

STRESS-REDUCING STRATEGIES

for Staff

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*The content in this article is solely the recommendations of the authors.

Restaurant closures, working from home, temporary clinic shutdowns, constant reminders to practice “social distancing”. You may feel as if there’s widespread uncertainty about the future, which can create heightened sensations of fear. The lack of control that comes with periods of instability can lead to feelings of anxiety and despair.

If you find yourself feeling anxious most of the time, don’t worry. This is an entirely normal response to a highly unusual crisis. Most of us have had periods of uncertainty in our lives, or times where we feel like we are failing or have had losses or had to deal with financial hardship or challenges. People out west have dealt with fires and earthquakes, those in the Midwest and south with tornadoes, and those in the north and northeast with blizzards. Many of us remember the fear and chaos following 9/11, but this is different. It may feel like all of your vulnerabilities are coming to the surface.

This may feel strange for those of us in the health care professions, as we are accustomed to caring for others and calming others, and it might feel unfamiliar to be the one feeling scared or uncertain. It might feel really odd to be almost frightened if you have patient contact, and you might find yourself wondering if patients are really as careful as you are being and if you need to fear that they are hiding any possible exposure in an effort to continue treatment. All of us are being faced with vastly unfamiliar situations, and it can feel challenging to not feel emotionally prepared to handle the distress of your patients at the same time that you are feeling overwhelmed yourself.

It’s common to play out worst-case scenarios in our mind related to your future health and career stability. The antidote is to assemble a toolkit of coping strategies to help you get centered and stabilize in times of uncertainty. The following strategies will help you manage your distress, feel more in control, and nourish yourself during the coronavirus crisis and beyond.

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1. Learn the Symptoms of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Burnout, or feelings of extreme exhaustion and being overwhelmed, can affect your physical and/or mental health and compromise productivity, performance, and the quality of the care you provide to your patients. On a normal day, you probably feel burned out from hectic schedules, time pressure, and work overload from taking care of demanding and highly stressed patients. Add a world pandemic, canceled cycles, and postponed treatment to the mix, and you have a recipe for disaster.

You can easily become the target of incredibly negative patient emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and trauma that can lead to compassion fatigue from absorbing their distress. Be aware that some providers reach a limit in their abilities to continually provide care and empathy to patients, especially when they are overwhelmed by personal feelings and a world crisis.

Recognize the signs of burnout in yourself and other coworkers to be sure that those who need a break or need help can address these needs.

Signs of Burnout:

- Sadness, depression, or apathy
- Anxiety and obsession/compulsion
- Psychosomatic disorders (eg headaches, insomnia, ulcers, or gastritis)
- Cynicism
- Easily frustrated
- Blaming others, irritability
- Lacking feelings, indifferent
- Isolation or disconnection from others
- Poor self-care (hygiene)
- Tired, exhausted, or overwhelmed
- Feeling like:
 - A failure
 - Nothing you can do will help
 - You are not doing your job well
 - You need alcohol/other drugs to cope

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Ways to Buffer Burnout:

- Recognize own feelings of loss and personal stress signals
- Decompress with colleagues or peers
- Set up a buddy system with a colleague
- Train in empathy and communication
- Practice mindfulness/cognitive behavioral therapy
- Establish regular wellness routines
- Compassion fatigue—recognize it and address it
- Find ways to replenish optimism and hopefulness
- Maintain an emotional center
- Learn to cope with failure and lack of control

If you experience any of the signs of burnout, more often than not, and for an extended period of time, try the techniques in this list to see if you get relief from your symptoms. Contact your health care provider to get support. Counselors can help you feel better and restore empathy for your patients through discussion, stress management techniques, cognitive behavioral strategies, and mindfulness practices.

2. Stay Informed but Limit Media Coverage of COVID-19

The current coronavirus crisis has many of us glued to the news and falling into a tailspin of stress and anxiety. Here's what you can do to stay informed without spiraling and to restore balance.

- Select a few credible outlets to trust as your sources of accurate information. Most rumination and worry are rooted in lack of information, wrong information, or both.
- Don't say glued to your television, internet, social media, or devices for constant news. Limit yourself to a few updates a day—and preferably not right before bed. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can increase distress.
- Set boundaries and limits when it comes to online searches and chat rooms related to COVID-19. Set a timer to limit your hours of online activity. Only search reputable sites.
- You will want to stay up to date on news of the outbreak, but make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control. Try to do enjoyable activities, and return to normal life as much as possible; check for updates between breaks.
- Create a list of activities to do in your free time so you have options to choose from and are not tempted to turn to the news.

