

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS UNDER COVID-19

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STRESS BASICS

The stress of COVID-19 is not distributed equally. Pandemic conditions are most difficult for those who were highly stressed before the pandemic began and for those with limited emotional, practical, or financial support.

Think of stress and supports as being on opposite sides of an equation that needs to be brought into balance. When stress increases, supports must increase as well. Work creatively to find temporary supports that can relieve the added stress of living through a pandemic. For example, having groceries delivered might free up time to do work or care for others.

SOCIAL CONNECTION: A KEY FORM OF COPING

Human connection is critical to happiness under normal conditions, and essential during times of high stress. Quality social support means having a confidant, a place to share worries, and the feeling of being accepted and connected.

For some, one or two individuals meet all of these needs. For others, a wide and active social network is required. But quality beats quantity. When it comes to the stress-buffering nature of social support, the number of connections does not matter, but the quality does.

UNDER COVID-19, CHRONIC STRESS IS UNIVERSAL

For the most part, stress is a normal, expectable, and even healthy part of life, but it becomes unhealthy if it is chronic or traumatic. Chronic stress results when daily life is persistently taxing. Traumatic stress results when individuals contend with events that overwhelm their coping capacity. Under COVID-19, chronic stress is universal and many individuals are also faced with traumatic stress. For chronic stress, healthy coping techniques can be a buffer; traumatic stress, however, warrants additional psychological support.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY COPING

Under chronic stress, we instinctively seek ways to cope, but not all coping is created equal. Unhealthy coping strategies may provide short-term emotional relief, but lead to problems down the line. Healthy coping techniques both offer immediate relief and are sustainable over time.

UNHEALTHY COPING	HEALTHY COPING
EMOTIONAL WITHDRAWAL and/or IRRITABILITY Avoidance of others and testiness provide brief emotional respite, but harm important relationships.	SOCIAL CONNECTION Positive interpersonal relationships reduce anxiety, improve mood, and boost immune functioning.
SUBSTANCE MISUSE When substance use is relied upon to blunt emotional distress, it quickly becomes destructive.	HAPPY DISTRACTIONS Periodic mental vacations - such as getting lost in a book, doing absorbing work, or spending time in nature - offer essential breaks from chronic stress.
JUNK HABITS Skimping on sleep, couch-surfing, or eating only comfort foods, trades short-term relief for long-term problems.	CONSCIENTIOUS SELF-CARE Prioritizing sleep, physical activity, and eating well, allows us to sustain ourselves amid long-term challenges.

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