

## Dealing With The Stress of COVID-19

By David Posen, M.D.

We're living through uniquely challenging times, both physically and psychologically. The two major factors affecting our mental health at times like these are *fear* and *uncertainty*. What they have in common is a feeling of *loss of control*. We can't see the virus, we don't know what or who is safe to touch or how long this crisis will go on. In these circumstances, how can we reduce the stress that most of us are feeling?

Stress and Control are like two elevators on one cable: when one is up, the other is almost always down. Think of being unable to find a parking spot or trying to get a two-year-old to go to bed: low control, high stress. If you want to *reduce* your stress, find ways to *increase* your feelings of control. And the good news is: **You Have More Control Than You Think**. Although you can't control the weather, the economy, other people's behaviour – or this coronavirus, you *can* control the way you behave, the way you think and the lifestyle choices you make. And if you take more control in these three areas, you will almost certainly reduce your stress to more manageable levels.

### Let's start with Action Strategies: Things you can DO.

In addition to the basic STAY HOME and hygiene advice from Government and Public Health officials:

**One:** Practice *Physical Distancing*. I prefer this term to "social" distancing. We're social beings. We need and crave social connection and interaction. We're wired for it. It leads to the secretion of Oxytocin, the bonding hormone, which also reduces stress.

**Two:** Use technology to stay connected with family and friends. Use email, text, Skype, Facetime, ZOOM, social media, and the good old-fashioned telephone.

**Three:** Be a good neighbour. Check in on the elderly and people living alone. Offer to run errands, buy groceries, fill medical prescriptions, etc. Helping others not only feels good but raises oxytocin levels as well.

**Four:** *Avoid News Overload*. Keep informed thro but don't binge-watch news channels and saturate yourself with negativity.

*Do Avail* yourself of Information, especially Q & A programs to learn more from experts about how to do deal with the crisis

**Five:** Maintain daily routines and rhythms. Get up at a reasonable hour, get dressed and establish some structure to your daily activities. It will help you feel more organized and in control.

**Six:** Eat regular meals, get the sleep you need and keep active as much as possible. These are all things you can control. They will also enhance your immune system and keep you healthy.

**Seven:** Do Relaxation Breathing, Meditation or Yoga. They neutralize the stress reaction. Find instructions on the internet or find guided imagery programs to help you relax.

**Eight:** Use this forced down time to slow down a bit. Catch up on chores you've been putting off (like decluttering.) Make time for neglected pleasures (your old "I wish I had more time to ...." list.) Pleasant diversions include puzzles, card or board games, projects, reading, playing or listening to music, TV sitcoms or movies, funny You Tube videos. If you're at home with family members, use the opportunity to spend more quality time with them.

**Nine:** Support others if you can: e.g. buy takeout to support favourite restaurants; donate to local food banks; give money to your gym or local stores you frequent - for workers whose hours have been cut.

**Ten:** Write a Gratitude List. Write down all the good things in your life, large and small. Then notice things throughout each day and add to the list. Focus on all the things you *have*, not on what's missing.

### **Now let's look at Cognitive Strategies: Changing the way you THINK.**

We can't always change what happens. But we can always change how we *think* about what happens. Easier said than done, but it's a skill that can be developed through practice. It's called *Reframing*: changing your perspective, changing the way you *look* at things. It's a remarkably valuable technique for reducing stress.

Looking for positives isn't always easy. This isn't about being insensitive or pretending to be Pollyanna where everything is wonderful. It's about mobilizing your resilience and resourcefulness – looking at things through a different lens. There's a proverb that says "It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Reframing is about looking for that candle.

The word "crisis" in English has an ominous connotation. But in Chinese it's written with two characters: one stands for Danger, the other for Opportunity. It acknowledges the negative side of a situation, but then it invites you to look for something positive. It's important not to gloss over the fear and pain too quickly. But to dwell on that for too long is not helpful.

Ask yourself: How else can I look at this situation? What opportunities does it present? Is there anything I can learn from this? What would I advise a friend in the same situation?

## **What are these *Sources of Encouragement to Focus On*?**

- We're starting to think collectively rather than individually. There's an emerging spirit of community and pulling together. Adversity often brings people together, even if mostly virtually at the moment. People are stepping up and reaching out in all sorts of ways: helping others, singing on balconies, making face masks and shields, performing free concerts on the internet.
- We're seeing courage and sacrifice from health care workers, hospital cleaners, lab techs, first responders, grocery store employees and other vital service providers.
- At least the virus isn't airborne, so we can go for walks and bike rides – at a distance from other people
- Most people recover or have milder cases.
  - Spring is here, with longer daylight hours and warmer weather to sit outside on balconies and back porches. It might also weaken the virus.
- We're lucky to have modes of communication that we never had before. Technology allows us to connect with family and friends, work from home, have virtual meetings, ask questions and get advice from experts, share humour and inspiring messages.
- Less pollution with fewer cars on the road
- A time to redefine our values: to see how little we *really* need materially to make our lives meaningful and pleasant (A reality check) A chance to slow down, catch our breath and reassess our priorities and the busy-ness of our lives. Looking at what really matters. Simplifying. Also, an opportunity to do pleasurable things at home we never seem to make time for.

Not all of these ideas will resonate with you. But the ones that do can be helpful.

We can't always choose what happens. But we can always choose how we *look at* what happens. Negative thoughts will drain you – and so will negative people. Conversely, positive thoughts (and people) will energize you. And you have a *choice*. So look for and focus on the positives as much as you can.

These ideas are not a panacea – but they might help to offer a way forward.

Keep Well and Stay Safe

David Posen, M.D.,  
author of *The Little Book of Stress Relief* and *Always Change A Losing Game*  
Twitter @DrDavidPosen