

## Taking Care of Yourself and Your Stress During the Pandemic

Understanding This Unprecedented Stress

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### **Time to Plan and Take Constructive Action**

Stress during this pandemic is like no other stress we've experienced before, which is why large numbers of educators and service providers are breaking down and experiencing uncontrolled stress responses. People are finding that their sources of stress are too numerous, the stressors are unrelenting, and their normal and automatic means of coping with stress are inadequate for the increased demand. We need to be more deliberate in our efforts to reset the stress response ourselves.

Often we can solve a difficult problem or deal with an isolated stressful event and this reduces the source of stress. This time we can't solve the problem and the event cannot be dealt with and put into the past. Instead, we have to get better at managing the stress response, by interrupting what it does to the body and the mind so we can reset and so we don't break down.

We can definitely do that and we can help others do that, but we have to approach this strategically, deliberately, and with consistency and precision. We can't rely on our stress response system to reset itself automatically. Our efforts have to be well thought out, planned and prioritized. Everyone knows what to do to limit their exposure to infection and most people have planned this, implemented this, and made it an ongoing top priority. Many have learned new skills and new ways of doing things in the process. The same has to be done with a stress management plan. The plan won't run itself or happen on its own, as it does with "normal" life and "normal" levels of stress, and new skills are needed that can help us continuously reset the stress response.

There are many obvious (and valid) reasons why people are chronically worried about the pandemic, but beyond the obvious worries there are unique features in this situation that create an even more overwhelming stress response. No one is spared. Everyone is challenged by these unique circumstances that worsen stress, circumstances that can't be helped or changed right now. There is hope, however, in what we can do to interrupt their adverse effects. The following understanding of the pandemic situational factors will help us name and label the source of stress. Just naming and labeling these sources will help us gain some control over their impact on us, and beyond that, our stress management plans can strategically address each of these factors. There are at least seven pandemic factors that worsen stress. It's no wonder, then, that people are overloading their coping systems, but we can mitigate the impact of every one of these factors.

### **Understanding the Pandemic Situational Factors That Create Overwhelming Stress**

1) Pervasiveness. The pandemic is relentless and pervasive. It is extremely difficult to get away from the news about it, the dire predictions, the expanding restrictions. It's

everywhere and all the time, even if you don't have the virus or don't know anyone who has the virus. It's never far from your mind and your stress response is not getting the break it needs to reset itself.

2) Disrupted routine. With most stressors, we can escape or become distracted by our daily routines, the routines that regulate us. The pandemic has disrupted nearly every routine that anchors us, that gives us structure and predictability and a sense of normalcy. Novelty triggers a

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stress response; familiarity triggers a calming response. Our days are usually full of both. Right now, however, we have little familiarity and too much novelty. It's tough to reset the stress response without the familiar routines.

3) Higher baseline of fear. Some of the stress associated with the pandemic is based on the higher level of persistent fear associated with it. Current emotions (e.g., fear) can trigger similar emotional memories (this happens so we're ready to deal with the current experience by using past experience as a teacher). Persistent fear and anxiety causes us to activate memories of other experiences where we've been fearful or anxious, so our current stress response is not just about what is happening now, but what is entering our subconscious minds from other emotionally challenging times. Some people have more of those experiences than others and that is what is being activated now. Throughout the day, the baseline of fear that people experience (current fear combined with memories of being fearful) is much higher than usual, so it doesn't take a whole lot of bad news to cross the threshold of what some people can manage.

4) Prolonged isolation. Prolonged isolation (such as what we must do to limit infection) can trigger memories and feelings of past abandonment, traumatic experiences of isolation and social rejection and separation from support. The stress (and emotion) of those experiences can blend with the current experience of isolation, thereby compounding or worsening the stress of the current experience.

5) Reduced support through work. With parents working from home, they are deprived of so many experiences that can reset their stress response. Going to work provides people with a different role and different responsibilities, a shift in scene. This is a natural way to reset the stress response. A change of scene makes it easier to leave stress associated with the family at home, as we face a different type of stress and reward at work. At the end of the work day, we change the scene again and leave work stress behind, as we replace it with the stress and the reward of the family. In addition, you can be important at work and valued and appreciated in ways that you can't achieve at home. At work you can be part of an entire network of people—a team of people—that appreciate you, support you, understand you and care about you. Right now, you can't leave the family for work and you can't leave work because work is in your home.

6) Blurred boundaries/competing needs and unfair expectations. With parents working from home, the normal stressors of home cannot be escaped by going to work, and the boundaries between home and work are blurred. It's tough to be a parent while you're working and tough to do any work while you're trying to be a parent. In most cases, people will feel like they're not doing either one well enough. Furthermore, there are no standards for how to do either. People have internalized their work standards and these will be the work standards that continue to define their success at work, even though it is impossible to achieve customary levels of performance while working from home.

In the same way, people have internalized their standards of family functioning and they will tend to use these standards to define their expectations of good parenting and

family functioning at home, even though the current circumstances are extraordinary and have no precedent. Students are learning entirely from home. Children cannot play with their friends. The family cannot go out to eat or to the movies or a sporting event, or even the mall. Children cannot participate in their music lessons, dance lessons, or with their sports teams. No one can visit extended family. Both parents are working from home. All family members are spending more time with each other in confined space than ever before. All of this puts tremendous stress on the family while limiting the way that family members can cope with stress.

7) Increased screen time. With so much work conducted from home people are forced to spend so many more hours in front of a computer screen. When so much time is spent focused on the screen it's easy for the brain to lose a sense of context, to feel disoriented and disconnected and maybe even dissociative. Changes in scene, different people, different places, different surroundings, can reset the stress response. Normally, all day long we experience scene-shifting resetting experiences, but with work done exclusively on the computer and other electronic devices we are eliminating scene shifting as a reset experience and instead we are experience stress without the natural opportunity to continually put things in context.

### **Next Steps**

Look back over the seven factors and identify which ones have the greatest impact on you. Give yourself the same level of compassion that you would give to a good friend or work colleague. Understand that you are dealing with a lot. Remind yourself that this is temporary. It won't be forever, but while it is happening to you, you will try to accept that you are doing your best under extraordinary circumstances and everyone else is trying to do the same.

Next, spend some time with the Pandemic Stress Toolkit. There are dozens of strategies and practices there that can help you reset your stress response. Don't be intimidated by the number of different things you could do. The number of choices is to enable you to find something that suits you. Find one or two or three that you can manage, that you would be willing to set up, learn and practice. Be patient with yourself. Give yourself a chance to try a few things and a fair chance to get better at doing them. Doing a few things that suit you and doing them frequently and consistently can be very effective and it's better than doing too many things inconsistently.