

TWENTY TIPS FOR DEALING WITH STRESS IN DISASTERS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Dr. Jane Fleishman

We have been living in extraordinarily stressful times. Never before in our lifetime has the entire world faced such a harrowing experience. Never before have schools and businesses across the country been shut down for such a prolonged period of time. During the height of the pandemic, our members struggled with tremendous loss and yet, we persevered.

It is difficult to live – and work – through disasters. We've been through the remnants of Hurricane Katrina around Buffalo in 2005, the high winds and rains of Hurricane Irene from Long Island to upstate in 2011, the devastation of Superstorm Sandy with winds over 100 mph and storm surges over 14 feet in 2012. And we made it through each of these disasters by sticking together and sharing our resources.

During the pandemic, every day we were both bombarded with the news of yet another slew of deaths and disease while also hearing of heroic (and everyday) acts of kindness, love, and concern.

These resources are offered to you in the spirit of support to assist you in staying healthy in these unprecedented times. Some of these tips are simple and some are more complex.

Contents

What is stress?	3
Locating Mental Health Resources	6
Reducing the Risk of Interpersonal Violence	7
What’s in My Control – And What’s Not	8
Postponing Recurring Anxieties	11
Catastrophizing or Accepting Uncertainty	12
Liberating Yourself and Saying No	13
The RAIN Approach	14
Reflect-Allow-Investigate-Nurture	14
Handling Frustration	16
Meditating Made Easy	17
Breathing Deeply.....	18
Being Present	19
Reaching Out.....	20
Self-Massage	21
Decompressing.....	22
Those Who Laugh Last	23
Music to My Ears.....	24
Moving Your Body.....	25
Choosing Serenity	26
Power of Touch and Consent.....	27
Attitude of Gratitude	28

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
 NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

What is stress?

Stress is our body's response to anything that changes or requires an adjustment. Our bodies react to these changes physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Though stress is an everyday part of our lives, our bodies are not equipped to deal with stress that is prolonged, unremitting, and pervasive. The stress we are living with, working with, and responding to in both our personal and professional lives is unprecedented.

How does stress feel?

Our bodies are already under stress. Some of it is just part of life. Like conflicting demands on our job. Or getting a new supervisor. Or dealing with an injury or disease. These are all instances where we might have felt stressed already. The difference is that the stressors during disasters are often between life and death. Researchers have identified three stress responses:

- Flight
- Fight
- Freeze

What is the body's stress response?

These are ancient ways our brain has functioned for millennia. The body's response to danger by fleeing (flight), battling (fighting), or shutting down (freezing) are the mechanisms we have evolved to help make sure our species survives. These automatic brain responses to impending danger cause significant changes to our physiology. Ever get the feeling of butterflies in your stomach? Palms getting sweaty? Muscles tensing up? Stomach aching? Temper getting short?

The body's stress response is to move the blood to the brain, heart, lungs, and muscles to help you get out of danger. The heart beat speeds up to move the blood to these areas. Breathing speeds up to get the oxygen to the muscles more quickly. Perspiration increases to stop the body from overheating during the exertion. Epinephrine (another name for adrenaline) gets produced by the adrenal glands when danger is upon us. Once that particular danger has been averted, resting for just 15 minutes can reset your body back to a state of balance (or homeostasis).

What are the effects of chronic stress on the body?

The problem with the kind of unrelenting, prolonged, and unending stress that we are under these days is that the body cannot find a time to rest. The stress is constant. Many people have reported that their sleep pattern has been severely disrupted since the COVID-19 crisis began.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

If the body cannot get the necessary rest, homeostasis cannot occur, and the effects of stress become more difficult for our bodies to absorb.

- The adrenal glands, which help determine how our hormones are released, become highly active and often create adrenal fatigue.
- When heart, pulse, and blood pressure continue to be elevated, our risks of heart and hypertension increase.
- When the blood is diverted away from the digestive track and stress hormones are flooding our bodies, the digestive system goes on shut down.
- Stomach acids increase, which can cause acid reflux, pain, and inflammation.
- Digestive muscles contract causing diarrhea, constipation, or spasms.
- What happens in our gastrointestinal system can have a large impact on our brain (and vice versa).

Each of these symptoms can compromise our immune systems and make us more susceptible to infection.