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- Remember that many media sources focus on the scary headlines. Try to seek out and read the good stories—the restaurants donating food to those who have lost their jobs, people donating money to food banks, strangers delivering groceries to the elderly.
- Instead of spending hours online, use that time to help yourself feel better through meditation, breathing exercises, physical exercise, or journaling, or by practicing self-care.

3. Stay Connected to Your Support System

Know that during times of uncertainty, feeling stressed, depressed, on edge, and angry are completely normal reactions to an infectious disease outbreak like COVID-19. Social distancing and quarantine can exacerbate these feelings and lead to feelings of despair. Staying connected to trusted friends, coworkers, and family is one of the best ways to reduce anxiety, depression, loneliness, and boredom through social distancing, quarantine, and isolation.

With social distancing as the new **temporary** normal, staying connected may take some creativity and planning. If you are currently working from home, use the telephone, email, text messaging, and social media to connect with friends, family, and others. Talk about your feelings related to the outbreak and the impact it's having on your job and relationships. Equally important, albeit not easy, is to have conversation completely unrelated to the outbreak. Connect visually with friends and loved ones using Skype or FaceTime to replace the in-person things you enjoyed doing together. With virtual visual connection, you can still enjoy cooking together, sharing hobbies, or getting your friends together for a morning coffee or for happy hour.

While connecting with others is one of the best buffers against distress, also know that It's OK to give yourself permission to have alone time, especially if you are sharing space with partners, kids, parents, roommates, etc. Create a room or corner that is tranquil space just for you, and set boundaries so you are not disturbed. Wearing headphones or moving to a separate space can provide the much needed peace you need to navigate these chaotic times.

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4. Personal Self-Care and Activities That Bring Joy

During stressful times like this, it can feel so natural to be angry with the world, yourself, and/or those around you. Many people experiencing stress related to seemingly uncontrollable situations stop doing nice things for themselves. The opposite is true; this is a really important time to nurture yourself the way you nurture those around you. In times like this, although a lot of things are largely out of our control, often we can still choose how we spend our time.

You require and deserve more enjoyment because your life may feel overwhelmingly stressful and because you are used to taking care of everyone else. By nurturing yourself, you reclaim your power to make yourself happier, to be more in control of your body and mind, and to have the continued energy to care for others. Here are some suggestions to try:

- Make a list of 20 things that used to bring you pleasure and joy. Think of activities that engage your senses and fill you with relaxation, pleasure, joy, and a sense of fun. These may include an afternoon nap, reading a book unrelated to pandemics, taking a mindful walk (6 feet from others), eating your favorite dessert guilt free, listening to your favorite music, taking a bath, lighting a scented candle, or putting flowers in every room of your house. Start to incorporate items from your list into your daily practice as a reminder that you matter and deserve to feel good during this difficult time.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities and reward yourself by doing something pleasurable after a hard task (see list above).
- Keep a feelings journal. Write down your sad, angry, or hopeless feelings, and see if things start to feel a little lighter. Pour out your emotions on paper; don't show it to anyone, this is just for you.
- Keep a gratitude journal, where you write things down that you are grateful for or that are going well. This can shift negative thoughts and help you maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking.
- If you are off from work or working from home, make a list of activities you always wished to do, if only you had extra time at home. These can include: learning to meditate, catching up on podcasts, doing laundry, cleaning the fridge, organizing a closet, starting an arts and crafts project, learning a new hobby, planting a garden, or trying new recipes.

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5. Practice Breathing and Relaxation Techniques

There are lots of ways to combat and decrease your anxiety, but the best way to start is to learn and practice breathing and relaxation strategies, since they work right away, in the moment.

The easiest way to practice is to download the free apps FertiCalm (for women) and FertiSTRONG (for men) and keep on going through the situations (petals for women, tree leaves for men) until you get to the petal/leaf that says “Relaxation.” Even though the apps were designed and written for patients, the prerecorded relaxation techniques are useful for anyone. There are 10 prerecorded relaxations; 5 are “mini” 1- to 2-minute relaxations and 5 are longer 10- to 15-minute ones. Use the “mini” relaxations in 2 ways—every time you notice that you are feeling anxious, do a mini; and start identifying situations that you know can make you anxious (watching the news, talking to anxious friends), and do a mini beforehand. You can do minis several times a day, anytime and anywhere, until they become your default way of coping with stressful thoughts and situations. To keep your overall stress level under control, do a longer relaxation at least once, and ideally twice, a day. If you practice daily, you will notice immediate relief, and after a week or two of regular relaxation practice, you should notice that your overall stress level starts to decrease.

