

## Emotional Well-Being in a Time of Great Uncertainty

Suzanne C. Danhauer, PhD

Associate Professor and Vice Chair of Social Sciences and Health Policy

Director of Faculty Well-Being and Resilience, Office of Faculty Affairs

We are in a time of unprecedented volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. How can we maintain our emotional well-being as we cope with the rapidly changing landscape of COVID-19?

In our current context, here are a variety of potential **emotional responses to COVID-19**:

- Uncertainty, anxiety and even panic
- Unexpected frustrations with new work challenges
- Isolation from family, friends, co-workers and community support systems
- Significant disruption in our usual routines
- Feeling conflicted from the pull of demands from both work and family responsibilities
- Fatigue
- Difficulty focusing and concentrating

**It is normal to experience stress** as we respond to the numerous challenges and demands of this pandemic. Stress can show up in a variety of ways, including:

- **Physical reactions:** rapid heart rate, muscle tension, headaches, GI distress, nausea, insomnia, fatigue, changes in appetite
- **Emotional reactions:** fear or terror, anger, irritability, argumentativeness, reactivity, hopelessness, depression, anxiety, numbness, detachment, despair, difficulty maintaining emotional balance
- **Cognitive reactions:** difficulty with problem-solving or decision-making, imagining only the worst-case scenarios, flashbacks/nightmares
- **Behavioral reactions:** hostility, blaming, unnecessary risk-taking, reduced ability to cooperate, conflicts with peers or family, withdrawal

**As a health care provider** during the COVID-19 pandemic, the additional stressors you face as you continue to deliver exceptional care during these extraordinary circumstances may impact your well-being further. You may be feeling:

- **Frustration over lack of protective equipment for providers**
- **Concern about your own health** and the health and well-being of the people you care about most -- your family, loved ones, and your colleagues at work
- **Guilt for taking time for your personal needs**
- **Exhaustion (physical and emotional)**

**How can we take care of ourselves and manage our stress?** Our ability to continue to care for others depends on our own well-being, which allows us to sustain our health, energy and efforts over the long-term. Here are some ideas that may help:

- **Show compassion for yourself and others.** Be kind and recognize that we are all navigating uncharted territory and a “new normal” right now.
- **In these uncertain times, stay calm.** While this may be easier said than done, take it one day at a time, one moment at a time. We can influence any situation for better or worse with our responses. Watch for “emotional contagion” and help where you can. Others can read emotion in your actions and words. Practice being a non-anxious presence.
- **Breathe.** Allow yourself to breathe slowly and deeply. Practice belly breathing (imagine that you are trying to blow up a balloon in your belly with your breath). Slow, deep breathing is physically incompatible with an anxiety response. It is a powerful way to calm your body and mind when you start to feel especially stressed, anxious or overwhelmed.
- **Maintain good health habits.** Pay attention to your basic needs. As stress increases, health habits are often the first to get less attention – at the very time when you most need to take care of your health to buffer against the effects of stress. Eat nutritious foods, limit alcohol use, avoid tobacco and allow yourself to get enough sleep.
- **Give yourself permission to keep moving.** Most people are well aware that exercise is a great way to handle stress and enhance sleep quality. Consider setting aside time for walking, biking, running, hiking, yoga, playing ball with a family member, or taking an online exercise class.
- **Be in nature.** Being outside in nature provides a rest from all the stressors of being in one place inside, and can be a powerful way to connect with the beauty of the outdoors.
- **Stay connected.** It may be helpful to think that we are really practicing “physical distancing” rather than “social distancing.” We need one another! Reach out to family, friends and colleagues for social contact. Consider a telephone call, FaceTime, Zoom, Skype or Google Hangouts to decrease your sense of isolation. Meaningful connections and emotional support are critical to our health and well-being. Support one another.
- **Pace yourself.** Healthcare is a marathon, not a sprint. Stress might be activating and give us the urge to go faster and work harder. Take mini-breaks and be cautious of the tendency to over-work, push yourself or neglect your basic needs. Even a quick 10-minute walk can “reset” you to keep going, increase your energy and help you feel calmer. We can’t care for our patients, families or communities when we are running on empty.
- **Organize your space.** Keeping your space in order or taking on a simple organizing task can help you to feel more in control of your own environment. This feeling can be useful at such a time when many of us feel little control over what is happening in our world.
- **Focus on gratitude and appreciation.** Amidst all the challenges and stress, remind yourself of what is going well and what you are grateful for. A grateful perspective can be a great antidote to a narrow focus on only the problem. Take time to appreciate the

ways that you see people continuing to show up and pitching in however is needed. Appreciation boosts our ability to keep going in difficult times.

- **Be selective about your use of social media and your consumption of news.** Try to focus COVID-19 on problem-solving and providing support. Be vigilant for information overload and consider watching the news 1-2 times per day but not constantly.
- **Check out useful online coping resources.** Two options (of many) include:
  - **Headspace** has brief breathing and meditation exercises. There is FREE access to this app for healthcare providers for all of 2020:  
<https://www.headspace.com/health-covid-19>
  - **Mental health apps** (including mindfulness coach and cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia) are FREE and highly-rated apps include evidence-based tools for managing stress, dealing with anxiety and improving sleep:  
<https://www.mentalhealthapps.org/>.
  - <https://www.virusanxiety.com/> is a website with useful information and a toolkit for dealing with anxiety and related issues in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Check your body language before speaking with a patient (or anyone!).** Check yourself before an interaction – take a deep breath, make sure you’re speaking at a reasonable pace, and assume a confident and comforting position with your body language.
- **Focus on what lifts your spirits.** Take time for the things that bring you joy. Those are different for everyone – perhaps calling a friend you haven’t talked to in a long time, putting flowers on your kitchen table, or watching a funny movie.
- **Be present.** Future concerns and "What If" questions can take us out of the present moment. Practice mindfulness (simply noticing something in the present moment – your feelings, what you see, what you hear – without judgment) while washing your hands, brushing teeth or before entering a patient room to stay present, focused and centered.
- **Create or maintain structure at home.** As more and more people are quarantined at home – many with children out of school indefinitely – establish a consistent workspace and schedule to help with focus and productivity.
- **Practice self-compassion.** As we all adapt to the “new normal,” our routines and ability to carry out daily activities have changed dramatically. You likely will be trying new things, having difficult conversations, and experiencing emotions you don’t routinely experience. Give yourself time and grace to adjust. Be gentle with yourself!

We can’t change all that is happening in our world right now. At the same time, we can use these current challenges as an opportunity to cultivate our inner resources and remain centered, both individually and as a health system. Thank you for all that you are doing.

## Helpful Links

### Stress/anxiety related to COVID-19:

- Seven crucial research findings that can help people deal with COVID-19:  
<https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/covid-19-research-findings>
- Five ways to view coverage of the coronavirus:  
<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/pandemics>
- Coronavirus anxiety: <https://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/coronavirus-anxiety>
- Sustaining staff well-being in critical care during and beyond COVID-19 (and other handouts):  
<https://ics.ac.uk/ICS/Education/Wellbeing/ICS/Wellbeing.aspx?hkey=92348f51-a875-4d87-8ae4-245707878a5c>