What about the psychological effects of stress?

If you are working from home, you've got an assortment of stressors which can cause stress, especially if there are kids or other adults you're not used to having around when you're trying to get work done. If you are working from home and living alone, isolation and lack of social connections can lead to more anxiety and depression. If your work calls for you to be out doing emergency response, assisting with others, or helping the public, fears of injury or illness are paramount and can lead to more anxiety and nervousness. If you are afraid of being laid off, those fears can outweigh others. Whether you are home or at work, these factors can drive further psychological harm. You are not alone.

Is stress our fault? What can we do about it?

While we are in the midst of a pandemic feeling grief and sadness along with our anxiety, it is important to remember that the **stress is not our fault**. We are living in a time like never before in our lifetimes. Given what we know about stress and that it has both physiologic and psychological impacts on us, our responses to stress are part of being human. Those of us who were already anxious or depressed feel those responses more deeply now.

What is the importance of mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a fancy word for awareness, a concept we discuss all the time in Safety and Health classes. Awareness of one's surroundings, awareness of the hazards we are facing, awareness of our bodies. These are all part of mindfulness. You can practice mindfulness by staying aware of your surroundings, the hazards, and your symptoms. If you are:

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

- witnessing hazards that could be harmful to you and other people at work, talk with local/unit noticing you have symptoms of a work-related injury or illness, talk with your supervisor and union immediately and fill out an incident report.

What happens when coping mechanisms turn into addictions?

Some of us cope with stress in ways that are helpful to us, like sitting down and relaxing after we get home from work (which can literally reset our body to its resting state of homeostasis). Or having a drink. Or watching TV. Or eating some comfort food. Or taking a nap. All of these can help the body to wind down.

The problem with these coping mechanisms arises when good ones turn toward addictive behaviors. Like staying on the couch for hours and not getting any exercise. Or drinking too much. Or watching endless TV or the news (the news right now can be downright anxiety-producing). Or overeating. Or sleeping too much. You get the picture. Great coping mechanisms can become addictions and we need to be aware of not tipping the balance.

How can I reduce the impact of stress on my body?

We aren't going to be able to reduce the stress we are facing right away, it takes time. In cases of trauma, we must be prepared for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) effects that may be long-lasting.

What we *can* do is change our body's response to the stress. We need to build and rebuild our immune systems so that we can fight off any viral infections we are exposed to. The ideas and methods we outline in this packet can help you to reduce the negative effects on you *and* help you to improve your immune system, which is vital to your future good health.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Locating Mental Health Resources

For some of us, these unprecedented times are just too brutal to deal with on our own. The crisis has made all of us who are sometimes anxious and sometimes depressed even more anxious and more depressed. The Kaiser Family Foundation found that half of the people responding to their latest poll said that their mental health was being harmed by the coronavirus. If you or someone you love are feeling depressed or anxious, hopeless and afraid, you are not alone. If you are concerned about your mental health or addiction or are feeling suicidal, getting the support you need from a mental health professional can truly be a life-saving experience. As this crisis goes forward, many of us are going to be experiencing signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and mental health professionals who have been trained in trauma-informed care can make a real difference in our lives.

Resources

1. If you are experiencing a life-threatening mental health emergency, call 911.
2. For mental health support, you can call NYS Project Hope Emotional Support Hotline (844) 863-9314.
3. If you are searching for a mental health provider in your area, please go online at <https://my.omh.ny.gov/bi/pd/saw.dll?PortalPages> where you can click on your county and find mental health programs in your area. Most are doing tele-medicine (office visits over the phone) so you can still be safe.

What we are experiencing in this current crisis is unprecedented. If you aren't feeling anxious or depressed, that is unusual. Getting the support you need from a trusted friend, co-worker, or family member may be helpful. But when you feel you need more trained, professional assistance, mental health providers can offer life-saving support.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Reducing the Risk of Interpersonal Violence

In times of crisis or when a country is at war, the incidence of domestic or interpersonal violence goes up. Rates of interpersonal violence have dramatically increased since this crisis began. Most domestic violence (and sexual violence) occurs in the home. If we are asking people to stay at home in order to reduce the risk of infection, we may also be inadvertently asking them to be at increased risk of violence.

