

Self-Care During COVID-19

FOR EVERYONE

“It is perfectly normal and appropriate to feel bad and lost... Consider it a good thing that you are not in denial, and that you are allowing yourself to work through the anxiety. No sane person feels good during a global disaster, so be grateful for the discomfort of your sanity.”

- Aisha Ahmad, Director of the Islam and Global Affairs Initiative, University of Toronto

TRAILS offers this resource as a menu of strategies for self-care, each grounded in empirical research that has demonstrated its ability to lift our spirits, calm our anxieties, enable sleep when it feels out of reach, or guide us through a moment of desperation. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for self-care. As the pandemic wears on and the landscape of stressors change, so too may our self-care needs and priorities. We encourage you to utilize strategies that are personally helpful and relevant.

- Recognize and Validate Emotions
- Stay in the Present
- Separate Out What You Can and Cannot Control
- Notice and Manage Your Worried Thoughts
- Pay Attention to Joy
- Balance Structure and Flexibility
- Get Active
- Stay Connected

Recognize and Validate Emotions

The many difficult emotions you may be experiencing – sadness, disappointment, anger, guilt, frustration, or loneliness – are normal responses to abnormal conditions. No matter what we are feeling or why, those feelings are important and give us information about the world, ourselves, and what we want and need. Recognizing what we are feeling is the first step in good self-care, and it is important to take a compassionate approach to ourselves and those around us.

Understanding what I'm feeling

Our emotions are evolutionarily beneficial. **All emotions serve a purpose**, whether that purpose is to motivate us to stay safe or to keep us connected to others. Even feelings of grief and sadness help us identify what matters to us and move us towards connection. Instead of judging yourself for having a certain emotion, try asking yourself, *“what is this emotion telling me about what I need?”*

We can experience more than one emotion at once! Sometimes these feelings might seem to conflict, such as feeling both relieved and disappointed or feeling both excited and anxious. This is normal.

How can I validate my own emotions through self-compassion?

Recognize and name the emotions you are experiencing. Check in with yourself, just like you would for a friend. There is no right or wrong way to feel, so give yourself permission to feel your feelings, whatever they may be.

Practice self-kindness. Treat yourself the way you would treat a friend! Avoid judging yourself. Practicing kindness and compassion toward yourself is never selfish; in fact, it will help you maintain strength and resilience, ultimately enabling you to be a more effective support for others.

Recognize the common humanity around you. We are all in this together. Many people around the world are having the same kinds of experiences, thoughts, and feelings as you.

Resources

To practice a guided loving-kindness meditation, try:

[Loving Kindness Meditation](#)

More resources on recognizing and validating emotions:

[Grieving the Losses of Coronavirus](#), New York Times

[That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief](#), Harvard Business Review

[Exercises to Aid in Practicing Self-Compassion](#)

[Self-Compassion Break](#), 5 minutes

[Be Kind to Yourself – Right Now](#), instructions for a loving-kindness practice

[Understanding Emotions](#), TRAILS

Stay in the Present

Chronic stress can take a toll on our physical health, leaving us feeling tense and on edge. When you find yourself overwhelmed by strong emotions, try to refocus your attention on what's going on in and around you in the current moment. We call this mindfulness. Mindfulness is staying present and being intentional with our attention. Try to notice and attend to where you are and what you are feeling, without judgement.

How can I stay in the moment when I'm **having so many thoughts about the future?**

Emotions are like waves. They come on, peak, and slowly roll out. **Practice riding the waves of emotion and learning to tolerate them instead of fighting them** or letting them overwhelm you.

Notice and name your feelings, and remind yourself that **each feeling is temporary**, even if the circumstances remain unchanged. Focus on accepting your feelings and remind yourself that you are strong enough to tolerate them until they pass.

When we're feeling overwhelmed or frightened of the uncertain future, we can sometimes get over-invested in figuring things out. In these moments it can be helpful to re-focus on the present and **take on one moment at a time**.

