

# Effective Self Care for Managing Stress and Building Resilience During Uncertain Times

We all have many responsibilities and roles, and many demands pulling us in different directions. Especially during emergencies or seasons of uncertainty, it is impossible to feel we are doing a good job meeting every need and managing stress well all the time.

For many of us, taking care of ourselves comes last on a long list of other things to do and care about. However, this is something that becomes *more* important during periods of high stress, not less, because when things around us feel uncertain, threatening, or chaotic we go into high-alert and our stress levels go up.

## What happens when our stress levels go up?

When our stress levels go up, a series of chemicals and hormones are released into our bloodstream. These are designed to help us deal with threats head-on (“fight”) or escape them (“flight”).

If these stress chemicals are not quickly used to help us take action (fight or flee), they frequently cause some of the uncomfortable experiences we often talk about as “stress reactions”—irritability, mood swings, anxiety, difficulty focusing and concentrating, trouble sleeping, and other signs and symptoms of stress.

Everyone reacts differently to emergencies and uncertainty. Some people get angry and argumentative (in real life and on social media). Some consume every scrap of information they can locate about the trigger events. Some panic. Some feel overwhelmed and cry. Some make a lot of jokes. Some deny or downplay the seriousness of the problems. Some become terribly active and task-oriented and try to get organized and take control. Some check out and withdraw. These are all fundamentally coping mechanisms for the same thing, which is at its root a sense of fear and loss of control.

## We can think about stress and coping like this...

Think of a scale with stress on one side and all the supports that help us cope on the other side. In order to cope, we have the option to remove stress or to increase/add to our coping basket. Sometimes it is not a realistic option to remove stress or resolve the issues that are causing the sense of uncertainty and threat. In these cases, we *must* add more helpful strategies into our coping basket. This is where healthy self-care comes in.

## What is healthy self-care?

Healthy self-care involves things that we know are good for us, even if they do not always feel fun or easy in the moment. They are things that make us feel **self-respect** and **connection**.

**Healthy self-care and coping strategies** make us feel more alive, confident, strong, refreshed, inspired, energized, empowered, and equipped to deal with the problems in our life. During emergencies or when things feel threatening and uncertain, it helps to look for ways to *increase* our sense of safety, structure, and control, and *reduce* our sense of isolation, uncertainty, and boredom.

**Unhealthy coping strategies** are things which make our problems worse or make us feel more numb, detached, distracted and disengaged from life and reality, disempowered to actually do anything about our problems.

## What are some research-supported healthy self-care strategies?

A number of particularly important self-care strategies are listed below. As you look over this list, consider where you are already strong and where you can improve in general. Also think about where you can take action in the short term (today, this week) to take good care of yourself and increase your sense of calm, control (e.g., over your daily routines and self-care choices) and safety.

- 1. Getting enough sleep:** It is difficult to function effectively if you are consistently getting less sleep than you need. A minimum of 6 hours a night is recommended on average. Most people function much better if they get closer to 8 hours.
- 2. Nutrition:** The food (and drink) you put into your body fuels you. If you put in poor quality fuel, or the wrong type, your body and brain cannot respond and work as effectively. When we are stressed, it is even more tempting than normal to turn towards high-risk coping and self-comfort (versus healthy self-care), and we should be extra careful how/whether we consume “liquid stress” (such as alcohol and caffeine) or lots of sugar and processed food.
- 3. Exercise/Movement:** Moving our bodies and exercising is so important for maintaining and improving overall health and functioning. Among many other benefits, raising your heart rate when you are stressed for at least twenty minutes (e.g., with a brisk walk) can “use up” some of the many stress chemicals your body is producing and help you feel calmer and less helpless.
- 4. Connection and relationships:** Connection is probably our best and strongest buffer against emotional distress. One of the most effective ways to truly address stress is to invest in our most supportive, close relationships. There is no single magic wand when it comes to improving wellbeing, but this is as close as we get. As a result, when it comes to building resilience, time spent with people we love and who love us is never wasted.
- 5. Rest:** We are living in an era of information overload—our thoughts are drowning in news articles, status updates, text messages, notifications, and emails. This information overload is exacerbated by our smartphones, and it is playing havoc with mental health and wellbeing. We know that nourishing our bodies with the right food and rest is important, but we do not think the same way about nourishing our minds—the thought of relaxing and renewing our mind can be seen as (and feel like) laziness. However, just as our bodies need fuel, our minds need stillness and rest. We must intentionally create down-time for our minds.
- 6. Fun/pleasure:** What are things that bring you joy or feed you internally—things that you want to do just because you enjoy them? These things do not have to be related to job or family. In fact, it is healthiest to have at least one source of fun/pleasure in our lives that does not involve our job or family. As important as these things are, our thoughts about them are often very enmeshed with our responsibilities towards them. Look for ways to put some pleasure and fun into your life. When we do things we feel passionate about and that are fun and enjoyable, it has a powerful positive spill-over effect onto other areas of our life.
- 7. Perspective anchors:** Perspective anchors are things that point us towards our important values, what we believe to be true and right, or our deepest sense of meaning and purpose. Perspective anchors can help us hold firm during times we feel depressed or overwhelmed. They can offer us hope and help us gain a broader perspective, think more positively, and feel less burdened. Things that often function as perspective anchors are spiritual or religious practices, practicing gratitude, and spending time in nature.

## Discussion Questions

1. Which of the 7 areas of self-care are you strongest in? What about weakest?
2. What are some of the things you already do well in terms of self-care?
3. What do you do for fun, just because you enjoy it?
4. How do you create down-time for your mind?
  - a. What are some changes you could make with regards to how you use your phone that would help create more down-time?
  - b. What boundaries have you placed around how you consume news/media during times of emergency, chaos, and uncertainty?
5. What are some perspective anchors that work for you?
  - a. What helps you feel calmer and more centered when things around you feel chaotic and threatening?
6. What is something you can do **today** to care for yourself that will increase your sense of calm, safety, or control?
7. What are three things you would like to do this week to care for yourself? [Things that will make you feel self-respect and connection, and that will help you feel calmer and more grounded]
8. We all know self-care is good for us, but often fail to put that knowledge into practice. How do you bridge that gap between theory and practice and help yourself actually put self-care in action?