Resources

1. You can call the non-profit New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence on their 24-hour hotline at (English & Español/multi-language accessibility): 1-800-942-6906 or call 711 for Deaf or Hard of Hearing.
2. If it's not safe to make a phone call, you can reach them at <https://www.nyscadv.org/>
3. They can help you locate resources locally in your region of the state.
4. Their advocates are trained to help you develop individual plans for safety.
5. Start thinking about other potential supports and people who can help you.

If you know someone who is experiencing domestic or interpersonal violence:

1. Stay connected, check-in, call, text.
2. Be there in case they need you.
3. Know who can help. Be ready to share phone numbers and websites to get someone the help they need.
4. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available 24 hours a day at (800) 799-7233 and if it's not safe to make a phone call, their website is www.thehotline.org.

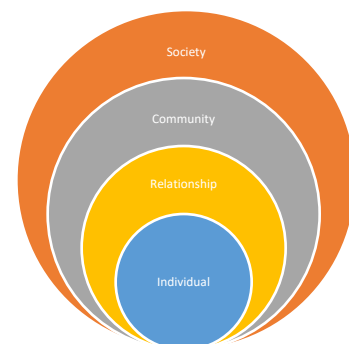
As we all focus on ways to keep our communities safer, let's not overlook the ways that working from home may be more dangerous. We are ready to support our members in every way possible.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

What's in My Control – And What's Not

These are worrisome times. Everyone is on edge. We want to protect ourselves and our loved ones. And we are used to being in control and able to solve most any problem. But there's so much we don't know about this virus and so much more out of our control. Do you find yourself trying to be more in control? Are you having trouble finding a balance for what's in your control and what's not? You are not alone.



Back in the 1990s, a brilliant researcher at Cornell University, Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner, developed a theory that helped people understand what's in their control and what's outside of their control, the Social Ecological model, and it's used widely in public health.

Think about what's bothering you. It can be large or small or complicated or simple. Doesn't matter. Just keep it in mind as you go through this exercise.

1. Individual level: Start by asking yourself the following question:

Can I solve this problem all by myself?

If you can solve it by yourself, it's in your control. If you're concerned about washing your hands, that's in your control.

But if you're worried about your family members washing their hands, finding enough toilet paper or hand sanitizer, those things are not in your control. They're out of your control. And you need to move on to the next level to get them resolved.

2. Relationship level: Now ask yourself:

Do I need to ask one other person's help to solve this problem?

If you need one other person to help you solve it, like your spouse, a child, or co-worker, then it's a Relationship level problem – and it's only going to be solved through your relationship with another person. If you're worried about your spouse or your child getting

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

sick, you can talk with them directly and make a new plan for protecting them. If you're concerned about your co-worker, you can talk with them directly as well.

But if you find yourself shouting back at the TV news anchors or wondering when your employer is going to have enough protective equipment, these things are out of your individual control. And you need to go to the next level to get them resolved.

3. Community level: Now ask yourself:

Do I need more than one more person to help solve this problem?

If you need more than one other person to help solve this problem, like your entire family, your team, or your union, then it's a Community level problem – and it's only going to be solved with a group effort. If you want to challenge the way your Agency or Department or school is carrying out the state's directives on protecting yourselves or want to find out your rights as a worker, then it's a Community level problem – and it's only going to be solved through collective action. So give a call to your union to help get it solved.

But if you find yourself worrying about how the federal government is handling the disaster or what's going to happen to people across the globe with other countries' responses to the issues, these things are out of your individual control. And you need to go to the next level to get them resolved.

4. Society level: Now ask yourself:

Do I need more than a small group of people to help solve this problem?

If you need more than a small group of people to help solve this problem because it's bigger and more complex than any problems we can generally solve with a small group of people (like what's happening today with the coronavirus pandemic!), then it's a Society level problem – and it's completely out of your individual control.

What many of us are experiencing today is unlike anything we've had to deal with in the past. Lack of PPE, lack of medical supplies, lack of diagnostic tools, lack of information, lack of leadership, lack of routine, lack of resources – and the list can go on and on.

