

## HOW TO COPE WITH COVID-19 STRESS WHEN YOU CAN'T STAY HOME

When you're on the front lines—in a grocery store, bank, hospital, delivery truck, pharmacy, or clinic—you can't stay home. You can't avoid all contact with others. You're literally *living* in the news, so trying to avoid consumption of worldly events can feel pointless. You're exposed, and it's scary.

To boot, your workload has likely increased exponentially, which would leave anyone feeling pretty overwhelmed. And for many, there are lives on the line—your life, the lives of your loved ones, and the lives of your patients or customers.

There are a lot of resources for you. We spoke with psychology experts and therapists to find the best coping mechanisms and strategies for all you on the frontlines.

### **Step 1: Cover Your Bases**

The simplest things that make the biggest difference in your health are often the first to go when you're stressed, overloaded, and overwhelmed. Here's your reminder from the experts to protect your immune system and maintain your energy so you can manage your stresses—knowing that the other tactics won't work if you don't do these things first.

"Try to have a daily check on three essentials: sleep, food, and movement," says clinical psychologist Kevin Gilliland, Psy.D. "Sleep is power, food is fuel, and movement is medicine. Those three things help us fight off the common cold and help us recover quicker. They also help us be our best in our jobs and with other people."

#### **First things first, focus on sleep.**

"Sleep is power," agrees Gilliland. "We need to be more aggressive in how we manage our lives when we leave work," meaning you need to prioritize sleep first and foremost. "Counseling is helpful, and so are medications, but neither of those can correct sleep deprivation."

What makes matter worse is that, "when stressed, many people tend to fall into bad sleep patterns which then intensifies the stress and decreases our ability to respond," says clinical psychologist Forrest Talley, Ph.D.

And if you can't do much about your sleep situation, "focus on the other critical areas like healthy food choices (not too much caffeine or alcohol), some kind of physical activity, and stay connected to meaningful relationships." And if you *do* happen to get some time off, Gilliland emphasizes prioritizing sleep. "It usually takes a few nights to recover sleep debt," he says.

#### **Recognize the importance of nutrition.**

Both Gilliland and Talley also emphasized the importance of proper nutrition during times of crisis. "People tend to either forget to eat or overeat—usually junk food," says Talley. "This also diminishes your capacity to deal with stress."

"When you binge anything, it's usually because of emotional or mental stress," explains Gilliland. "You're not being very present with what you're doing (mindless eating), which isn't a very

productive way to manage stress. It actually keeps you from developing the psychological muscles that you need and can use in other situations. Not to mention, most binge behaviors can lead to some serious problems (addiction, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, financial debt, divorce, and—oh yeah, a weakened immune system)."

**Movement is really important too.**

"A healthy, regulated body and mind rely on being able to manage the fluctuating levels of hormones and neurotransmitters (brain chemicals that contribute to your feeling states) that are coursing through your brain and body at any given time," explains deVos. "In prolonged states of fight/flight or fear, the stress hormones that are discharged into the body (namely cortisol and adrenaline) can wreak havoc on your physical and emotional health in ways such as spiking blood sugar, reducing blood oxygen levels, slowing digestion, disrupting sleep, and increasing reliance on the more 'primal' parts of the brain, which means that you aren't as able to think logically, reason, and self-soothe." Movement helps to mitigate all this.

**Step 2: Identify Your Stressors**

Make sure you're listening to bodily cues that may indicate you've surpassed your stress threshold. "These symptoms [below] mean your body has been attempting to function in a fight-or-flight state for too long without being able to downshift into the rest-and-digest mode," says deVos. Keep an eye out for:

- Trouble concentrating and completing tasks
- Irritability
- Heightened emotionality
- Hypervigilance
- Low energy
- Feeling numb
- Fogginess and tiredness

If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, deVos says to remember that this is normal. "It's important to first acknowledge that this makes sense!" she says. "You are functioning under extreme and unprecedented circumstances."

**Step 3: Tackle Them Individually**

"Identify one or two of the things that are most stressful," says Talley. Then ask yourself, "Is there something that can be done directly or indirectly to reduce the stress related to these sources of concern?" he suggests. There are two kinds of approaches you can take: *direct and indirect*.

**Direct Changes You Can Make**

"There are very few things you can do about the virus itself, so it's essential to take advantage of the things you *can* do to stay strong," says Whatley. Everyone's situation is different, but here are some things you can take control over.

**Prioritize your boundaries and needs.**

"Where possible, be an advocate for your physical and emotional boundaries and needs," says DeVos. In your workspace, "This may include being clear about what shifts you are and are not available to work, the protective wear you need to feel safe and able to complete the requirements of your job, and the ability to accept or decline overtime when requested."

