we can do to get our brains back online and our minds thinking in ways that will support and strengthen us through a difficult situation. We have to take back control and calm down the fight, flight or freeze response initiated by our brain.

It is human nature to want to control our world. In a pandemic crisis we have lost some control and choices are reduced. This article began with naming

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some of the issues that are out of our control. Our familiar everyday way of life is disrupted by a world-wide event. Our sense of community and connection disrupted. The naming of the issues that have may have disrupted or changed our life maps may sound rather simplistic however, it is an essential part to bringing our brains back from an error mode back online. By concretely naming the impact the crisis has had on us gets it out in the open. It helps to write down the things that are out of our control and to list those things we can control. By constantly focusing on the things we cannot control actually keeps us in a constant state of flux, upset, irritable and stressed. When we identify and name the things that have changed our world and the parts we can and cannot control this sets in motion a process of calming our brain. We recognize what we cannot control. Set those things aside and start turning our thoughts and attention to focusing on what we can control. We create a temporary life map that will best serve us through this difficult situation.

Taking Back Control

Formulate a New Structure: When structure is disrupted we have to re-create a new structure and routine that incorporates a sense of competency and accomplishment to every day. Have clear expectations for our self and for our family. Are there things we have been wanting to do and never have time to do? Is there something we can do for someone else? Helping others can boost our sense of competency and connectedness to our world. Structure and routine provide control and comfort to our world.

Create Connectedness: It is important to maintain our social connections. We may have social distancing but we can use our phone and video chat to stay connected with others. Have meetings online with friends/family/co-workers. All of us have been through difficult times. How did you survive those times? Find out how others have been able to get through difficult



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times? It is important to reflect and remember the internal strengths we possess.

Cultivate Mindfulness: Mindfulness is keeping our thoughts focused on the here and now of what we are doing. Staying focused on the present task and right now of our moment. Worry is helpful if it jumps us right into problem solving. It can be counterproductive and anxiety inducing if we get into long periods of worry and rumination which activates our threat response. If you have to worry try confining worry to a period of 5 to 10 minutes once a day. In that time go all out with the wildest worry scenarios you can muster. Once your 5 to 10 minutes is over set about doing something else. Remember worry activates the threat response. It is important to notice when unhelpful thoughts, worry about things outside our control, entertaining the what ifs, negative, or judgemental thoughts surface. These automatic negative thoughts generated by our brain require our mind to put boundaries to and compartmentalize them particularly if they are causing distress. (see more about automatic thoughts at: https://youtu.be/OUzFx_SA9y4). In practicing mindfulness, you might think of these automatic negative thoughts as birds flying by. Notice them, but allow them to pass over. Don't entertain them. Find times in your day where you quiet your mind taking in a beautiful view using all five of your senses to notice it. You can even imagine a view and get the same benefits such imagining lying in the sand at the ocean shore feeling the sun on your face. Prayer and meditation also are shown to provide numerous calming, and health boosting benefits.



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Avoid News Cycles: We learned after 911 that people were getting stressed and often re-traumatized by constantly watching the news cycles. Limit your updates. For example, you might obtain an update in the morning and once in the evening from the COVID-19 experts and people in the know about what you need to do. (CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>) AK Dept of Health & Social Services <https://youtu.be/18v5ba-oeC0>

I hope you found this article helpful and like and share it. If you are struggling with anxiety or stressed based symptoms please reach out to someone you trust or talk to your medical provider. SoulAideTherapy is offering 50% off the cost of online Tele-Health sessions to new clients through May and provide a free, initial 30-minute phone consultation. Phone 1-800-208-7006 or you can go directly to my confidential and secure client portal at: <https://soulaidetherapy.securepatientarea.com/portal/register/>



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