If we can remind ourselves that we are not in control of much of what is going on, we can relieve ourselves of much of our stress. We can then focus on what we *can* do as individuals and join

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

together with co-workers, family members, and union members to work toward change. It will reduce our stress, not to mention fostering the age-old adage that nothing really important has ever been changed by a single individual – it takes all of us pulling together.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Postponing Recurring Anxieties

Are you waking up in the middle of the night with anxious thoughts? Are you in a constant state of anxiety? You are not alone.

Try this out if you find yourself waking up in the middle of the night or are in a constant state of anxiety. Jot down your answers to these questions first.

1. What are you worried about right now? (Be as specific as possible.)
2. In the past week, how much time do you think you worried about this each day?
3. How much time do you *want* to be thinking about this each day?
4. When do you *want* to be thinking about this? (It could be on your commute, in the shower, on a walk, or when you would be thinking about this anyway.)
5. Write it in your schedule. Give the worry your full attention. (Worrying uses the verbal cortex of the brain. Driving uses the visual-spatial cortex. Many people feel safe addressing their worries when they're driving. But if that doesn't feel safe, choose another time.)

Postponing Worry in Your Mind

1. When the worry comes up outside of your scheduled time, remember not to fight it.
2. Note the worry and note how it feels in your body (like a tightening of the shoulders or a knot in the belly).
3. Remind yourself when you have scheduled to address it.
4. Gently apply a strategy for letting go of the worry. One way that works well is to take a few long breaths and think of the word "postpone" on your inhale and the word "worry" on the exhale.
5. Continue until you have calmed yourself down a bit and can get back to what you were doing (working, sleeping, eating, talking, etc.).

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
 NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Catastrophizing or Accepting Uncertainty

With an almost constant array of messages about disasters and crisis', do you find yourself catastrophizing? Given that we are in the middle of an unprecedented crisis, you are not alone.

Try this out if you find yourself feeling out of control and worried constantly about impending doom.

1. Jot down the ways in which your worry about catastrophic events makes your life feel more out of control.
2. On a scale of 0-10, how much are your worries about catastrophes controlling your life in a negative way? (circle the number that works best you.)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. Now think about to what extent your worries are giving you control and to what extent you believe your worries are helping to prevent bad things from happening. What is your level of control over tragic events on a scale from 0-10? (10 = total control)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. If you find yourself doing the following, these are behaviors that reinforce catastrophizing:
 - Incessantly checking doors and windows
 - Calling or texting to check up on a loved one
 - Insisting that a loved one contact you every hour of the day
 - Excessive prayers for safety – honor your religious practice but avoid increasing your praying to manage your worry
 - Texting or calling a loved one who is only a few minutes late
 - Overusing alarms, mace, or weapons in a generally safe area

Postponing worry can offer you relief from the constant stress we are all facing during this crisis. Trying this exercise may provide you with a lasting resource for the rest of your life.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Liberating Yourself and Saying No

It's never easy to say no when people are in need. And when your job or your family are in need in the middle of a pandemic, it's even more difficult. If you find yourself overly-stressed because you just haven't been able to turn down requests for help, you are not alone.

If you need to say no to your boss, please talk with your Union to make sure you are protected. In your personal life, it's going to take practice, so here are some ways you can say no. Try these out and check off the one(s) that seem most possible for you:

- I'm sorry, I'm not going to be able to help you out at this time.
- I'm sorry, I have a policy to not lend money to anyone.
- I have other commitments. (Your commitment might be to stay home and be with your family.) This is truthful. You do not need to have a specific reason in order to say no, but sometimes it's easier to do it this way.
- I'm not sure whether I'm going to be able to help you. Let me check my schedule and get back to you.
- I'd like to be able to help you for a couple of hours (when you're asked to do something for a full day). I'll text you before then to see where you are.
- I won't be able to keep my appointment, but I'd be happy to find another time.
- From now on, I'm only going to be able to talk to you over the phone.

Saying no may be the one thing you can do for yourself in your personal life right now that can make the difference between your constant state of stress and developing a way to take care of yourself in the face of this crisis.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

The RAIN Approach

Reflect-Allow-Investigate-Nurture

Do you find your mind drifting into anxious thoughts even when you are in the middle of a conversation? Do you get anxious every time a notification comes up on your phone? If you find yourself trying to cope with these anxieties, you are not alone.

Thanks to Tara Brach, RAIN is an approach used worldwide to help people experiencing anxiety and stress. Here's the way it works.