Remind yourself that humans are incredibly adaptable, and although you may feel overwhelmed and unsettled much of the time right now, over the next days and weeks, we will all get accustomed to the new **temporary** normal. But in the meantime, use the minis and longer relaxations to keep you calmer and to help you feel more in control.

There are also many apps available that contain numerous recorded relaxation scripts, such as Calm, Headspace, or Insight Timer. It is important to find ones that feel comfortable for you, so that you continue the practice at least until this crisis is over.

6. Set Boundaries and Say “No”

In times of crisis, we often feel the need to help those around us. This is especially true for people who work in health care. However, as good as it may feel for you to help others, it is incredibly important that you maintain a solid self-protection zone. Whether it is requests to donate money, volunteer, work extra shifts, or care for others, think carefully before committing yourself. Here are a few ways to say no:

- “No”. No is a complete sentence, although it may not feel comfortable to say it. So here are some other suggestions...

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- “No, but how about...”. So if someone asks you to donate money to a shelter, and you are not able to donate financially, perhaps offer to donate some baked goods or some canned goods you have and don’t need, or donate your time if safe and appropriate
- “No, because...” So if your boss asks you to come into the clinic despite most of your coworkers being instructed to work from home, you could say that the reason you can’t is that your partner has diabetes or that your elderly mother lives with you. If you are asked to care for a patient with a known exposure, and you don’t feel that the correct precautions are being taken, be clear that you don’t feel comfortable until certain corrections can be made.
- “I need to get back to you about that.” Most of us don’t think of responses quickly and frequently say yes to requests simply because we don’t know how to say no politely. By saying that you need to get back to them, it gives you time to carefully consider the request and decide whether or not you want to say yes, and if declining, what you are going to give as an explanation.

Do be aware that helping others tends to make us feel less anxious and overwhelmed, so if there are things you want to and are able to do, then say yes. But choose what will make you feel good, versus doing things that may add to your emotional burden, and don’t overextend.

7. Take Care of Your Body

There are lots of ways to handle stress, and some of them are better for you than others. However, when we get stressed, we tend to seek out things that at least temporarily help us feel better, such as a lovely glass of wine, a good cup of coffee, lots of chocolate, and/or an intense workout. We are also being bombarded by stories in the media about the blessings of comfort food, with tempting pictures of mac and cheese, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and heaping bowls of ice cream. There is, of course, nothing wrong with comfort food. And, at times like now, if eating ice cream will provide you with a few moments of bliss, go for it—just not every day. Try to focus on an 80/20 plan for eating. If 80% of what you eat is the good stuff (fruits and veggies, lean meats, fish, nuts, whole grains), the other 20% can provide some of those comfort moments, without the guilt.

Given that this current situation might not improve for weeks or even a few months, it is important that you keep your body as healthy as you can. Don’t use tobacco or drugs. Don’t significantly increase your alcohol consumption; although it might help you to feel better in the moment, it is not good as a long-term stress reduction solution. Try to continue to eat and drink as you did before the current crisis, so if you had 2 cups of coffee a day, continue that routine.

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Exercise is probably the best stress reducer there is, so even if you can't go to a gym, be creative in ways to get as much exercise as possible. Walk briskly or run (hopefully with a friend or relative, 6 feet from each other), download exercise classes online, or learn how to do yoga. Set goals and rewards for yourself and work out virtually with friends to stay motivated. When we aren't able to follow our normal routines, are stressed, aren't having a regular work schedule, and can't socialize as we used to, there is a very human tendency to eat more, drink more, and exercise less. Our instincts about what can help us feel better when under duress are exactly the opposite of what actually will do so.

There are other ways to take care of your body. Choose to wear your favorite perfume or lotion, even if you are working from home. Shower and dress, even if you are sitting at your computer all day. When you are at the grocery store, carefully choose the treats you want as your 20%.

Staying healthy and treating your body well can help you feel stronger emotionally and physically and make it easier to cope.

8. Practice Good Sleep Hygiene

Lots of things can interrupt our sleep, and one of the top culprits is stress. Many people are feeling stressed these days, and, as a result, insomnia is becoming far more common. Here are some tips to encourage good sleep habits that can lead to a higher quality of sleep, allowing you to feel more rested throughout the day and, as a result, less stressed. Many of us don't realize that when we are sleep deprived—we feel irritable, stressed, and sad. Learning good sleep habits can significantly improve your sleep and thus your mood.

