

AN APPROACH TO WELLNESS DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

Adaptive Refocusing

Definition: Actively shifting your attention to subjects and thoughts that promote a positive state of mind. This technique interrupts the tendency to continuously think about matters that provoke negative emotions and distress. This is *not* a form of avoidance; it helps maintain boundaries around problems so they don't consume too much mind and energy.

Present-mindedness: This means focusing all of your attention and intention on what you are doing in any given moment – e.g. when you eat, be wholly consumed in concentrating on the taste, texture, sight and sounds of the experience, and nothing else. Shut off your TV, music, even your phone if possible. This practice of being in the present allows you to settle-in with the one thing in your possession: the here-and-now. Being in the present releases our mind and body from preoccupations with the past or the future, even if for a short time.

Meditation is a powerful practice of emotional grounding and facilitates an honest relationship with one's own state. Meditation builds capacity to radically accept what is, rather than fighting or rejecting it. Specialized methods of meditation focus on building gratitude and appreciation, powerful modifiers of mood and outlook.

Engage in Activities That Promote a Sense of Accomplishment, Control, & Immediate Gratification

- **'Mundane' Activities:** Cleaning, Laundry, Meal Planning, Cooking/Baking, Gardening/Yard Work.
- **Help others**, while respecting and acknowledging your own needs and limits.
- Dismantle that stack (read: mountain) of papers on your desk at home; clean up the attic, etc.
- **The Arts & Entertainment:** drawing, coloring, painting, playing a musical instrument, puzzles/online brain teasers are widely available and free; board games, card games, listening to music.
- **A word on video gaming and 'binge watching':** video games can be a totally immersive experience, giving relief from our problems and worries, and even connect us with other players online. Modest use can be adaptive but beware the slippery slope; the same goes for watching back-to-back-to-back episodes of a show.
- If you have a **pet** spend **more time** with and caring for your pet; some might consider getting a pet.
- **Journaling:** a place where you can be honest with yourself and a means to meaningfully purge all that has built up on the inside. Strongly recommended is the use of *pen and paper* to slow your mind, encourage a mindful approach to the activity, and disconnect from those things associated with other parts of daily life. Even if you choose to destroy what you have written so no one ever sees it, it is still very worthwhile.
- **Spiritual Practice** is an expression of the self and often occurs in solidarity with others who hold similar beliefs. While in-person congregations cannot occur during social distancing, video interfaces can substitute.
- **Relive** great moments in your life and the people you shared them with by looking at your favorite photos.

Exercise is a Must, Not an Option

- **Exercise** is often one of the first sacrifices when work demands rise. Regular workouts of moderate intensity increase endorphins, reduce cortisol, promote better sleep, boost immunity, and improve stress symptoms like anger, nervousness, and depressed mood. A brisk walk or short run still count.
- In the setting of social distancing or other lack of access to fitness clubs, consider the following: **video guided exercise programs** (yoga, Pilates, high intensity interval training, etc.); lifting weights at home (get creative here – textbooks, bag of flour); stationary bicycle or buy a riding mount for a real bicycle; newer equipment may have integrated audiovisual platforms that allow you to competitively ride against others in a class.

The Role of Mental Health Professionals

- Psychotherapy offers a private, contained psychological space where individuals experience an unparalleled safety and freedom to explore and express aspects of their innermost self. While traditionally occurring in-person, psychotherapy can effectively be delivered through telephone or audiovisual platforms. **When to go?** That is a personal call; be honest with yourself if you are experiencing emotional distress or difficulty functioning. Don't wait until the problem starts to get out of control - early intervention is key.

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Limit and Be Strategic in Watching / Reading the News

- Speculation, dramatization and theatrics abound in the news; provocative headlines sell newspapers and draw readership. This can stoke angst and tension. Be a discerning reader and focus on facts.