You can get even more refined with this approach. "This may also include more subtle boundaries, such as who you spend time with (or don't spend time with) during your shifts, or what you feel comfortable discussing while working," she said. "Some of these things may not be in your control, but during times of extreme stress and anxiety, focusing on what/where you do have control is an important factor in managing these intense experiences."

**Be realistic with your bandwidth.**

"You may feel incredibly passionate about supporting and helping where you can, but to avoid feeling overwhelmed and burnt out, it's crucial to self-monitor for signs of depletion/exhaustion or burnout [noted above]," says DeVos.

This includes how far you're stretching yourself at home too. "The workloads are harder than ever, so let the typical household things go a bit so you can concentrate on rest and taking care of yourself until this has passed and your workload is back to normal," says Whatley. Don't be afraid to ask for help where you need it as well. Communicate, and remember that you're human, and all humans need help from time to time.

**Limit your news intake.**

Is the news a source of stress for you? Turn it off! This is something you can target directly. Focus on what's going on around you, and take in only what is necessary for your job. "Limit your news intake to what is necessary," said Wright. "

**Locate your resources.**

Talk to your manager about what's available for you. Ask questions. Be candid. Every state and organization will have a different protocol, but this is your time to lean on management and ask for the support you need and deserve.

**Get a counselor.**

"If you have insurance, check your benefits for an employee assistance program or mental health benefits and use them," says Gilliland. "During this strange time, just talk with someone, get some wise counsel (counseling) to solve the issues that will most likely go away when this is over. You may not need therapy, but there are a lot of us that need some good counsel," he says.

**CARE WorkLife Solutions is your EAP and services are available.**

### **Indirect Tactics for Stress Relief**

If you can't make changes to your situation, there are things you can do to manage your stress. This is the 'indirect' method Talley was talking about earlier, and it's all about shifting your self-talk and taking care of yourself.

#### **Embrace the abnormal.**

"For front-line workers, you should feel a strange mix of emotions and thoughts—that's normal," says Gilliland. "The front-line workers I treat all talk about this odd mix of gratitude that they can still work and are still making money, worry for family and friends, sadness about the impact on people's lives, and fear about where this will go next," he says. Sound familiar? "Feeling abnormal right now is actually a normal response. That said, you need to make sure it doesn't spill into isolation, anxiety, depression, or all manner of struggles."

#### **Focus on your purpose.**

Remember the bigger picture in which you are involved. That is, remind yourself of the higher purpose of your work. Being driven by a sense of purpose makes it easier to push through exhaustion and maintain a confident attitude. The grocery store workers or baristas, for example, should remember that while so many things have changed due to the coronavirus, he/she is providing a small bit of stability and joy for those they serve.

#### **Try not to overthink.**

Easier said than done, eh? "You need to stay anchored in today," to avoid spiraling, says Gilliland. One way to do that is by changing your goals to the more immediate—like today or this week, he says. "Think: 'What do I need to focus on today?' and then worry about the other things tomorrow or next week. Get through this day."

Keeping your focus on the immediate future can also help quell unease about what's to come, says Whatley. "Looking far into the future can exacerbate anxiety so taking things one day at a time will be helpful for anxiety levels," she says.

#### **Find your "remedy."**

Pick your new anti-stress "remedy" of choice. "Do something today that releases some of the day's stress," says Gilliland. "Regardless of how you feel, force yourself by going for a walk, meditate, call a friend, eat a healthy meal, or read a good novel. "It helps to begin by taking inventory of what coping mechanisms are most effective for you," agrees Talley.

#### **Don't dwell.**

Talley advises preventing yourself from "dwelling on dark themes." It might sound obvious, but "this intensifies anxiety and sadness," he explains. Again, easier said than done, but if you can "intentionally shift your thinking to other topics," (another great mindfulness technique), you'll see the benefit. "

**Let go of fear.**

When you're exposed to the world during a pandemic, it can feel extremely frightening. "When it comes to concerns about exposure for those of us that still need to deliver essential services, it's reasonable to be concerned and cautious," says Gilliland. "Stay current on what is recommended, and do those things—social distancing and sanitizing—and then let it go," he says. "Continuing to worry is going to actually weaken your immune system. Once you've done what you can, go on with living and try to stop those thoughts that circle back and create doubt. You don't need that thought so stop it or let it run right past."

**Try free mindfulness programs.**

"Mindfulness is one of the very best tools for the high levels of anxiety essential workers might be experiencing," says Whatley. "It can be done in 30 minutes, and makes a huge difference in the stress hormones produced in the bodies and keeping those down if at all possible." Apps like Calm and Headspace are offering free resources for managing stress and anxiety, and Oprah and Deepak Chopra created a "Hope in Uncertain Times" 21-day meditation program (also free). (More: [The Best Meditation Apps for Beginners](#))