When all else fails, simply **focus on your 5 senses to ground you** in the present. Listen carefully for very subtle sounds, look for all the colors in the rainbow, notice how your feet or fingertips feel, attend to a subtle taste in your mouth or scent you can find.

Resources

To practice a guided 5-senses meditation:

[Engaging Your Senses](#)

More resources for using mindfulness to stay present:

[Getting started with mindfulness and mindful meditation](#)

[Free online 8-week mindfulness course](#)

[Hope in Uncertain Times](#), Oprah and Deepak Chopra's free 21 day meditation program

[Power Up](#), a set of audio tracks to guide you through various mindfulness practices

[Grounding Skills](#), TRAILS

Cope with **Uncertainty and Worry**

The human mind seeks certainty and control, especially when we are faced with new or stressful experiences. Under stress, our brains focus on warning signs of danger. This “fight or flight” response can leave us feeling uneasy and tense, or can trigger worry as we try to predict and plan for negative outcomes. However, when we worry, we are usually making some unhelpful assumptions. We might assume that something bad will happen, even though we can’t really know for sure. We might assume that if a bad thing should happen, that we won’t be able to cope. We might also assume that it’s possible to “get this figured out” or feel 100% certain about what to do. The truth is, everyone feels uncertain sometimes. When worry and uncertainty get the best of us, we can take steps to manage our unhelpful thinking by challenging our worry thoughts and considering what is within our control.

STEP 1:

Identify the **worried thought**

Ask yourself: **What would my worried thought say if I wrote it down as a complete sentence?**
What assumptions am I making about what is going to happen or how I will cope?

You can also try using one of these prompts:

“What if...” “I won’t be able to...” “My loved ones will...” “I fear that...” “I can’t cope with...”

STEP 2:

Examine the **facts**

Try to determine if your thought is fully true, partially true, or not reasonable. If your thought is true, try to evaluate how helpful or productive it is. Try to identify any assumptions you are making about the future or your ability to cope.

Ask yourself: **How do I know this is true? What is the evidence? Is there any evidence that this thought is not true? Even if this is true, is thinking about this helpful to me right now?**

STEP 3:

Develop a **believable, more helpful coping thought**

Ask yourself: **What would I tell a friend who was having the same thought? If my worried thought came true, how would I cope?**

See [more examples](#) of common worried thoughts and more helpful thoughts [on the next page](#) →

Examples of **Worried Thoughts**

Example worried thoughts about COVID-19	More helpful coping thought
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I won’t be able to cope with the emotional effects of this situation – the fear, sadness, or isolation will be overwhelming.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have experienced difficulty in the past. I am strong and can get through even very difficult situations.” • “I know many people who have experienced significant hardship and survived. I can reach out to them and learn more about what steps they took to get through it.” • “I’m not alone – people all over the world are going through exactly what I’m going through right now.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am failing at keeping up with all the demands right now: work, family, finances, household responsibilities, and more.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am doing the best I can right now. It’s okay if I can’t get to everything or if I make mistakes. This is not the time to be perfect.” • “Everyone is trying to juggle many responsibilities right now. I’m not alone in feeling this way. I can ask other people how they are managing and try some new strategies. It will take time to figure out how to make this work.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If I leave my house, I will become sick. I am trapped.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I can leave my house to go for a walk, go for a drive, ride my bike, sit on my front steps, and just get fresh air. Getting out is good for my mental and physical health.” • “When I go out, I can take precautions and follow guidelines about how to be safe by wearing a mask, staying six feet apart from others, washing my hands regularly, and more.”

Consider What is **Within Your Control**

Decide if the worry **is about something within your control.**

Worries about things you **can control** can help motivate you to make a plan or take action. Worries about things you **cannot control** are depleting.

Problem-solve **the parts within your control.**

Problem-solving involves considering your options and brainstorming solutions to barriers.