Social Media & Video Chat Apps

- A great asset for communication and connecting with people across a distance. Some individuals have pages / sites that are inspiring or educational. Misinformation is bountiful so beware; chat rooms, blogs, and other venues can sometimes become a conduit to release aggression (anger displacement).
- Connect with others through family video chats; virtual dinner with friends, etc. There are many platforms to choose from that are not social media.

What to Do if Your Anxiety Keeps Ratcheting Up

1. Sensory Therapy: best with ice packs (caution re using hot packs). Place the ice pack on a temperature-sensitive area: axilla (arm pit), upper chest, ribs, or low back. Focus on the sensation (supposed to be somewhat uncomfortable) and keep your attention focused on that. As your mind drifts to thinking about other things, gently bring your focus back to the ice pack. This halts escalation of tension propagated by thinking about what bothers you. Don't wait until your anxiety is "8/10", intervene sooner. For severe anxiety put your face in a large bowl of ice water, count to five or ten, and repeat as necessary.
2. Aromatherapy: allows you to focus on intense, preferably pleasing, aromas of a wide variety. (Before use, consult your doctor if you are pregnant or being treated for a medical condition.)
3. Massage Therapy – partner, massage chair, or another device.
4. Cool Mist: Fill a humidifier with cold water (or use a powerful cool mist ultrasonic humidifier), place a fan behind it and stand in front of the breeze of cool mist.
5. When to consult a physician? Interference with sleep, daytime functioning (work, family responsibilities), relationships, turning to substances (e.g. alcohol, cannabis, other drugs) to manage your symptoms, or having thoughts of self-harm are reasons to reach out to your doctor without delay.

Three Ideas to Guide Adaptation to Living at Home and in Relative Confinement

1. Loss of daily structure (being laid off, quarantined, or even newly working from home), affects the three major pillars of life: work, relationships, and play (recreation). Response: create a new daily schedule and treat it like a job.
2. Get out of your apartment/house/condominium at least twice a day for 30-45 minutes in way that respects current mandates on social distancing.
3. Start that do-it-yourself backyard or home improvement project you've been putting off, circumstances permitting.

Bibliotherapy

1. When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chodron (also see other titles by this author, publisher)
2. Five Reasons to Meditate by Pema Chodron. <https://www.lionsroar.com/5-reasons-to-meditate-september-2013/>
3. Meditation in Action by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (also see other titles by this author, publisher)
4. Hope and Help for Your Nerves by Claire Weekes. (get the audio CD add-on if available)
5. Reading any book that you can get totally lost in – so much so that everything else fades into the background

Web resources

1. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. 1-800-273-8255. SuicidePreventionLifeline.org
2. Illinois Suicide Hotlines <http://www.suicide.org/hotlines/illinois-suicide-hotlines.html>
3. If calling 9-1-1 for any mental health emergency ask for a Crisis Intervention Trained ("C.I.T.") Officer.
4. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Chicago 312-563-0445 or 833-626-4244
<https://www.namichicago.org/> NAMI Illinois 800-346-4572; NAMI National Helpline 800-950-6264
7. Community Counseling Centers of Chicago Crisis Line 773-769-0205

A PRIMER ON OPTIMIZING YOUR SLEEP

Greater amounts of physical or psychological stress demand a longer sleep time. Sleep deprivation or poor-quality sleep are lead-ins to fatigue, physical complaints, cognitive complaints, depressive symptoms and burnout. Protection of sleep quality and duration is essential during times of heightened stress. This guide is meant to educate you about factors affecting sleep.

Environmental Optimization

Comfortable mattress: the right firmness or softness allows your body to relax and maintains correct musculoskeletal support throughout the night. Proper support and comfort enhance sleep quality.

Pillow Choice: pillows are designed to support a specific sleep posture - stomach v. side v. back.

Pollution: sound and light pollution interfere with sleep; use ear plugs and a night mask as needed. Be mindful of indoor air pollutants such as: tobacco smoke, pet dander, mold, cleaning chemicals, and others.

Temperature and Humidity - major factors in promoting quality sleep; tailor to your needs. Cotton clothing and bed sheets breathe much better than synthetic fabrics (e.g. polyester) and keep you cooler overnight.

