

A SELF-CARE GUIDE FOR CHANGE-MAKERS AND PEACEBUILDERS DURING COVID-19

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Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped almost every dimension of our lives. Many of us are seeing how the severity of this crisis is impacting the physical and psychological well-being of our communities. In this time of increasing uncertainty and instability, our work as change-makers and peacebuilders requires us to find creative ways to address the conflicts emerging in our families, our communities, and our societies. While people around the world mobilize to tackle the virus, we are aware that this is an opportunity to build relationships, trust and collaboration with different sectors of society for a more holistic and conflict-sensitive response.

Though many of us are caring for our communities and aiming to find the redemptive aspects of these challenging times, these efforts require energy and creativity that many of us may feel we are lacking as we cope with increasing change and intensifying circumstances. We are not alone in these challenges. All of us can expect that increasing levels of stress will impact us in different ways as prolonged isolation, sudden loss, fear, and the illness or death of loved ones becomes a reality during this epidemic. As change-makers and peacebuilders, these challenges may be magnified by sudden losses of the support of our team or colleagues, an increase of conflict in our communities, and new or exacerbated physical threats to our lives and well-being.

Despite the challenges we face, as humans, we have an amazing capacity for resilience: the ability to transform moments of adversity into opportunities to thrive (Sherwood, 2020). As we seek to address complex challenges in our communities and understand their contextual nuances, this brief guide outlines basic recommendations for ways we can take care of ourselves and our households during this challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES

It is important each of us take care of ourselves, paying attention to the needs of our own bodies, our minds, and our spirits. We should recognize the new reality we face can contribute to increased feelings of sadness, anger, discouragement, or being overwhelmed. A key component to taking care of ourselves during this time is identifying the things we can control rather than focusing on the things we cannot control. While it is critical to physically isolate as much as possible during this pandemic, finding strategies to maintain our health and our connections with others will significantly impact our well-being.

Here are strategies each of us can practice to take care of ourselves:



Set aside time to exercise each day. Find a form of exercise you enjoy and can do at home. Make daily or weekly exercise goals for yourself, as long as they are flexible and realistic. Walk or run outside (if this is possible where you live and if you are not sick). Encourage your community to find creative ways of staying active.



Drink water and maintain a healthy diet. Giving our bodies the nutrients and water we need in this time is a key component to maintaining well-being. Try to drink around 8 glasses (2 liters or half a gallon) of water each day.



Stick to a regular sleep schedule. Many of us experience difficulty sleeping. If this is a challenge for you, remember you are not alone. Keeping a regular sleep schedule and using mindfulness and breathing techniques before bed are a few practices that may help. Resist the urge to work from bed during the day as this helps your body associate your bed with a place of rest.



Maintain your normal routine as much as possible, keeping regular mealtimes, working hours, exercise and sleep schedule. You might also try scheduling hours to step away from screens and related work messages or emails.



Maintain regular connections with loved ones. Scheduling these calls and video chats may also give us something to look forward to.



Create peer support groups to help each other work through difficult moments. Creating a safe space for discussion on specific topics can help us remember we are not facing the challenges of this time alone. We may also be inspired by new ideas for how to navigate them.



Set aside time for mindfulness and gratitude, especially when you feel anxious. Take moments to appreciate the beauty of the ordinary. Some online resources may help with feeling calmer.



Schedule your intake of news. Block off specific times in the day you will read or watch the news. Avoiding the news right before bed or first thing in the morning may also help with sleep and levels of stress.



Build new traditions and rituals for yourself and for your community to mark the passing weeks.



Explore creative outlets such as music, art, or dance, whether you're an expert or new to them.



Focus on immediate financial needs rather than panicking about long-term investments.



Give yourself time to grieve. It is OK to grieve the loss you are experiencing in this time, no matter what it is. Find ways to reframe your situation especially if you are feeling depressed.



If you feel anxious, use strategies to feel calmer, including: (1) practicing mindfulness; (2) looking out the window, and observing or being out in nature; and (3) repeating compassionate mantras to yourself.



If you are experiencing severe stress or trauma: (1) call or video chat with friends and family, (2) avoid alcohol or other depressants, (3) find reasons to celebrate, (4) try writing down or voice recording what you are feeling, and (5) meditate or relax (6) [try these reflective questions](#), (7) look for a therapist or mental health professional to speak with.



If you have a history of suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts, [see the Suicide Prevention Lifeline's COVID-19 Guide](#).

TAKING CARE OF OUR HOUSEHOLDS

Once we create a plan to take care of ourselves, we can turn our attention to other members in our household. Our relationships with the people in our household, whether they are family, roommates, or romantic partners, can be the greatest source of support or distress during this time. While we can certainly anticipate additional challenges, here are a few steps we can take to foster support and good communication within our homes:



Have an open conversation about your household response and adaptations during COVID-19. Plan for who will come and go from your home, how you will respond if someone becomes sick, and how cleaning and other routines will be maintained.



Be honest about your needs and respectful of each other's' needs as your need for extra space or extra social support may differ. Be patient with yourselves, and with each other, as you navigate this new reality.



Anticipate increased conflicts during this time recognizing we will each respond to these new stressors in different ways.



Notice if there are any major behavioral or emotional changes in one another. Our households, roommates and partners can be our first line of support in these times. Recognize that increasing stress may also be linked [to an increase in drug and alcohol use at harmful levels.](#)



Recognize that gender inequalities will be compounded by COVID-19. A heightened risk of violence against women and girls is among the greatest concerns. For more information on addressing gender inequalities during COVID-19 see [here.](#)



Be aware of an increase in intimate partner violence during this time. For a comprehensive list of resources available to survivors during the COVID-19 epidemic, [visit this website.](#) Additionally, the CDC released a [handbook on IPV](#) describing specific behaviors of abusers and survivors.

Creating strategies that work for taking care of ourselves and our households may take time, energy, and dedication to build. It is likely that our needs and those of our households will change over the coming weeks, and new strategies will need to be created and old strategies adapted. It is important we are patient and kind with ourselves in this process and communicate our needs to others when we need more support.

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The authors will continue consultations with peacebuilders in conflict zones to advance the recommendations made in this guide for a second version. If you have specific recommendations or inputs please contact Annalisa Jackson at ajacks51@gmu.edu.

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