1. Close your eyes and think about the issue that is really bothering you.
2. Begin with **R: Recognize what is happening right now**. As you reflect on this situation, ask yourself:

What is happening inside me right now?

What sensations am I most aware of?

What emotions?

Is my mind churning with thoughts?

Take a moment to become aware of your overall feeling of the situation in your body as well as your mind.

3. **A: Acknowledge what you're feeling**. Send a message to yourself to “let it be” to this entire experience. Take a moment to pause and accept that, in these moments, *what is, is*. You can experiment by saying, “yes, this is how I'm feeling,” instead of trying to change or get angry at yourself. You might find yourself saying *yes* to a huge inner *no* with a body and mind painfully contracted in resistance. You might be saying *yes* to the part of you that is saying, “I HATE THIS!” That's all a natural part of the process. You are just noticing what is true – without judging, pushing away, or punishing yourself – at this particular moment.
4. **I: Investigate**. Now begin to explore what you are experiencing more closely. Be curious about your inner life. You might ask yourself:
 - What about this do I most need to attend to?*
 - What most needs my acceptance?*

Ask in your most patient, gentle, and kind inner voice. Notice where you feel the experience most distinctly in your body. Be aware of any heat, tightness, pressure, aches, or squeezing.

Notice where you feel the most intense part of the physical experience. Investigate what emotions you are feeling: Fear, anger, grief, shame, hurt, envy?

As you continue to investigate, ask yourself:

What are you believing?

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.

NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

*Do you believe you are failing in some way?
 That you will let someone down?
 That you will not be able to handle whatever is around the corner?
 How does this belief live in your body?
 What are the sensations?
 Tightness? Soreness? Burning? Hollowness?*

As before, send the message of *yes* or *let it be*, allowing yourself to feel the fullness and intensity of this difficult experience. As you investigate what is happening, notice:

*Is there any softening in your body and heart?
 Can you sense more openness or space?
 Does it bring up more tension, judgment, and fear?
 Does it intensify or change what you are feeling?*

Now ask the most difficult questions:

*What do you need most?
 Do you need acceptance, company, forgiveness, love?*

5. **N: Nurture.** And finally, let yourself attend from your most reflective and wise heart. As you sense what is needed:

What is your natural response?

What does this vulnerable place most need to remember, experience, or trust?

You might offer yourself a wise message, such as *I'm sorry, trust your goodness, it's ok, I'm here, and I'm not leaving*. This moment might also find touch healing, and you might gently place your hand on your heart. Feel free to experiment with ways of befriending your inner life. Discover how you might become more intimate and loving.

6. **After the RAIN.** As you offer this unconditional, kind presence to your inner life, sense the possibility of relaxing again. Get familiar with the quality of presence that is here. Like an ocean with waves on the surface, feel yourself as the waves washing against the shore, in and out, with discovery, gentleness, and love.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
 NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Handling Frustration

With so much at stake, it's not unusual to get frustrated. Have you noticed that you are more apt to get angry at other people and yourself?

If a current crisis is causing you to be frustrated and angry, remember:

1. **There is no shame and no blame.** No one asked to be in this situation. We are all trying to do our best with it. And we're sure to make some mistakes and hit bumps in the road. But remember to be kind to ourselves and each other. Without shame and blame we can begin to work together more as a union and less as individuals fighting against each other.
2. **This is not our fault and we accept the responsibility to change.** We did not bring on this coronavirus. We had no part in the beginning of this crisis. The fact this is a worldwide pandemic is completely *not* our fault. And yet, we accept the responsibility to make the changes needed to keep ourselves and others safe and healthy.
3. **Next time you feel frustrated and angry.** Ask yourself these questions:

How can I remember not to feel ashamed for what has happened?

How can I remember not to blame others for what has happened?

How can I remember it is not my fault?

How can I remember to accept the responsibility to change?

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Meditating Made Easy

You don't have to go on a 7-day meditation retreat to get the benefit of meditation. In fact, you can do it for just a few minutes a day in your own home. If you've ever wondered about how to meditate, here's a few simple tips to get you started.

A few minutes of practice each day can help ease your anxiety. Daily meditation has been found to change the brain's neural pathways, making you more resilient to stress. And it's easy. It might be good to try this with one other person the first time so they can read the directions to you while you have your eyes closed.