Managing Artificial Light Exposure: TV's, computers and especially mobile phones are the biggest culprits. Some phones allow you to reduce wakefulness-promoting blue light emission (shift to red hues) at night; you can combine this with reducing screen brightness as much as possible. Try no phone/TV/computer at least 1 hour before bed, especially if you have insomnia.

Sleep Partner: one of the most common causes of disrupted sleep is a bed partner that has a sleep-related difficulty (e.g. sleep disorder). At the extreme, this may require you to sleep separately for a time until you/your bed partner address reversible sleep problems.

OSA & Other Conditions: if you are diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea, follow the advice of your doctor. OSA is a common cause of excessive daytime sleepiness. Speak to your doctor about sleep problems that persist or are interfering; numerous medical conditions are associated with sleep problems.

Alarm Clock: most people use their mobile phones, but this has drawbacks such as sound/vibration alerts for emails, messages, and rogue telephone calls (e.g. robocalls); you are more likely to check your phone if it is near you during a brief awakening (e.g. overnight bathroom use) or in the case of insomnia.

Insomnia

A) Go to bed at the same time each night (ideally within 20-30 mins). If you can't fall asleep within your usual time frame (not more than 20-30 minutes) get out of bed, *leave the bedroom*, and go and do something you dislike. Why? To break the psychological association between negative emotions associated with insomnia; and to not reward your brain for accomplishing tasks when you are supposed to be asleep. **B)** Avoid daytime naps. **C) Sleep Delta Waves**: located easily online, this music is designed to entrain your brain to relax and enter a deep sleep. Music with hypnotic qualities may displace unconscious thought content (conflicts) that manifest during sleep, inciting nightmares and turbulence during the sleep cycle. Requires persistent use before making an assessment. **D) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)**: especially focuses on addressing thought patterns, misconceptions about sleep, as well as physical and psychological responses to sleep problems that perpetuate insomnia. Courses are available online but may

THIS DOCUMENT IS FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY AND NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR MEDICAL CARE OR ADVICE not be validated; best to consult with a mental health professional. **E) When to consider medications:** sometimes the severity and duration of insomnia creates significant problems with daytime functioning and mounting emotional distress. Certain medical conditions can cause insomnia such as mood disorders, sleep disorders, reflux disease, and asthma, to name but a few. Talk to your physician about the pros and cons of behavioral, medication, or combined approaches to address insomnia.

Make a Bedtime Ritual That Promotes Relaxation

Tea ritual, bath with aromatherapy or candle light, reading a book (not on your phone!), listening to specific music (only used for relaxation before bed), etc. This becomes all the more important during times of elevated stress and you must keep up with this for it to work; don't give up after the first several tries!

Alcohol & Caffeine

Alcohol: alcohol is a double-edged sleep sword. While it does make falling asleep easier, that 'benefit' comes at a high cost, namely: less time in deep sleep (the most restorative stage), multiple awakenings overnight (you will not recall these), sleep fragmentation, and reduced time in REM sleep. Overall, you sleep poorly and wake up less refreshed. This gets worse if you are running on less hours than you actually need. Best to avoid completely in times of stress. (As an aside, alcohol is also an immunosuppressant).

Caffeine: caffeine metabolism varies tremendously across individuals. Some people will have caffeine in their system after a period of six or even eight hours after a lunch-time espresso. Caffeine is a stimulant and can induce or exacerbate physical and psychological signs of stress (e.g. subjective anxiety, tremulousness, elevated heart rate). Limit caffeine intake where possible; exclude if you know you are sensitive to caffeine and under stress. Ideally, consume your caffeine in the morning hours and not thereafter. Sources of caffeine: soda, chocolate, tea, energy drinks, decaffeinated coffee still has some caffeine in it.

Five Don'ts with Your Sleep!

