

Mental Health and Self-Care during the Coronavirus Crisis

By Jennifer Robohm, PhD

While COVID-19 poses a significant threat to our physical health, it also threatens our mental and emotional health. We're concerned about infection and the health of loved ones. We're struggling with loss of social connection, daily routines, long-anticipated milestones (e.g., weddings, graduations), and our sense of normalcy. We're scared about bills, our livelihoods, and our futures. And if we were already feeling socially or financially on the margins, the virus is amplifying our sense of vulnerability.

Given these threats to our mental health, most of us are feeling greater stress and anxiety, and some of us are feeling blue. We may be having a harder time sleeping, focusing, being productive, or feeling emotionally present. We may feel overcome by panic attacks, cravings, or waves of depression or despair. **What can we do to take care of ourselves and others during this time of tremendous fear and uncertainty?**

For starters, it is important to **care for our bodies**: engage in physical activity, get enough sleep, eat nutritious food, drink lots of water, and minimize our use of substances (e.g., caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and drugs). Attending to these basics helps our minds and hearts feel their best and boosts our immune systems.

It's also critical to **connect with other people**, while maintaining social distancing. Calling or texting our friends can reduce isolation and distress. Reaching out to loved ones over e-mail or social media can help us to offer and receive support and comfort, while sharing a laugh or a virtual "hug".

We need to find ways to **quiet our nervous systems**, to reduce stress levels. That might mean attending to our breathing, practicing mindfulness, visualization, meditation, or yoga, or engaging in prayer. Even if we've never before engaged in these practices, this is a great time to give them a try!

We also need to **make time for pleasure and fun**. Even when juggling more responsibilities than usual, it is still critical to make space for positive activities and feelings. Reading a book, solving a puzzle, making music, connecting with nature, or engaging in creative pursuits can do much to reduce stress and lift our spirits.

At a time when much feels uncertain, it can also help to **focus on things we can control**. Creating structure and routine can provide a much-needed sense of predictability, particularly for children. Consider posting a schedule where everyone can see it. Clean and disinfect our living spaces, or attend to long-neglected projects. Tackle concrete problems we can solve now.

Focusing on what feels positive, meaningful, and consistent with our values helps us see the bright side during an otherwise challenging time. We should take a few moments each day to **practice** gratitude, acknowledging those people or things for which we feel thankful.

And finally, we need to **pace** ourselves, because we don't know how long this crisis will last. Remember to take regular breaks from the headlines, put down our phones, and take 5-minutes to stretch or breathe. If we're responsible for others, it will be especially important to "put our oxygen masks on first," so we can be there for them (and ourselves) for the long haul.

Note: If you are struggling, consider contacting a counselor or therapist, many of whom are providing telehealth services at this time. You can also call the Montana Warm-Line at 1-877-688-3377 or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-272-TALK (8255), or text the "MT" to the Crisis Text Line at 741 741. In an emergency, dial 911 or go to the ER. Please reach out – you are not alone!

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