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### COVID-19 Coping Tool Kit

*Note: I've put together a list of things you can do to ease the stress and anxiety of coping with this global outbreak. These ideas, while based in good science and the recommendations of experts, are my own opinions and are not intended to be prescriptive nor all-inclusive. I hope you find them helpful. Doug B.- March 2020*

#### -Anxiety is a normal response to perceived threats, physical or psychological.

Remind yourself of this as you contemplate what the virus pandemic means to you. You are NOT going “crazy.” That does not mean that prolonged states of anxiety aren’t harmful to our overall health. Some of the following tips may help you minimized the times you experience too much anxiety. Besides, when the anxiety circuits in our brains are activated, the pleasure centers in the brain are shutting off. If you are too anxious, it is biologically impossible to be happy, content or enjoy yourself.

#### -Develop a scheduled daily routine, but pace yourself- stay meaningfully busy.

Work and school routines act to automatically organize our lives. Staying home day after day we lose it. Build a daily routine for yourself and your family. Reasonable wake and bed times, set work and school times, set exercise and outdoor times, set leisure (including screen) times etc.... Make it loose, but not too flexible. The idea is for you to know what you should be doing at a given time and moving through the day with a sense of accomplishment, both work and fun.

#### -Socialize via phone and video chat.

Social distancing doesn’t mean social isolation. We are social creatures and have a fundamental need to interact with each other regularly. It’s important to our mental health and to minimizing anxiety. Take advantage of technology and use voice and video platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime, Skype etc... to connect with family and friends. Kids can have play dates via video. Adults can have meet-ups with one or more friends. It helps to literally see each other when you interact. Consider having your regular book club on Zoom, or a virtual meet-up for cocktails with friends, or a visit with extended family via video chat. Make sure you connect socially with someone at least once a day.

#### -Exercise daily.

We all know the benefits of exercise, especially to improve our sense of well-being, fight anxiety and help with sleep. You can’t go to the gym so get

creative. It's time to try something new, such as online yoga or other exercise routines, Youtube has hundreds. Make sure to get your heart rate up. In fact, try to get your heart rate up TWICE a day, once during your regular exercise and again at a different time of the day just for a few minutes- go find a hill to walk up quickly or take a brisk walk around the block. This will help you take a healthy break and get you breathing.

-Eat well and get plenty of sleep.

I know it sounds like your grandmother, but it's true. Minimize the junk, daily fruits and vegetables and regular meal times (eat together as a family as much as possible- check out the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation on this one!). Practice good "sleep hygiene." Set aside at least eight hours for sleep (more for children), have the same bedtime/wake time every day, put all screens in night mode after 6pm. Cut caffeine off by afternoon. If you drink, minimize alcohol after 6pm, it can inhibit stage 4 sleep when there is replenishment of important brain chemicals that help us with mood regulation (like coping with anxiety). Rule of thumb: cut off alcohol one hour before bedtime FOR EACH DRINK.

-If you can't sleep take action.

Google the term "sleep hygiene." You'll find plenty of resources and lists to assess your sleep habits and see if there are things you can change. If all else fails talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner. This is a problem that could easily be addressed in a telehealth visit.

-Learn to breathe- better yet practice mindfulness meditation.

There are many forms of breathing exercises, such as diaphragmatic breathing- or "belly" breathing. (Youtube has a number of good videos). These help tremendously with relaxation and decreasing anxiety. Take a few minutes periodically throughout the day to stop and practice your breathing routine.

Even better, take up a mindfulness meditation practice. Research has shown that a mindfulness practice is one the most effective ways to decrease stress and anxiety, among other benefits. If you take up mindfulness meditation, practice it daily and commit to trying it for a least 30 days. Some of the benefits come only after practicing it for some weeks. Here is a free app developed by experts to get you started:

<https://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach> My favorite mindfulness author/coach for us "western thinkers" is Thich Nhat Hanh.

-Get a hobby or return to an old one.

Yes, now that you are home all the time and have scheduled in plenty of leisure time, do something light, fun and most importantly, meaningful to you! Ask yourself "what am I passionate about that is enjoyable and will nurture my soul." Get back to cooking, photography, writing... it could be a million different things, ask that voice inside of you what it should be!

-Go outside (avoid close contact with others).

If you can't exercise outside, make sure you get outside at least once a day for a walk or to just breath fresh air. Make sure you practice good social distancing when you do.

-Limit your exposure to news- 10 to 20 mins a day, best not at night.

This one is important! Overexposure to sensationalized "bad" or threatening news will unnecessarily increase your anxiety. I recommend avoiding getting your news (at this time) from broadcast media or social media, it tends to be too sensationalized which can create distortions making anxiety worse. However, still stay informed. You can get what you need to know by spending 10 to 20 minutes a day from brief reliable sources like established news feeds. An example is the New York Times Daily Briefing, which you can have delivered to your email at no cost. You can also check the State and County Health Department websites for updated recommendations and objective numbers. You can sign up for automatic alerts if something important changes on the County's Public Health site. And DON'T GET YOUR NEWS BEFORE BED, it might keep you from sleeping.

-Keep a journal- especially of your experience with these times.

It helps to get thoughts and feelings out of your head by putting them on paper. This is long time established and therapeutic method for letting go of anxieties and fears. Besides, it could provide you with a personal record of these unprecedented times for the future. Imagine if your teenager kept a journal of these experiences, they would have it to share with their own children some day.

-Help someone else if you can.

I know it sounds like something from AA, but it works. It gets you out of your own head, makes you feel worthwhile, and may provide desperately needed help for someone during these very difficult times. Just make sure to NOT put yourself or someone else at risk by continuing to practicing social distancing. It could be as simple as sending someone in need money, or providing words of encouragement to someone who is struggling.

-Develop a self-care menu of things you enjoy.

Try it! This is long time strategy the social learning theorist have used to help us reward ourselves for making positive behavior changes. Make sure the items are affordable, accessible and relatively easy to do. Thirty minutes with your favorite book, a chat with a good friend, a hot bath.... brainstorm what works for you. Now you'll have menu to choose from during planned leisure/relaxation time.

-Practice gratitude.

Brain science has shown that the practice of contemplating the things you are grateful for changes the brain in a positive and meaningful way. It stimulates the pathways to contentment and happiness. An easy exercise is to make a list of three to five things you are grateful for each day, best to do in the morning. Google the terms “the science of happiness” and you’ll find a number of resources.

-Identify what you can control and what you can’t.

This may be as important as anything else. When we are stressed and threatened our brains put us in a mode of attempting to control things to keep us alive. It’s a survival mechanism. The problem is we might focus on things we have no control over and end up frustrated, spinning our wheels and feeling helpless. Did you wonder why everyone is hoarding toilet paper? It has nothing to do with toilet paper, it has to do with engaging in a behavior to control something, anything. It might be best to engage in a mental exercise to identify the things you actually have control over and the things you don’t. Then let go of those you don’t and put some energy into the things you do. See below.

