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Mental Health Resources for Coping During the COVID-19 Pandemic
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Hello. My name is Angela Scarpa and I am a Professor and Director of Clinical Training for the Clinical Science program in the Department of Psychology at Virginia Tech. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has upended us all in so many ways personally and professionally. We are dealing with a substantial amount of uncertainty and fear, hearing tragic news on a daily basis, watching loved ones suffer, and struggling with changes in routine, isolation and loneliness while adhering to stay-at-home orders. Some of you may have lost your jobs. Others may find it difficult to function or concentrate as you normally do, leading to less productivity. Some may need to continue to work, and feel unsafe. The stakes may seem higher. If you are feeling off-balance, overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or irritated at times, you are not alone. Pandemics are scary, and sad things are happening. These responses are normal reactions to an abnormal situation, and to be expected.

What can you do to help cope with the uncertainty of the situation? Here are some tools that I have compiled from psychologists, psychiatrists, colleagues, and public health or mental health organizations around the country, that are based on cognitive behavioral principles. A special acknowledgment goes to my friend and colleague Joel Hughes, Ph.D., Director of Clinical Training at Kent State University, for sharing some of these ideas with me. I hope you will find these helpful. Please accept my best wishes for good health during this time. Be well.

To make it easier to remember, I organized these tools around the acronym PRISM.

1. Physical tools: Find ways to engage in physical activity. Exercise. Walk. Run up and down your stairs. Get some fresh air in a manner consistent with social distancing. The main goal is to keep your heart pumping and release pent up energy. Exercise also can raise endorphin levels and help you tolerate stress better. More broadly, exercise reminds us that no matter what is going on in the world, self-care such as nutrition, sleep, and physical activity are important for maintaining our physical and mental health. The CDC also recommends getting good sleep and eating healthy foods during the pandemic.
2. Relaxation tools: Learn stress management. There are many approaches, like progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), and others. You can find a wide variety of instructions online (e.g., www.calm.com, www.meditainment.com), and there are many smartphone apps for meditation and other forms of stress management. Choose an approach that fits you, and take the time for REAL relaxation. The main goal is to calm your energy. Reducing your overall level of arousal steals the oxygen from the emotional fire.
3. Interest tools: Be mindful with your time by prioritizing things that matter to you. Even during this time, find ways to live consistent with your most deeply held values. Regardless of how you feel in the moment, what is truly important to you? Family? Relationships? Health? Your education or vocation? Helping others? What are activities that you enjoy? Music? Telling jokes? Singing? Watching TV? Cooking? Reading? Find ways to engage in these activities and valued principles that mean so much to you. It also

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helps to keep a schedule and stick to a routine that is as close to typical as you can manage: Shower, Dress, Eat, Work, Play. Schedule some of your interests throughout this routine. You can also schedule the other PRISM tools!

4. Social tools: During the pandemic, we are encouraged to keep our physical distance from others. While some of us do not mind and may even prefer being alone, others will feel a deep sense of loss. Find ways to gain the social support that you need. Stay connected by checking in with close friends and family via Zoom, FaceTime, calls, text messages or other social media platforms. Many support groups can also be found online. Remember that talking to pets can also be a source of social support.
5. Mental tools: From time to time, and especially when you are feeling worried or sad, pause to reflect on your thoughts and feelings. What exactly are you thinking? Feeling? Accept your thoughts and feelings and let them be. No need to change them, but also no need to dwell on them! Take a breath. Avoid fixating on the news, and instead try to focus on what you are grateful for. Recognize that while you may not be able to choose the negative circumstances surrounding the pandemic, you also do not need to be dictated by them. You can choose how to think, feel, and respond. What do you have control over that you can do? If you find yourself in a spiral of negative thoughts, talk back to those thoughts with positive encouragement. Remember, you do not need to believe everything you think. Try to stay in the present, and choose how you want to respond. If your mind wanders to worries, keep a small journal handy and write them down to review later (you can even put worry time into your daily schedule!). Use your ability to control your attention to focus on positive, productive activities, and compress your worry time into an hour or less each day. Another helpful strategy is to keep yourself present – use your five senses to notice what is around you – what you see, smell, taste, hear, touch. Do a quick body scan – notice your feet, toes, hands, fingers, shoulders, neck, head. The goal here is to spend less time thinking about the past or the future or negative catastrophizing, and more time on what is going on right here and now that you can actually impact. You can accept your thoughts/feelings AND move on with your life at the same time.

One final note is that everyone responds to crises in different ways. These coping tools may be helpful for some, but not for all. If you find that the challenges are overwhelming your ability to cope, seek out professional help. Parents might also have some special circumstances dealing with children at home. Here are some additional resources for support during COVID-19:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coping with Stress during COVID-19:

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fmanaging-stress-anxiety.html

The National Alliance on Mental Illness: <https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/NAMI-HelpLine/COVID-19-Information-and-Resources>

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/>. Those in crisis can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 to talk to a counselor (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>).

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Information for Survivors, Communities, and Domestic Violence Assault Programs:
<https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/get-updates-information-covid-19/>. Also, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 and TTY 1-800-787-3224.

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline (<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>): Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to be connected to a confidential crisis support counselor, 24/7, 365-days-a-year. This is a national hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster.

Tips for Parents, School Staff, and Others on Talking to Children about COVID-19:
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcommunity%2Fschools-childcare%2Ftalking-with-children.html

American Psychological Association's Advice for Caregivers of Children with Disabilities:
<https://www.apa.org/research/action/children-disabilities-covid-19>

Seven Strategies to Support Children with Autism through Uncertain Times:
<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/supporting-individuals-autism-through-uncertain-times>

Tips for Keeping Children Safe and Engaged in Fun and Meaningful Activities At Home:
<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/quarantine-parents-tips>