1. Sit up straight with both feet firmly on the floor.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Focus your attention on your breathing. Just breathe normally.
4. Place one hand on your belly as you breathe.
5. Try repeating this phrase silently, "I feel at peace" even if your mind may be swirling.
6. When distracting thoughts come into your mind, don't judge or blame yourself.
7. Try to resume your focus on your breath and that one phrase, "I feel at peace."
8. You don't have to do this for more than just a few minutes.
9. When you feel ready, open your eyes and scan your body and your mind for any changes.
10. Do you feel more at peace? Does your body seem more relaxed?
11. As you continue to practice meditation, you can try it for longer periods of time.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Breathing Deeply

When we take a deep breath and let out a sigh, it can be calming. Even in the face of an escalating crisis. Take a 5-minute break in a spot where you are alone and undistracted.

1. Focus on your breathing.
2. Sit up straight, close your eyes, and place one hand on your belly.
3. Slowly inhale through your nose, feeling the breath start in your chest and make it's way up to your nose.
4. Imagine your breath working its way up to the top of your head.
5. As you let out your breath on the exhalation, exhale through your open mouth and let it out with a sigh.
6. Repeat this process for 5 minutes without trying to force or push yourself too much.

Deep breathing can help release your stress by slowing down your heart rate and lowering your blood pressure. You can do this anywhere you feel comfortable sitting with your eyes closed. Once you have mastered this exercise, there are many other forms of breathwork you can do to continue to relax, fall asleep, or feel energized.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Being Present

Buddhist monks and yogi masters have taught for centuries that we can train our consciousness to be more active and more present, even in the face of a crisis. Slow down.

1. Take 5 minutes and use your senses to notice what is around you.
2. Focus with awareness.
3. If you are in a room with someone and feel yourself slipping into anxiety or stress, stop what you are doing or saying and focus on one thing around you.
4. Notice your breathing. Is it shallow or deep?
5. Notice how the air feels on your face when you're sitting still or walking. Is it cold? How does it feel?
6. Then notice how your feet feel hitting the ground or sitting still. Is the ground hard or soft? Are your feet active or quiet?
7. Notice the smells around you. Do the smells remind you of anything?
8. Next time you are eating, focus on each individual bite of your food. How does it feel to focus on each bite, each chew?

Being present takes practice. Next time you feel yourself slipping away from awareness, ask yourself, "*Am I here?*" Focus on your awareness of breath, the air around you, the ground beneath your feet, the smells in the air. You may begin to feel as if you are pulling yourself literally back down to the earth. Being present can offset your stress and allow you to feel less tense.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Reaching Out

We are all being asked to keep our distance from each other to reduce the risk of infection from the coronavirus. Staying six feet away means we haven't been able to shake hands, hug, or get close to anyone outside of our own immediate family. And for those of us who are living alone, that means we haven't been able to touch anyone. This can be so hard, especially when many of us are anxious about the future. Think about who in your social or work network you'd like to reach out to.

1. Make a list of the people you've been meaning to reach out to, both near and far.
2. Give them a call, send them a text, send an email, or set up a time to talk. Even if you can't be there face-to-face, you can do a video chat on your phone or other device through Zoom, Google Hangout, Slack, or Jitsi (which is 100% free, fully encrypted, with unlimited usage).
3. Share with them what's going on for you.
4. Express how important it is for you to be reaching out to them.
5. Be curious. Find out what is happening in their life.
6. End the call with an intention and a plan to get in touch again in the future.

Reaching out can relieve the stress from isolation. Reaching out by phone or video call can give us a sense of connection. If there is anything positive that we come away with from this crisis, perhaps it will be new forms of connection, both near and far.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Self-Massage

The stress and anxiety we feel from the experience of living and working in the midst of this unparalleled and extraordinary coronavirus crisis affects our physical health. The term psychosomatic actually means bodily symptoms caused by mental or emotional disturbances. When your mind is under stress, that stress is going to manifest itself somewhere in your body. And when we are stressed, we hold our bodies differently. Frowning, tensing, crying and other body responses can all cause discomfort. It's going to be different for each of us and it's important right now to take note of those bodily changes. Find a quiet place.