Practice accepting situations that are outside of your control and **focus on how to cope well.**

Practice acceptance. Acceptance is not the same thing as calling something good. Acceptance is recognizing when something is out of our control and no longer resisting that reality. Instead of trying to control what you can't, focus on what is within your control- how you cope. Making peace with what is out of your control can create mental energy for you to plan more productively for what is within your power.

Practicing **problem-solving**

- What resources are available to help me?
- Who can I contact for logistical or practical help? For emotional support?
- What steps can I take right now, to help me prepare for this situation?

Practicing **acceptance and coping**

- What am I feeling right now?
- On a 1-10 scale, how intense is my emotion?
- Which coping skills can I use to help me relieve or tolerate my distress?
 - relaxation, deep breathing
 - meditation, mindfulness
 - physical activity, getting outside
 - distress tolerance, riding waves of emotion
 - music, hobbies, creative arts
 - social support and connection
 - distraction: books, movies, TV

What kinds of **things can I control** during this uncertain time?

1. Steps you take to stay healthy.
2. How you cope.
3. How you treat others.
4. What you eat and drink.
5. How much help/support you seek.
6. How you support your community.
7. Amount of news you consume.

Resources

More resources for coping with uncertainty and worry:

[Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty: a free guide from Psychology Tools available in more than 20 languages](#)

[COVID-19: 5 Tips to Face Your Anxiety](#): interactive modules to help manage anxiety

[TRAILStoWellness.org](#): handouts, worksheets, activities and videos on challenging unhelpful thoughts

Cultivate Positive Emotions

It can be hard to notice good experiences or even experience positive emotions when we are in the midst of significant stress. It is also common to feel guilty about feeling good or about things that are going well when we know that others may be suffering greater hardship. However, cultivating positive emotions can significantly elevate your mood, build resilience, and strengthen your ability to be emotionally available for others.

What steps can I take to experience more positive emotions?

Recognize the things in your life that are going well, no matter how small they might be. Start by listing 3 things that you are grateful for in this moment.

Give yourself permission to see the silver lining and focus on the good. If you are feeling guilty for something that is going well for you, or some way in which you feel more fortunate than others, **try to shift your guilt into gratitude.**

Take time to savor the things that you do enjoy. **Using all five of your senses, take time to relish activities that soothe you or bring you joy**, even if they are as simple as breathing in fresh air, taking a warm shower, or lying still for two minutes.

Plan and pay attention to positive events. Schedule activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy. Has it been a while since you watched your favorite movie, or practiced your favorite hobby? Plan activities into your days that will give you a boost of positive emotions. Not only will you look forward to the experience, but you can savor the experience while it's happening using mindfulness. Afterwards, try writing about the positive experience or discussing it with someone close to you. Research shows that re-living an experience can train our brain to get even more joy out of positive experiences!

Establish a regular gratitude practice. For example, every night before bed, write 3 unique things that you are grateful for or 3 parts of the day that went well, even if they were small moments.

Resources

To practice a guided gratitude exercise:

[Gratitude Meditation \(Strengthen Happiness\)](#)

More resources for paying attention to positive experiences:

[Private Gratitude Journal](#)

[The Gratitude Experiment](#)

[The Science of Gratitude](#)

Stay Connected

Social support is critical for getting through difficult experiences and can help instill hope in ourselves and others during times of difficulty. **Make time for connecting with others every day, even if only for 5 or 10 minutes.** Physical distance does not have to keep us socially isolated.

How can I invest in social connection when I'm **not able to be around other people?**

Go outside for a walk or sit on your front steps or apartment balcony and greet other people you see. Seeing other people will remind you that you are not alone, even as you follow distancing recommendations.

Schedule a regular phone call or video chat with friends or family. Use Facebook Messenger, FaceTime, Zoom, Skype, or another free video call service to talk with friends, family members, or even your neighbors. Make this a regular part of your routine! Regular connection can help you and your loved ones maintain hope.

