

# How you can best cope with the stresses of COVID-19

Submitted by Mindi Thompson on March 19, 2020

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As a licensed psychologist and associate professor of counseling psychology, I want to start by saying it is normal to experience a range of emotional reactions. There is a lot going on as we find ourselves in this surreal and unprecedented time. The news updates are incessant and ever-changing. Our emails are flooded with announcements about canceled regional and national conferences, suspended grant-supported fieldwork, movements to online instruction, and closures of K-12 schools and businesses.

**Create boundaries around your consumption of media, social media, email and text messages.** During moments when new information, guidance and instructions are coming at us from multiple angles (e.g., news, Twitter, campus communications, calls and texts from friends and family), we can easily find ourselves feeling the urge to stay on top of all information at all hours of the day and night. We can get sucked into continuous reading, tweeting and texting.

But while staying informed, aware and connected to others is important, wasting away hours at a time engaging in these behaviors often leaves us feeling even more overwhelmed and anxious. Being depleted emotionally isn't helpful as we try to take care of ourselves or others who need us. To this end:

- Keep your consumption of information contained by scheduled blocks of time each day to read the news, engage in social media and respond to emails or text messages related to the pandemic. If this seems impossible, try putting your devices in another room or under a pile of clothes and setting a timer. Start small (say, 30 minutes) and work your way up from there.

**Stay active and prioritize your physical and mental health.**

- Explore online resources for physical activity. A large variety of apps and online streaming content are accessible at little to no cost. Possibilities range from short to longer guided workouts and are available via YouTube channels and online subscriptions.
- Seek opportunities to spend time outdoors that allow you to maintain 6 ft distance
- Walking, sitting in the sunshine or doing a few jumping jacks or push-ups can provide a helpful change of pace to being indoors.
- Stretch your body.
- Sleep.
- Limit alcohol and other drugs.
- Explore or revisit leisure activities that contribute to your relaxation, joy and balance. Lists of suggestions have been popping up online that include everything from reading a novel, cooking a new recipe, drawing or painting, and learning a new craft or hobby.

- Keep in mind that completing small tasks can be useful in maintaining some small sense of control. Identify those you can complete each day when you are stuck indoors, such as organizing your files (electronic or hard copy), cleaning out your junk drawer, or rearranging your closet.

**Maintain connections with others.** Schedule time to connect with others virtually via video chat and phone.

- Engage in online community conversations with others around particular topics.
- Check in with others and ask how they are doing. A simple text message or sharing a funny meme can help to stave off feelings of loneliness and maintain bonds.

**Exercise patience, kindness and compassion toward yourself and others.**

If you are feeling particularly anxious, ask yourself, “How did I get through the last stressful situation I faced? What strategies did I use? What behaviors were helpful?” and make a list. Examples include:

- Free write or journal for a few minutes to clear your mind.
- Take deep breaths, listen to calming music or listen to a guided meditation to promote relaxation.
- Be patient and kind in your interactions with others. Keep in mind that everyone is managing stressful situations, including families with sick members, students who remain in relative isolation in college dorms because they have no homes to return to or cannot enter their countries, and health service providers with growing clinical responsibilities to clients and patients
- Be gracious in sharing your time, resources and expertise with others. We are a part of a community of individuals who are strongest when we work together. For example, if you have expertise in online teaching, take a few minutes to share some tips and resources with colleagues who have never taught an online class. If you are a senior faculty member, take time to support junior colleagues. Seek out ways to support individuals who are in precarious work and living situations and who may not have access to basic needs like shelter, food and medical care.

**Pay attention to your feelings and thoughts, and know when to reach out for help.**

- If you are experiencing emotional distress related to the COVID-19 pandemic and in need of immediate crisis counseling, contact the 24-hour [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Disaster Distress Hotline](#) [4]. (Services in multiple languages and for those who are deaf and hard of hearing are available.) You can also text for services in English and Spanish.
- If you are in crisis or feel concerned about your ability to keep yourself safe, contact the 24-hour [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) [5]. Calls are free and confidential.

**Create structures to allow you to focus on select responsibilities and goals.** Contrary to popular belief, a transition to “working from home” is challenging. This has become increasingly clear as we’ve settled into the realities of distance teaching while caregiving, telecommuting and dealing with continuous uncertainty. Regardless of your particular circumstances, developing small and realistic goals can serve as a protective factor for your health and wellness. The following questions may provide a useful starting point:

- What would I like to accomplish today, tomorrow, or over the next week? Begin by listing responsibilities on your plate at the moment. Start small and be super basic! Things as simple as “get out of bed,” “take a shower,” “feed the kids breakfast” and “check on a friend” are critical foundations that will allow us to keep moving forward with a focus on health and wellness during this uncertain time.
- What is actually realistic for me to accomplish given \_\_\_\_\_ [insert unique aspects of your personal and professional situation]? Most likely, your answers to the first question are overly ambitious. Use this as an opportunity to go back to your list, simplify and adjust accordingly.
- Which expectations for myself and my work do I need to adjust during this time? For example, your definitions of your child’s playtime activities may need to become more flexible, your standards of excellence in the classroom may need to be adjusted to a new reality of teaching online and your research and writing goals in your semester plan [6] may need to be drastically reduced. Release yourself from the expectations you held for yourself at the beginning of the semester, or just last week, and allow yourself to experiment with lowering your standards [7].
- What structure and supports do I need to help me accomplish my revised personal and work goals? As I mentioned, maintaining some semblance of routine can be helpful as we manage the day-to-day uncertainties. In order to do so, we often need to create supportive structures.

Most important, be compassionate toward yourself (see above) and know that very real external realities will impact your productivity during this time. So many of us are concerned about our children's or parents' health, which can make it hard to even think about writing -- you might feel that completing the most minor of goals is impossible. But spending focused time on a task can augment our health and wellness much more than spending an extra two hours reading about COVID-19 on Twitter. It can contribute to our health and our ability to care for others who need our support.

With all my best wishes for health and wellness for all,

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**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/19/how-faculty-members-can-best-cope-stresses-covid-19-opinion>

## **Links**

- [1] <https://www.findapsychologist.org/>
- [2] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>
- [3] <https://providers.therapyforblackgirls.com/>
- [4] <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>
- [5] <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- [6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2010/01/18/semester-needs-plan>
- [7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2010/07/12/lower-your-standards>
- [8] <http://www.facultydiversity.org/>
- [9] <https://www.facultydiversity.org/webinars/dailywriting20>