

Resiliency in the Time of Covid 19: Psychological First Aid

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Much is now understood about the psychological impact of unexpected events, such as illness and natural disasters. There is clear consensus, both expert and in the literature, that one's level of social connectedness will likely be the single most important determining factor in how an overwhelming or unexpected event affects both the individual and the community. What is unusual about a quarantine as it relates to other natural and man-made disaster events is the need for physical distancing and social isolation to contain the illness.

We lean here on expert consensus (Hobfoll, et al) for simple and powerful tools, things we all can do, that support emotional health and even post traumatic growth in the face of uncertainty, decreased contact and a rapidly changing situation.

Consider developing a **resiliency plan** for yourself, your family, and even your smaller communities. Pandemics are unusual in that they hit each person, family and community in different ways and at different times. Planning resiliency actually counters the feeling of helplessness and allows us to remind each other, that there are many things we can do to support ourselves and each other, thereby reducing the feeling of helplessness so often at the core of the development of emotional trauma.

Consider building a plan for the next two weeks that has elements known to support and mitigate traumatic stress in real time. These elements include the principles of **Psychological First Aid: Safety, Calm, Connection, Efficacy and Hope.**

This moment represents a phase change- we often discuss this concept in rescue- a time during the rescue when you revisit the original goal and recalibrate the direction and mission of the team. This is what is needed in this moment. We can't move forward as we always have. We have to create new

priorities, and a mission for enduring through this moment and beyond. You can always change it. This is particularly helpful for kids, but it helps all of us in times of uncertainty.

Get creative. You could think about making a star chart or playing bingo with younger kids to see if you might be adding each element every day. Create friendly competition (that's connection!) with your neighbor, families or co-workers to see who is fueling their social and emotional immune systems the most

Safety

Protect yourself from misinformation and fearful stories.

Plan your interaction with the media and the world around you. Choose one reliable news source and stick to it. Create a small circle of friends or family you trust to be level headed. Check in once daily about what you need to know. Create times twice daily to check e-mail and allow for 'protected spaces' or "Corona Free Zones" where you are not responding to media and texts when you might otherwise have a chance to engage in something important, connect, or do something for yourself.

Plan moments to be present.

Plan moments to check in on life around you at set times, perhaps when you brush your teeth in the morning and night. Are you healthy right now? Moments where you are reminded that you personally are not at imminent risk can help your nervous system relax and gives your immune system a boost. Share these moments with someone else.

Stay in your own lane.

Many folks are worried about family members, loved ones and even other cultures impacted by this moment. Other folks can't help but worry about the future and what it all means. Give yourself permission to take care of only yourself or your own family for one window in the day. Acknowledge when the uncertainty is more than you can handle and spend time doing something that feels good to you.

Protect yourself from the virus

Wash your hands. Clean commonly used surfaces. Stay at home and if you leave, maintain physical distance at the store or while exercising.

Calm

Be active

Plan for an activity, at least once a day, that helps your body relax. This might be a shower, going outside your apartment, calling a friend, watching a funny show, walking in nature. Consider a goal of getting out of your house every day, even if it's snowing, even if it's just a walk around the block. Look for evidence of life while you're out there. Make it a scavenger hunt. Look for the green bud or early crocus coming up. You don't usually need to be in contact with others to go out of your doors.

Exercise. Yep. Even if it's not your thing. We lean hard on the evidence that tells us that exercise decreases arousal and lowers our cortisol secretion – that means it's great for our immune systems. It also helps us to secrete calming chemicals that help keep our levels of arousal lower. You don't have to run a marathon. Just walk.

Sleep

It might seem like you don't need sleep if you're not leaving your home or attending to work or school life. Not true! Sleep is restorative, boosts our immune system and we process much of our stress while we sleep. Sleep helps to support production of the neurotransmitters that keep your brain healthy. Give extra points for winding down slowly with a book and avoiding media in the hour before bed. More bonus points for an 8-hour sleep opportunity.

Breathe.

