Coronavirus/COVID-19:

How to Stay Well in Challenging Times

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Amidst a growing threat from the coronavirus and COVID-19 (the disease caused by the virus), Americans are working hard to protect ourselves, our families, and our communities by staying well. We’ve likely all heard about the importance of handwashing, cleaning surfaces, and social distancing, but managing stress can be just as critical to our overall health and wellness.

Stress is toxic to overall health and wellness and, if left untreated, can create or exacerbate health problems.

Of course, worry, sadness, uncertainty, frustration, irritability, and disappointment can all be normal, expected reactions in a time of great change and potential tragedy. We are all faced with tough choices about how to best protect aging loved ones, how to ensure our children are learning, and how to adjust our routines to a “new normal.” It’s understandable that, given these challenges, anyone might struggle emotionally. It’s important to remember that – despite what the term “social distancing” might imply – you are not alone in the challenges you may face and in how you may react to them. During these troubled times, we are all experiencing, to varying degrees, thoughts and feelings that might at times feel upsetting, frightening, and unwanted.

You might be asking yourself: what do I do to get through this? How do I stop worrying?

First, it’s important to recognize what’s a normal reaction vs what’s a problematic one. As stated above, reactions that include stress, sadness, and concern can all be typical. However, without a strategy to cope with and channel our emotions, they can become overwhelming, and can color how we respond to challenges. When worry about safety, finances, employment, schooling, and health becomes out of control and all-encompassing, a national tragedy can become a personal trauma. Prolonged, frequently sad and depressed moods; thoughts of suicide, and obsessional thoughts that prevent you from taking care of yourself or your family indicate a need for extra support.
Some signs that you’re struggling to care for yourself might include trouble sleeping, reduced appetite, trouble completing daily chores, unable to care for family members, difficulty going to work, overwhelming feelings of sadness.

If you’re finding it hard to cope with the demands of your daily life, please contact a behavioral health professional who can assist you with these issues. There is help available! In Rhode Island you can call the BH Link at 401-414-5465, or walk in to the facility 24/7, 365 days per year, at 975 Waterman Ave., East Providence.

Remember: there is hope. We know from past times of national crisis that we can and do recover.

Here are some ideas on simple, free, and safe ways to bounce back from adversity:

- Focus on what you can control. “I can” statements help us feel empowered. For example: “I can take a deep breath,” “I can choose to go for a run,” “I can call a friend for support.”
- Get outside! Fresh air is key to health and wellness.
- Take a free yoga or Chi Kung/Qigong class online. These meditative exercises are proven to reduce stress and improve overall wellness.
- Dust off games like Monopoly, Clue, UNO, etc. Games bring us closer together and take our minds off our worries.
- Stay connected to friends and loved ones via video chatting, email, or, even the old-fashioned way: letter-writing or card-making!
- Start your spring cleaning both inside and outside. A clean, decluttered space is rejuvenating.
- Remind yourself that we will get through this! Think of a time in your past that you faced adversity and bounced back. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that we are survivors!
- Start meditating. If it works for the Buddhist Monks, it will work for you. Try guided meditations or relaxing music, all available free online, to help you get started.
- Get moving! Go for walks. Bring the dog along for double the benefit.
- Take advantage of the time to take an online course, read books, or start doing crosswords puzzles and/or Sudoku.
- Eat healthy! A protein-packed breakfast will power your day. Drink plenty of fluids. Try foods like nuts, berries, bananas, and salmon to fuel your brain and body.
- Stay busy! Reconnect with old hobbies, or start new activities you had always wanted to try. Think scrapbooking, reading, knitting, or anything else that you can try safely at home.
- Stay informed, but remember: too much information – like obsessing over updates on our phones and TVs – can spike our stress levels. Worse, misinformation, like a virus itself, can spread and wreak havoc. If you would like to stay current, stick to essential information from trusted, reliable sources like the RI Department of Health, Federal COVID-19 Task Force, CDC, or World Health Organization.
- And lastly, listen to music throughout the day. Music has been shown to elevate mood and improve digestion while decreasing anxiety, pain, and inflammation.

It’s normal and expected that some days will feel better than others. While the above suggestions can be helpful, some days it’s ok to simply say, “I am enough, and what I am able to do is enough.” It’s also courageous and important to know when to ask for help. Remember: the world may feel out of control, but we can control how we choose to manage our stress. You are not alone, and there is hope.