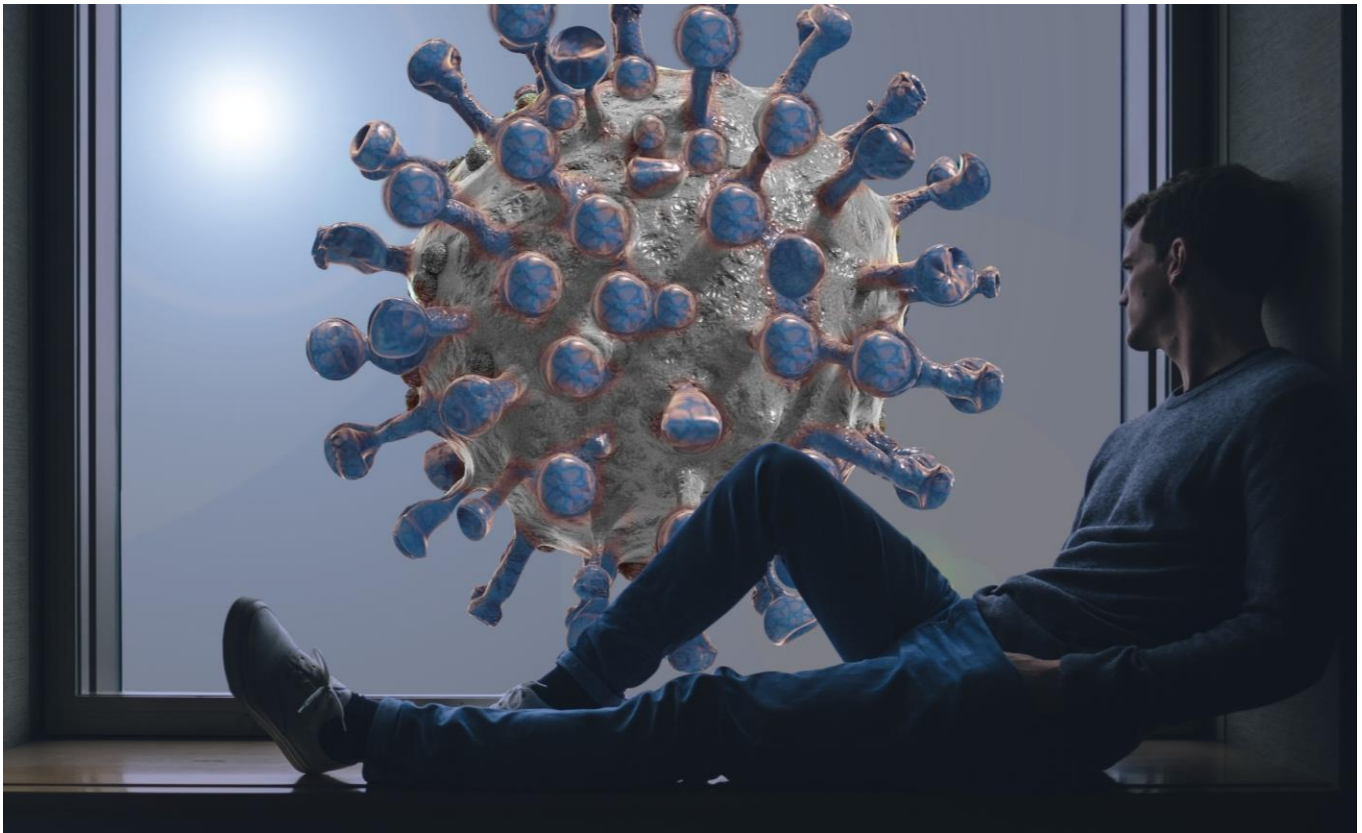


COVID-19 AND STRESS MANAGEMENT



STRESS AND THE BODY:

It is well documented that when our routines change, our anxiety levels spike. With the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, without a definitive end in sight, many of us feel more unsteady than ever. While the unease is common and to be expected in emergent times, a state of chronic anxiety triggers a stress response in our body's fight-or-flight system that can wreak havoc on our physical and emotional health. In short, the body's fight-or-flight response, if continuously activated, results in an overproduction of cortisol (the body's "stress hormone"). Cortisol, in excess, is notorious for damaging our body's immune system (the one that protects us against disease). An impaired immune system has negative implications for chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression. An impaired immune system also means a weakened ability to combat COVID-19, if exposed. Therefore, it is more important than ever to be conscientious about managing your stress, in an effort to avoid physical and/or emotional deterioration during this international period of concern. The good news is, there are practical and simple steps you can take to offset the activation of the fight-or-flight response, or simply stated, to minimize anxiety and stress in the age of COVID-19.

STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

- **FOCUS ON YOUR OWN RESILIENCE AND PROBLEM-SOLVING ABILITIES.** Resilience is your ability to maintain or regain mental health and stability after you've faced a period of adversity. By reflecting upon previous struggles, and your ability to overcome them, you can strengthen confidence in your own resilience. By doing so, you are building trust in your own ability to triumph through this hardship as well, just as you have hardships in the past. While we cannot change the fact that exceedingly stressful events arise, we can change our perception of our ability to handle them. Give yourself credit for how well equipped you are to effectively tackle whatever comes your way, and remind yourself of this often.
- **IMPLEMENT NEW ROUTINES TO REGAIN A SENSE OF CONTROL.** In this unsettling time, there is a lot that feels outside of our control. Since humans thrive on having a sense of structure, stability, and control; it is important to add things into your day that allow you to feel productive and empowered. Adopting a new routine for the time being, creates opportunities to feel just that. Try to stick to a consistent wake and sleep time. Be intentional about your daily hygiene practices – as unbelievable as it may sound, you'd be surprised at how many people fail to make a point of taking a shower each day while unemployed or underemployed, or while under extreme distress. Get exercise or movement during the day, avoid caffeine late at night. Make a daily to-do list in the morning and try to stick to it as best as you can. Doing so creates opportunities to feel constructive, and a very little bit can go a long way.
- **PRACTICE KINDNESS AND COMPASSION.** This applies to yourself and others. While the previous bullet point referenced the importance of creating and sticking to a routine, be fair with yourself. You may find that you are struggling to find the motivation, and that's OK, too. The kinder and more forgiving you are with yourself for having an off day, the easier it will be to bounce back the next day. The same applies to how we treat and approach others, especially those whom we may be quarantined or hunkered down at home with. It is important for our well being to practice patience, employ effective communication strategies (rather than shutting down entirely, or becoming hostile/aggressive), and to put careful effort into regulating our negative emotions, such as anger or frustration. Remember that we are all doing the best we can in our relative survival modes, and allow this to bring out the best in you, rather than the opposite.
- **BE MINDFUL.** Part of the previous bullet point referenced regulating your negative emotions as much as possible. One way to do this is to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness minimizes fear, anger and related adverse emotions, by challenging us to stay in the present moment (rather than allowing our minds to ruminate about what has happened in the past, or to obsess about what might happen in the future). It minimizes anguish by allowing us to forgive what has already transpired, and to tolerate future uncertainties. You might consider that as a tradesman or

woman, you do your best work when you are calmly and resolutely focused on what you are doing in the present moment. In fact, OSHA's top four hazards for construction injuries and fatalities, are related to poor focus and awareness (your mind being in a place different than where your body is, such as rehashing the past or being apprehensive about the future). The same logic applies outside of our work as well; when we make an intentional effort to center ourselves as much as possible, we have much better health, wellness, and relationship outcomes. To slow down your stress response and encourage mindful calmness, try breathing in for four counts, holding your breath for four counts, and then exhaling for four counts. Repeat as many times as necessary. Doing so can offset panic attacks, allow you to regain a sense of control over your emotional responses, and has even been shown to strengthen our immune systems.

- **MAKE AN EFFORT TO SEE POSITIVES, BOOST OPTIMISM, AND FOSTER HOPE.** Humans tend to dwell on the negatives, as our brains are hardwired to do so. It has even been said that our brains are “like Velcro for the negative, and like Teflon for the positive.” However, by making a conscious effort to focus on what is going *right* instead of what is going *wrong*, we can actually begin to ‘rewire’ our brains to boost our happiness levels and overall sense of wellbeing. When you are beginning to feel overwhelmed, challenge yourself to identify sources of joy and comfort (no matter how small). What are you grateful for? Even something as simple as recognizing a sense of community and solidarity in a time of crisis, can provide a buffer against going in a downwards spiral. As such, this is an excellent reminder to invest in relationships and avail of modern technology if you are feeling isolated (such as video chats, text messaging, or joining virtual social networks). Always look for the opportunity in a situation, rather than the potential consequence; and know that almost any negative can be reframed. Know that there is an end in sight, and that normalcy will resume.
- **LIMIT ALCOHOL, SUBSTANCES, AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION.** Being home, potentially alone, for extended periods of time can dramatically increase the risk for problematic alcohol and substance abuse for a number of reasons. Due to the fact that alcohol is a chemical depressant and can have negative effects on mood as well as increase levels of anxiety, it is recommended to be mindful of your alcohol and substance use. Similarly, many professional health organizations are advising that excessive media exposure can have a negative impact on wellbeing. While it is important to stay informed and to follow safety and health recommendations from trusted authorities, don't overdo it. All in all, try to tap into your intuition on the matter, or seek feedback from those who know you best – if it seems that you might be “overindulging,” or are at risk for compulsive consumption, consider alternative, healthier sources of distraction or methods of coping during this time. Moderation is key.

- **IF IN DOUBT, REACH OUT.** While anxiety levels are universally and acutely raised at this time, please know that strategies to promote calm and stress management should not replace the treatment of serious, chronic and underlying anxiety, depressive, and/or substance and alcohol use disorders. Seeking support is not a sign of weakness, but rather one of the largest testaments of courage. If you are in emotional distress, and are not sure where to turn, or whether to turn to someone else at all; err on the side of seeking the support of a licensed mental health professional for further guidance. You may do so through IUBAC's free, confidential Member Assistance Program (MAP). Always be reminded that there are countless resources available, and ones that will continue to materialize, that can and will support you in rebounding through and following this challenging time.

BAC
MAP

**Member
Assistance
Program**



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