- Limit caffeine and eliminate nicotine exposure, especially in the late afternoon and evening. Also, while alcohol consumption may help you fall asleep, it tends to interrupt your sleep later in the night, so you might feel far less rested in the morning.
- Establish a regular exercise routine but not right before you go to bed. Even 10-15 minutes of exercise can improve sleep.
- Make sure to keep to a regular nighttime routine. While this might feel silly if you are working from home, and thus might not have to establish a set early wake-up alarm, you will sleep better if you go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Do the same thing each evening, such as reading quietly, meditating, taking a warm shower or bath, or simply stretching. Try to avoid using devices in the 30 minutes before bed. Use your bed only for sleeping and sex, so your body habituates to relaxing while in bed, not getting worked up watching the news or a tense TV show.

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- If you feel tired during the day, limit any napping to no more than 30 minutes. You can't make up sleep deprivation with naps. If you are feeling tired, try going for a brief walk, stretch out, or do a few yoga poses. A brief nap will increase your energy level, but don't allow yourself to take a long afternoon snooze.
- Make sure that you continue to be exposed to natural light, even if you aren't commuting to work. Keep your shades up, work near windows, and try to take walks during the daytime. Even with the disruptions we are all facing, you need to maintain a normal sleep/wake routine.
- Make your bedroom as sleep enhancing as you can. Keep shades down, and use a white noise generator if there is a lot of noise outside. The cooler the room (ideally 60-67°F), the easier it is to sleep. Don't have your phone charging near your bed.
- Be careful about what you eat and drink in the hours before you go to sleep. Spicy and citrus foods can cause indigestion, which can be made worse by lying down soon after eating. The same goes for carbonated beverages. Heavy, large, and fatty meals can also make it harder to fall asleep.

9. Take Breaks and Limit Your Time Working Alone

This may feel like an overwhelming situation, with so much uncertainty about your health and the health of your loved ones, your financial security, and the abrupt changes to your life and daily routine. For those of us old enough to remember 9/11, the first few weeks were overwhelming as well. We felt that our lives as we knew them would never get back to a comfortable normal, and most of us had no confidence that we would adapt. But we did. Never underestimate the human capacity to adapt to the most extraordinary circumstances.

Working with patients who were already highly stressed and needy before this crisis can only add to the level of discomfort you may be feeling. But most people who became health care professionals did so because they like to help others. However, you need to be careful to monitor your emotional well-being at work. It is likely that patients will be even more emotional, with the combination of their infertility, concerns about their health, and the possible postponement of treatment and pregnancy.

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Take frequent breaks in between phone calls and in-person visits. Walk around the building, read some online jokes, get a cup of tea, and stretch out. If personnel are being limited, and you don't have your normal support system at work, reach out to others via the phone or online. Although your coworkers might have annoyed you in the past, it is funny how much you may be missing them.

Be aware that your status as a health care worker might encourage friends and family members to assume that you are in the know about COVID-19, and you may be peppered with questions and requests in their attempts to calm their fears. Be honest with your inability to always be there for them and encourage them to stay current with referrals to legitimate media and web sources.

We will get through this, just like humanity has always managed to endure and even thrive with highly challenging circumstances. Situations like this can encourage the good to come out. Do the good you feel comfortable with, but limit yourself so that you can maintain your physical and emotional health.

10. Know When to Ask for Help

We know that many of you may be experiencing increased levels of distress during this time. It is certainly normal to feel concerned and out of control with the current COVID-19 situation. You may feel concerned about your own health or the health of your loved ones who are more vulnerable. You probably feel anger about how long you will need to remain in this situation and uncertainty about the future. Loneliness and boredom associated with feeling cut off from others only adds to this perfect storm.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. How you respond to the outbreak can depend on your background, age, personality traits, the community you live in, and job status. Situations like the current pandemic can trigger other times in your life that you felt out of control, like previous trauma. Be aware of these triggers and get the support you need. When times get tough, practice patience and compassion, not just with others, but most importantly, with yourself.

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How do you know when it's time to reach out for professional help? Ask yourself some of the following questions:

- Have you lost interest in activities that used to make you happy?
- Do you find yourself unable to think of anything other than the pandemic?
- Are you isolating yourself more than you used to (not connecting with others in your home, virtually, or by phone)?
- Do you have more difficulty with others in your life, such as your partner, family, friends or coworkers?
- Are you feeling numbness, anxiety and/or fear?
- Are you feeling bitter, guilty, worthless, hopeless, or that you are being punished?
- Are you having trouble getting a good night's sleep, sleeping too much, or are there changes in your appetite?
- Are you feeling the desire to use alcohol or drugs to cope?
- Do you have physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes?
- Are you experiencing intrusive distressing memories, flashbacks (reliving the event), or nightmares, or are you easily startled?

If distress is impacting activities of your daily life for several days or weeks, talk to a clergy member, counselor, or doctor to get support.