1. Sit with your feet on the floor.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Mentally scan your body from the bottom of your feet all the way up to your head.
4. Notice any tightness in any of your muscles, any soreness, any itchiness, any hot or cold spots, any spots that feel different than you used to feel before this crisis began.
5. If you find that your shoulders are tight or your neck is sore, it might be because you've been tense and keeping your shoulders up or you've been slouching since you're so overwhelmed. If any part of your body is feeling tender, give yourself a small massage in that area.
6. Keep track of those spots on your body – these are the places where stress is manifesting itself.
7. Try gentle stretches, yoga, or light workouts at home to loosen your muscles.

Tuning in to your body and attending to the physical impact of emotional stress can help to prevent chronic musculoskeletal problems.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Decompressing

Stress is not necessarily a problem, especially when we can return to a calmer state. The problem with stress is that it becomes hard for our bodies to adjust when the stress goes on for longer periods of time without any reprieve. Your body needs to decompress to remove the physical effects of stress. But how do you decompress when you're constantly in stress mode? All you need is a few minutes, a quiet place to sit, a warm wash cloth, and a tennis ball.

1. Find a quiet place to sit and relax.
2. Place a warm wash cloth around your neck and shoulders for about 10 minutes.
3. Close your eyes and notice how it feels.
4. Relax the muscles of your face, your neck, your upper chest, and your back.
5. Remove the wash cloth and again notice how it feels. Do you feel any relief?
6. You might want to warm it up again and repeat steps 1-5.
7. Next, use a tennis ball to massage away any tension on your back, neck, or legs.
8. Stand up with your back against the wall.
9. Slide the ball behind you between your back and the wall.
10. Lean back into the spot where the tennis ball is making contact with you and the wall.
11. You can move slightly and give yourself gentle pressure for about 15 seconds.
12. Then move the ball to another spot on your back, neck, legs.
13. Apply gentle pressure and hold for about 15 seconds.
14. You can finish this by sitting in the chair again with another warm washcloth on your neck and shoulders for about 10 minutes.

Decompressing takes as little as 10-12 minutes and as long as 20-25. You can decide how long you'd like to do this exercise. With gentle massage, you can remove some of the tension in your muscles. You can also use a foam tube (like a noodle people use for swimming) to roll behind your back or legs.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Those Who Laugh Last

Hard to imagine laughing at a crisis of global proportions. Yet laughter is often one way that people in the trenches find solace with each other. A good hearty laugh doesn't just act as a distraction, there are a wide range of positive health effects. Laughter can lower your cortisol levels. Cortisol is your body's stress hormone and lowering cortisol can help relieve stress. Laughter also can increase your endorphins level, which help lighten your mood.

1. Try getting comfortable with your favorite sitcom, romcom, or video.
2. Read the comics section of your local paper.
3. Find a YouTube channel with previous SNL skits.
4. Chat with someone online who makes you smile.

Any of these will give you a pause from the constant diet of depressing, scary, and stressful events going on. Don't be afraid to take a few moments out for laughter or smiles. The world will still be there when you get back. And hopefully, you'll be able to deal with it all in a better mood.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Music to My Ears

“Don’t play that music so loud!” “What is that you’re listening to?” “Do you call that music?” We all have different tastes in music. What’s music to your ears may be mush to mine. That’s the beauty of headphones if you’re working around other people. Researchers have found that listening to soothing music is not only enjoyable and a break from the daily news broadcasts about disease and deaths. Music can also lower your blood pressure and heart rate which help to lower your body’s response to stress.

1. Create a playlist of songs that remind you of better days.
2. Go online and find a source of nature sounds like the ocean, bubbling brook, birds singing, wind chimes, or other soothing sounds.
3. Focus on the different melodies and sounds, the instruments, and singers.
4. Feel free to rock out with some beats.
5. Sing at the top of your lungs (best done while driving).
6. Give yourself a little dance party (best done while not driving).

Taking a break with music is a great method for lowering your anxiety levels. Try these and see what happens.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Moving Your Body

If you're one of the people who is working from home and you haven't been outside in a while, this one's for you. Staying sedentary can be hard on your body and your mood. All of the research on activity shows that at least 30 minutes a day can improve your overall sense of well-being, reduce your stress, and strengthen your muscles. Moving your body can take about as many forms as you can imagine. Moving your body will release endorphins. Just like a runner's high, you'll feel better right after you finish moving. If you like walking and can do that from a safe distance from others, go out for 30 minutes and walk. Breathing in the fresh air will also help improve your mood. If you like exercising on a mat, doing yoga, pilates, or other activities, you can find many classes on you tube for free!