1. Don't track your sleep, unless told to do so by your health provider. Many devices are unreliable/inaccurate. Tracking perpetuates excessive attention and evaluation of your sleep, which can cause/worsen insomnia.
2. Don't try so hard to 'sleep well'. Not every night is going to be a great sleep.
3. Don't try to sleep less than you need.
4. Don't compare how much sleep you need with others.
5. Don't use bed time to solve your problems, problems of others, or solve the mysteries of the universe.

Web Resources

The National Sleep Foundation has a lot of useful information on sleep on its web site, including average amount of sleep required by a person, stratified by age. <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/insomnia/what-causes-insomnia>

National Sleep Foundation on the use of music to aid sleep:

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/can-music-help-you-calm-down-and-sleep-better>

Binaural Beats: Breus, MJ. "How can binaural beats help you sleep better?" *Psychology Today*. Oct. 11, 2018
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sleep-newzzz/201810/how-can-binaural-beats-help-you-sleep-better>

Introduction to Indoor Air Quality (Environmental Protection Agency web site):

<https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/introduction-indoor-air-quality>

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DEALING WITH STRESS, GRIEF, & BURNOUT FOR FRONT-LINE HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

This Document Complements “An Approach to Wellness During Times of Crisis”

Take Time for Yourself: *no matter how short the time is; incorporate even just one of the activities outlined in the Approach to Wellness During Times of Crisis. This also means doctors making time to see their own physician with the same degree of conviction that they put into patient care.* In addition, you must have time away from your phone and emails for a portion of some days. You must have time to talk to loved ones regularly.

Grieving: watching a patient deteriorate and die from an illness is identified as a common cause of symptoms on the post-traumatic and depressive spectrum for front-line health workers. This happens even more so in situations where the professional experiences helplessness or a sense of ineffectiveness. In a crisis, the time crunch and pressure make it much harder to grieve, but grieving is a crucial element in metabolizing the thoughts and feelings that accumulate and subsequently take a tremendous toll on providers.

- a) Speak with a spiritual or religious leader about the experience (Chaplain Service, for example).
- b) Do something representational to honor a patient that has died – an important acknowledgement, just as a funeral is.
- c) Meet with your mentor, a person who has likely gone through the same experience in the past.
- d) Write a hypothetical letter (pen and paper) to your patient where you share what you are going through – you can then share that with a mentor or mental health professional.
- e) Resist any temptation for self-isolation, which is a slippery slope of descent.

Challenge Myths of Control: Be honest with yourself about expectations placed upon you and those you place upon yourself, versus what is actually achievable or realistic. Physicians bear the burden of perfection and performance despite the circumstances, and especially amidst a crisis. We can only control what we think - that is both powerful and an important self-acknowledgement. Find ways to maintain faith in yourself and help your colleagues maintain theirs (acknowledge the tenacity of a colleague; talk with a mentor or seek mentorship; acknowledge victories in whatever form they come; take time to really internalize praise and thanks from others).

Simplify Your Life as Much as Possible:

- a) This may mean delegating tasks that you usually did yourself.
- b) Automate the payment of all of your bills
- c) Have groceries delivered (disinfect packages before opening; rinse produce very thoroughly)
- d) Let the dry cleaners do your laundry
- e) Child care – does your institution offer a service or has it established service with a trusted third party? Talk with other colleagues who are parents for ideas.
- f) Take ten minutes to permanently banish unwanted senders from your work email

Identify Wellness Resources at Your Institution: See if (crisis) counseling is offered - and use it.

Have Your Voice Heard and Follow Your Conscience: Speak with your clinical director. Participate in team meetings. Engage administrators who are there to support you, your safety, and well-being. Moral distress – failing to speak or act in line with your values is an established contributor to physician burnout and duress.

Consult a Mental Health Professional: Insomnia, depressive symptoms and trauma-related symptoms can seriously interfere with adapting to and tolerating the stress of a crisis. Symptoms that are persistent and subjectively bothersome warrant early intervention. Confidentiality is often of highest importance to physicians and there are providers who use ‘old-fashioned’ pen and paper, not EMRs, if that is important to you.