

A psychologist's science-based tips for emotional resilience during the coronavirus crisis

(Sergiy Maidukov/For The Washington Post)

By Jelena Kecmanovic

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As the news about the coronavirus pandemic becomes grimmer, and governments and businesses issue closing or work-from-home directives, many of us are experiencing a variety of negative emotions. We feel anxiety in response to the uncertainty of the situation; sadness related to losing our daily sources of meaning and joy; and anger at whatever forces are to blame for bringing this upon us. As a psychologist, I believe following evidence-based recommendations for bolstering mental resilience can help us weather this crisis. It's normal to be unsettled and concerned about the upending of life as we know it. "Humans find comfort and safety in the predictability of the routines of daily living," said John Forsyth, a professor of psychology at the University at Albany in New York and co-author of "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Anxiety Disorders." As our lives have dramatically changed overnight, many are struggling with finding ways to deal with the new reality. "We have two children home from college, along with a girlfriend of one, and another high-schooler who is distance-learning," said Jane Legg, an elementary school teacher from Bethesda, Md. "It's like a lot of people cramped in a small ship, all trying to get their work done." Many parents of younger children are facing the stress of taking care of them at home, often while teleworking themselves. And families with elderly or sick members are dealing with even stricter isolation in an attempt to prevent covid-19 in this vulnerable population. "I feel especially sad and worried for my elderly mom and aunt, who are sequestered in their assisted-living facilities," said Larry Eastman, a retired engineer in Ellicott City, Md. "And I'm concerned about my dad being isolated, because he's not leaving home."

As schools move to online teaching, students will be spending extra time in front of a screen. Clinical psychologist Nicole Beurkens has some pointers. (The Washington Post)

Nobody knows how long the pandemic will last or how long it will be until we can resume our regular lives. Even worse, many people are worried that they may be

laid off and lose their livelihoods. The pervasive uncertainty of the situation makes it hard to plan a course of action and creates a high level of stress. To add insult to injury, our typical ways of de-stressing, such as working out in a gym, watching sports, meeting for happy hours with co-workers or hanging out with groups of friends, have largely come to a halt.

How can we respond to the coronavirus situation in a way that will preserve our psychological well-being? The following science-based approaches can help.

Accept negative emotions

It is important to acknowledge that a lot of anxious thoughts and emotions will show up during this time, and to accept them rather than trying to push them away or escape them. The same goes for sadness stemming from the loss of our regular ways of living, worry about lack of supplies or apprehension about kids getting cabin fever. That's because research has shown that avoidance of such emotions will only make them stronger and longer lasting. Notice negative emotions, thoughts and physical sensations as they come up, look into them with curiosity, describe them without judgment and then let them go. This is an essence of mindfulness, which has been consistently linked to good psychological health. "By allowing negative emotions to come and go, and focusing on how to spend this time to still include engaging in meaningful and joyful activities, we can get through this," Forsyth said.

Instead of fighting our emotions, we can invest our energy in creating the best possible life, given the circumstances.

Create new routines

Although many people escape from reality by Netflix binging, cookie indulging or marathon Fortnite playing, be mindful of over-relying on these distraction strategies. Instead, studies have shown that planning and executing new routines that connect you to what really matters in life is the best recipe for good mental health.

It's important to establish structure, predictability and a sense of purpose with these new routines. "It's good for adults and crucial for children to stick to regular wake-up, grooming and meal times. Where and how everyone works and plays at home should also be



planned, while understanding that we all need to be flexible and adapt as needed,"

said Deborah Roth Ledley, a clinical psychologist in Philadelphia and co-author of “The Worry Workbook for Kids.”

In the time after work is done, use the opportunity to enrich your life. “The most helpful routines are the ones that meet essential human needs for competence and relatedness,” said Joel Minden, a clinical psychologist at the Chico Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy and an author of “Show Your Anxiety Who’s Boss.” For example, this might be the perfect moment to learn to play that guitar that has been lying in the corner, or to master French. YouTube lessons abound. You can also teach your children all those skills we often don’t get to share in the era of overscheduling and helicopter parenting: cooking, laundry, balancing a checkbook, dealing with airline agents, building a ramp for the grandparents. These lessons will make them more resilient as they go off to college or move away from home.

Reinvent self-care

It is hard when you’re robbed of your tried-and-true ways of taking care of your physical and mental health. But don’t abandon them; science has shown that exercise, good nutrition and socializing are directly linked to emotional well-being, so now is the time to get creative.

“To keep your psychological well-being, schedule self-care each day. It can consist of running or walking outside, using apps for home exercise or makeup sessions, and FaceTiming your friends,” said Ilyse DiMarco, a clinical psychologist at the North Jersey Center for Anxiety and Stress Management. Whether you need to change already established exercise, eating and socializing habits, or whether you’re using this time to launch a healthy-living routine, the new routines will give you mental strength.

One thing that is still available to us, unless we experience complete lockdown, is nature. I have never seen more people in Washington’s Rock Creek Park than the past two weekends. Studies show that spending time in nature, whether you are hiking or gardening, positively affects psychological health. Make sure, however, that you are observing social distancing guidelines.

Reflect, relate and reframe

It might help to realize that these trying times offer several avenues for psychological growth and an opportunity to deepen our relationships with the people in our household and beyond. “Start a family book club or watch Harry Potter movies together. When else will you all be home to do that?” Roth Ledley said.

Leverage audio and video technology to stay in touch with others. As the usual hectic tempo of our busy lives recedes, taking time to savor heart-to-heart conversations with family members or friends will probably result in stronger social connectedness going forward.

This crisis also offers an unexpected chance to check in with yourself. “I

think that this is an opportunity for slowing down and reflecting on life,” Eastman said. What brings you meaning when the noise of modern life quiets down? Have your priorities reflected what truly matters to you? As the usual pursuits of status and money are put on hold, where do you find your life purpose and transcendence?

Finally, keep in mind that experiencing stress and negative emotions can have positive consequences. Studies show that people who go through very difficult life experiences can emerge from them with a stronger sense of psychological resilience, rekindled relationships and a renewed appreciation of life. Some describe starting to live more fully and purposefully. With care and planning, we, too, can stay psychologically strong during the pandemic and perhaps even grow from this transformative experience.

Jelena Kecmanovic is a founding director of the Arlington/DC Behavior Therapy Institute and an adjunct professor of psychology at Georgetown University. Find her @DrKpsychologist.