1. Set a time for yourself each day so you can get build it into your schedule.
2. If you can't go outside, try walking up and down the steps in your apartment building.
3. If you can go outside, try walking or running (staying at least 6' away from others).
4. Try stretching, yoga, pilates, dancing, kickboxing, or any other movement you like.

The most important part is that you move. No question about it. Just move. Doesn't matter how fast. Doesn't matter how hard. Doesn't matter how long. Just start moving. And before you know it, you'll want to keep moving every day.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Choosing Serenity

The Serenity Prayer is a prayer originally written by an American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), and used widely by 12-Step groups everywhere:

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

At times like this, facing a worldwide unprecedented pandemic, we must remember that we need serenity, courage, and wisdom. We cannot know what will happen in the next few months or years. We can be more present each day and continue to remember that we are not alone.

1. Find a quiet place and either read the serenity prayer to yourself or read it aloud.
2. Repeat it as many times as you need to be able to reflect on it.
3. Notice any changes in your inner thoughts or your body.
4. Continue as needed.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Power of Touch and Consent

Much has been written about the healing power of touch and yet, we are living in a time where we cannot touch or even get within six feet of almost everyone. There are many facets of touch. If we are fortunate enough to live with someone else, we've got the possibility of touch with them. Or maybe we have a whole family under our roof. This can create bedlam at times, but also multiplies the possibilities of hugs. What if you are living alone? Who can you get a hug from? What are your possibilities for touch? A neck or foot massage? The healing power of touch follows a continuum from a gentle hug to a sexual expression.

What about sexual touch? There is evidence that sexual touch can improve your overall well-being and build your immune system – so long as it is consensual. You can choose who and how you want to be touched. In a crisis such as this one, your safest sexual partner is yourself! We use the term HSP (household sexual partner) to describe someone in your house or apartment with whom you are having sex. Particularly since the amount touch has been severely limited, please treat all interactions with your HSP as sacred and not to be taken lightly or without thinking. Consent is always a choice. You must never be coerced into having sex with them.

When you are able to have sexual touch with another, remember *always* to get consent. Consent means:

1. Asking before you touch.
2. Keep asking.
3. Don't assume that the lack of "no" means yes.
4. Sex may feel different living in a pandemic.
5. Try to find something that feels good to both of you.
6. If you live far away from your sexual partner, don't forget the phone, video, and toys.

Whether you live alone or with someone else, whether you are craving a foot massage or something more sexual, remember that everyone is anxious right now. So proceed slowly and always ask for their permission to touch.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314

Attitude of Gratitude

You know that feeling you get when someone appreciates something you did? It's a moment of joy. A moment of feeling good about yourself. When we appreciate others, we know that we can also give them a moment of joy. Did you know that appreciating someone can also be beneficial to the person who gives the appreciation? There is a marked improvement in happiness when we express our gratitude. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for something an individual receives. When you give gratitude, you acknowledge the goodness in your life. Gratitude can help people feel more positive emotions, re-live positive experiences, improve their mental health, deal with difficulties, and help build stronger relationships – both for the giver and the receiver of that gratitude.

1. Keep a gratitude journal to help you remember all the things that are good in your life.
2. Each day (perhaps when you first wake up or before you go to bed), make a list of the things in your life that you are grateful for.
3. These can be events or discussions you had the day before. They can be broader than that.
4. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The important aspect is that you write something down each day in your journal.
5. Choose a time of day to tell someone you love something you appreciate about them.
6. Continue this practice every day.
7. Keep this up for a week and notice any differences in the way you feel after you give someone your gratitude.

Acknowledging the goodness in life for yourself and for others can help to quiet some of the fears and anxieties we have around this pandemic. Adopting an attitude of gratitude can help you as much as others. Gratitude helps us connect to something larger than ourselves.

You are not alone.

For a mental health emergency, please call 911.
NYS Project Hope Hotline: (844) 863-9314