

# Ways to relieve stress during COVID-19

***Presenter – Erica Hanlon, Clinical Counselor***

Hi everyone, my name is Erica Hanlon, I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach and today we are going to talk about ways to relieve stress during COVID-19. At the end of this webinar, I'm hoping you will walk away with a better understanding of what the stress response is, we all have it, we're just born that way, it's nature.

## Today we'll explore:

So I'm hoping you'll have an understanding of what exactly is going on when you experience stress, and that you'll also have some new skills to help you manage stress so that it's not managing you and finally you'll have some ideas about where to go for support, should you feel like stress is maybe out of control.

## What is stress?

I think it helps to get on the same about what exactly stress is. This definition comes from the Cleveland Clinic and they say that stress is really just the body's reaction to any change that requires you to make an adjustment or respond to that thing in the environment. So, there's a change, something happens in your environment, you have to adjust or you have to respond in a certain way and that creates stress for us.

## The body's stress response

So you've probably heard of fight or flight and this is a stress response that helped our ancestors respond to danger, it's their evolutionary gift to us and it's completely natural, it's what happens for all of us.

So, in essence, at first we have an event and before you have a stress response, you have a thought about that event and your thought is that this event is stressful in some kind of way. And this can be true of positive stressors too, like getting married, or having a baby, or getting a promotion, but you have a thought about that event that it is in some way stressful.

And what happens is the body then releases stress hormones, we usually refer to these stress hormones as cortisol or epinephrin, also know as adrenaline, and this is just getting your body ready

to respond to the stressor so you can survive, and often this looks like an increase in your heart rate, your breathing, maybe even an increase in your awareness about what's going on around you. Then eventually the threat is supposed to pass and your body then releases hormones that help you calm down.

Well, you can imagine with COVID-19 going on right now, doesn't feel like the threat has necessarily passed, so for a lot of us, we are sort of stuck in this stressful state where we are not able to calm down on our own. We have to really be very intentional about doing things to help us keep that stress in check so it doesn't take over.

## **Coping with stress**

Now we are going to talk about how you can cope with stress.

## **The truth about stress**

So the truth about stress is that it's completely natural, nothing has gone wrong, in fact stress can be good for us, it is helping us. You may have noticed sometimes if you have too little stress it's hard to get motivated, it's hard to get things done, we just want to aim for kind of an optimum level of stress, and when stress happens, again it just our brain and our body trying to protect and care for us. It's a natural part of life, nothing has necessarily gone wrong, and again, it's important to stress, that stress comes from our thoughts.

So when I said before that's there's a circumstance and in order to feel stress you have to have thoughts about that circumstance that then causes you to feel threatened by it in some way, right, that you have to adjust, you have to respond in some way. You've probably seen this with COVID-19, there are some people who are very laid back about it, they think it's no big deal, there're probably are fewer of those people now than there use to be. But, if you are having thoughts about COVID-19, those thoughts may be causing you to feel stress. The good news is that once you start to recognize those thoughts you can start to choose new thoughts to help you feel a sense of calm. Our feelings really come from our thoughts.

## **Be present with your stress**

One thing that is really helpful is to be present with your stress. A lot of us don't know how to cope with emotions that make us feel uncomfortable, we avoid them, we try to resist them, what this does is it tends to make the feeling last longer. We don't process it, we don't work through it so it just sort of stays there.

So the best thing you can do if you're having any kind of uncomfortable emotion, including stress, is to allow the feeling to be there, and to really pay attention to it and approach it with curiosity rather than judgment. So here's a way that you can do this. First off, you have to notice that you are feeling stressed. What's going on, you know, right now? What are the thoughts that you are having that's causing the stress? Where is it in your body? Once you recognize and understand the stress and are listening in to your thoughts, you're finding it in your body, you can then start to process it, but you have to allow for the stress to be there, and you have to acknowledge it.

## Self-care strategies

Now let's talk about self-care strategies. I already sort of referenced this one, but it's important to allow the stress to exist in your life, again, stress can be helpful for you, it can help you get things done. We just want to make sure that we are managing it.

One of the best things you can do to take care of yourself and manage stress, is to simply engage in healthy activities. We know that when you engage in healthy activities, what it does is it builds resilience so that when stress does happen, you're able to bounce back from it. It doesn't mean that you're not bothered by it, you're just able to cope more effectively. And a lot of times resilience comes from healthy activities.

Another thing you can do is practice mindfulness, we have exercises on mindfulness in videos you can look up online different mindfulness techniques, there are lot's of resources out there. But mindfulness is really just about being in the moment, allowing your thoughts and feelings, again, without judging them.

You can also learn relaxation techniques, there are lot's of different relaxation techniques available out there, everything from visualization to progressive muscle relaxation, there are lot's of relaxation techniques. I think it's helpful to try different ones out, see what you like.