Yep. Again, you might think, don't I already do that? You do, and you have since you were born, but now, let's do it with intention. Set your timer. Plan at time to look out the window and pay attention to your breathing, even for 2 minutes, twice a day. When you exhale long, slow breathes, you actually tell your brain to send out the chemicals that calm your body down (parasympathetic nervous system).

Turn off the ping

If the constant tempo of electronic communication, personified by alert pings and vibrations on your devices, is getting to you, shut them off. Scheduled checks for messages can move you from constant reaction to proactive control.

Efficacy

Efficacy is empowerment, engagement, and a way to tell your brain you're not helpless.

You practice efficacy by putting a plan together. Start close to home. It's what you can do. If you have enough efficacy to share with others- this tells your brain that not only can you get yourself out of this, but you have enough for the people around you. This is a powerful and not-so-subtle message to yourself, your family and your community that you've got this moment. It is the antidote for the feeling of scarcity and fear.

The possibilities are endless. Making a plan for a meaningful project you can do at home. Check in with an elderly neighbor to see if you might shop for them or run an errand. Make menus for the next two weeks. Make a donation to a local group that is serving the homeless or hardest hit by this situation in your community. Make a plan to reach out and connect or send a letter to someone you know is sick or in quarantine. Play a game or give your full attention to a family member who needs distraction. Organize your closet. Go through that pile of papers. Plan a dance party or a new routine that you want to do (different song of course) every day that you're home. Make a menu based on the food you have in the house right now; you might be surprised what you find at the back of a pantry.

If you are laid off from your job, seek the information you need to understand the future and make a plan. If you are knowledgeable on these matters, share with friends and family.

Connection

We already said it. This is reflected across all the literature in times of crisis. Normally during times of crisis, we huddle together and help each other. Quarantine and social distancing create new barriers for connection, so we have to build connection into our plan. We need each other. We are wired to lean on each other for support, calm and even give and receive hope from strangers. We'll have to do this – create connection - with intention. Get creative and plan for connection on a daily basis.

Schedule connection

If you are working from home, consider scheduling meetings with your team to check in on each other. If you are missing church, consider attending online or creating a text group with a few people you most enjoy seeing.

Plan to get old school.

A letter in the mail, or art from a kid, to someone who you are thinking about or worried about, is good for both the giver and the receiver.

Plan check-in's

Create a small team of folks that care about you. Ask for them to check in on you every day, or make a calendar to check in once a week with a different person. Send an e-mail to your classmates, school mates, or friends or family far away to connect.

Buddy system- If you are separated from the folks you love or normally work with, forge a new connection with folks who truly understands your situation. Lean on each other, plan a daily check in, even by text.

Plan to reconnect with someone you have been meaning to reach out to. This can be especially important for aunts and uncles and folks in the community you are thinking or worrying about.

Hope

How do you plan for hope? In times of uncertainty, it can start to feel like there's no moment but this one.

Planning for the future can be an act of defiance when everyone around you is panicked. Planning for the future and finding your creativity, and offering hope to others also tells your brain there is life after this moment. Even creating structure and planning is a way to create hope.

Plant for the future

Plant a few seeds in a garden or out front of your house. Summer is coming. Those seeds will sprout. Have children write in journals to gather and write about their experience in a pandemic and put this in a time capsule for their children.

Share inspiration

Share encouraging stories with each other- stories of hope, things you hear that neighbors are doing for neighbors, the stories that inspire you to rise up to this moment and do what you can.

Make a list of the movies and books that remind you of what others have already overcome.
Deliver art projects to neighbors and leave them on their doorsteps. Do yardwork for someone who can't get outside.

Plan a gratitude practice.

This might be a journal, chalk board, slips of paper or a practice before meals or bed. Practicing gratitude changes the wiring in our brain to focus on and look for the things that are working are good in this moment.

This is psychological first aid, simple, tangible, powerful things you can do to support the mental health of yourself and others in these challenging times. You can do any and all or this.

You've got this.

Hobfoll, W. P. (2007). Five essential elements of imme. *Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence.*, Winter;70(4):283-315.

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