Write old fashioned letters. Receiving a letter can bring so much joy; if you're feeling like much of your day is spent in front of a screen, unplug for a few minutes and write someone a postcard or letter instead.

Use social media wisely. Social media can help us feel connected, but it can also be a source of upsetting news and misleading information. Use social media to build connections with people who help you feel good, while limiting time spent scrolling through content that makes you feel excluded, anxious, or excessively upset. Tip: set a timer for 1 hour when you begin browsing on social media. When the timer goes off, step away from your device and take a walk around. Check in with yourself about your feelings and mood to determine whether it's a good idea to keep browsing or not.

Try thinking about the global sense of community that can be felt during this time. Everyone around the world is facing the same public health threat, and everyone is getting through it to the best of their ability. You are far from alone.

Resources

[Don't Call it 'Social Distancing'](#),
Opinion, CNN

[Tips for Staying Connected During COVID-19](#), Kids Help Phone

Get Active

Staying active is one of the most effective ways to stay mentally healthy and to cope with worry, sadness, and isolation. If you are not used to being physically active or if you have health conditions that make it difficult, physical activity may feel hard. It's okay if you can do only a little bit – this is not a competition with anyone, even past versions of yourself. Setting and tracking goals for physical activity can help you get started, and achieving even small goals can be empowering.

How do I incorporate more activity into my day?

Start where you are, recognizing that your resources and energy may be depleted. The purpose of physical activity is to get your heart rate up for 15-30 minutes day, not to compete with anyone else.

Don't wait to feel motivated. Stress and worry can create fatigue and lower motivation, making exercise feel impossible. Commit to your physical activity each day, knowing in advance that you might not feel like doing it. Trust that once you get going, the energy will find you and you will feel better!

Identify a time and space that you can realistically dedicate to physical activity. **Don't let perfect be the enemy of good enough:** even 15 minutes of movement right at home is beneficial.

Get creative. You can't go to the gym, but you can go outside! Home exercise programs and virtual yoga and dance classes are also widely available right now and many of them are free.

Be consistent. What we do every day is more important than what we do on any one day. Stick to your plan 5 to 10 times and you will see that it starts to feel more like a habit!

Resources

To Plan Activities:

[TRAILS Behavioral Activation Planning Worksheet](#)

More Resources on Getting Active:

[Behavioral Activation: Rationale for Physical Activity](#)

[25+ Free Live-Stream Fitness Studios and Gyms offering Live-Stream Workouts](#)

[Hundreds of workouts from celebrity trainers and fitness experts streaming free](#)

Balance Structure and Flexibility

Most of us have experienced significant disruption to former schedules. However, we all do best when our days are structured and consistent. Creating a daily schedule can help cultivate and maintain consistency with habits that promote health and reduce vulnerability to exhaustion and low mood. It can also help you incorporate some of the strategies recommended in this guide. Take some time to create a schedule that feels feasible and also prioritizes your physical and mental health. As you experiment with solidifying a workable schedule, be sure to check in with your mood to reflect on how the schedule is impacting how you feel.

What should I include in my schedule?

Your first priority should be your basic, physical needs.

Schedule time for sleep, exercise, nutrition, and basic self-care.

Next, build in time each day for taking care of your emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs.

Schedule even short periods of time for physical or mental breaks, social connection, meditation, or prayer.

Finally try to make time for activities that bring you joy and comfort.

If possible, prioritize at least one small enjoyable activity each day. During this planned activity, try to use mindfulness to stay present and focused on your experience, so that you are able to notice and relish it to the greatest extent possible.

Spirit

Meditation, prayer, gratitude practice

Mind

Pleasurable activities, activities that provide a sense of accomplishment

Body

Sleep, exercise, healthy eating, staying hydrated, showering

Resources

More resources on maintaining routine:

[Stay Calm and Create a Daily Routine During the COVID-19 Crisis](#), Columbia News

[Creating Impeccable Structure for Your Life](#), Zen Habits

[Sticking to a Schedule](#), TRAILS