Social supports are really important when it comes to managing our feelings including stress, so it's important to seek support from trusted family and friends. So right now, what that might look like, since we can't get together with people, is interacting by televideo, you know, video calls on your computer, or just simply phoning a friend. Those kinds of interactions tend to be more effective than online interactions via social media, having that kind of conversation with somebody in real time makes a big difference when it comes to managing stress and other feelings.

And if you are like me, you have a lot on your plate right now, you might be working from home, you are thinking about all the things you have to do, you have kids at home who are also demanding your attention, so it's easy to neglect self-care. A lot of times the things that we do that give us

energy are the first things that we neglect when we feel overwhelmed and we feel stressed, but those are the things that are most important for us to do, so make sure that you're making it a priority, maybe even put it on your calendar, set a timer, set a reminder, anything that's going to make sure that you are making some time to take care of yourself and do those activities that give you energy.

## Tips to reduce stress

So we talked about that kind of fight or flight response and what happens and the body sort of releases all of those hormones, the cortisol, the epinephrine, that leads to us, you know, feeling really stressed out. So you can think about that stress response as being kind of like the gas pedal on your car, but sometimes if the gas, you know, you're speeding, you're going to fast, you may be at risk for getting into a crash, so it's important to learn how to pump the brakes.

One of the best ways that you can do this, is by taking deep, abdominal breathes. Deep abdominal breathes actually signal to our brain and to our body that we're calm and you can just do several of these and it can make a big, big difference. One thing that I like to encourage my clients to do, is once they identify where the feeling is in their body, when they take a deep breathe, to try and almost like breath the oxygen into that part of their body. It's almost like breathing oxygen into it and then breathing the feeling out to help reduce it.

Another thing that can be helpful is to focus on a soothing word, something really easy like peace or calm, that you can repeat over and over, can be really helpful. Another I really like is visualization and here is why. Your brain actually cannot tell the difference between doing something and to thinking about doing something.

So if you find yourself in a really stressed out state, think of a place or an activity that you love to do that really helps you relax, just imagine it, try and use all of your senses if possible, sight, sound, touch, and really try to picture yourself there in that place that you love that helps you relax. Another thing that is critical is to show compassion for yourself. I sort of mentioned this before about observing your thoughts and feelings without judgment.

So many people judge their responses. They feel bad, then they fell bad about feeling bad. Brene Brown actually just released a wonderful podcast where she talks about comparative suffering and she says that, you know, a lot of times we feel bad and then we feel like "Oh, I shouldn't fell bad about this "because other people are feeling worse, "they're going through worse things," but that's just not how emotions work. Your emotions are going to be there, we don't score emotions, we don't score suffering, there's no such thing as you have to be in a certain amount of emotional pain

in order for it to count. If you are feeling stressed, if you are feeling an emotional pain, it counts, it matters, it's okay and you can allow for the feeling.

And finally, remember you are not your thoughts. A lot of times we have thoughts and we believe our thoughts, we think our thoughts are just facts, but our thoughts are optional and when you start to pay attention to them, you can, you know, listen to them, be curious about them, allow for them, and then start to choose new ones.

## **Build resilience**

I mentioned a little bit before about the importance of building resilience because when stressful things happen, you are able to bounce back, you're able to cope more effectively and a lot of resilience comes from the way that we practice self-care. It's really critical that you are getting plenty of sleep and I know a lot of us are struggling with sleep right now, we're waking up in the middle of the night, we're having a hard time falling asleep, those kinds of things.

As much as possible, try to get a good night's rest as much as you can. Eat well, stress is hard not only on your mind, it's hard on your body so take care of your body by eating nutritious meals and getting as much exercise as is possible for you to do safely right now.

Again, surround yourself with supportive people, you know, phone calls are great, you know, video calls are great, do what you can to make sure that you are getting those social connections as much as possible.

Also practice optimism. I know for a lot of us our brains are going to worst-case scenario, that's okay. I'm not saying you don't have to think about worst-case scenario, just give equal air time to best-case scenario. However much time you're spending on worst-case scenario, practice best-case scenario the same amount of time as well. It's also important to build self-confidence. Remember that no matter what happens here, you will get through it, you will come out on the other side, yes, you may be changed but you may be stronger in the end.

Trust that you will be able to handle whatever feelings come up, and make sure, again, to take time for yourself. It's easy to let self-care go, but it is critical to help us manage stress during times like this.

## **Get support**

Okay, so self-care is great, we gave you lots of self-care tips, lots of ideas for helping you manage stress right now, but what happens if you're just still really having a hard time, you're having a hard

time coping? It's really important that you don't just try to push through this on your own, help is available, you can talk to somebody you know, somebody you trust, maybe a loved one or friend, but there are also other resources available. You know therapists are providing televideo therapy right now, they're providing phone therapy right now, so you can call your employee assistance program, you can call your insurance carrier, you can go to websites like Psychology Today to find a therapist in your area.

Resources are available to help you make sure that you're taking care of your mental health right now. That concludes our session today on ways to relieve stress during COVID-19. You are not alone right now, help is available. Please reach out for help, let us know if there's anything we can do, we are here for you 24/7. Thank you.

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