

## Managing Stress and Anxiety During Uncertain Times

Healthcare workers and teams are facing an unprecedented global pandemic. Many of us feel anxious about what will happen to our patients, families, friends, and communities. Below are four specific steps we can all take to cultivate a sense of calm during these uncertain times.

### 1. Practice Mindfulness

What is mindfulness? It's simply the practice of returning your attention to the here and now. It sounds simple but it's not easy, especially when we're facing uncertainty about our situation and the future. We find our thoughts wandering to what will happen next. The "what ifs" of tomorrow quickly capture all of our attention and send our stress response into overdrive. One way to reverse this cycle is to bring our attention back to the present moment. There is a simple trick you can do to return your attention to the present. It's called the 5 senses exercise. Here's how it works:

Look around the room you're in. Notice the colors in the room. Find everything in the room that's blue. Next, find everything in the room that's green.

Listen to the sounds you can hear. Sometimes it helps to close your eyes so that you can hear not just the obvious noises, but also the quieter ones that you usually miss.

Smell the scents in the room. Take a few breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. Can you smell anything?

Taste the flavors in your mouth. Focus your attention there for a moment and see if you can notice anything.

Feel the air on your skin. Does it feel cool or warm? Notice the places where your clothes touch your skin. See if you can hold your attention there for a couple of seconds.

You have just contacted the present moment through your 5 senses. You can do it anytime, anywhere without anyone else knowing. It can be helpful for breaking through the anxiety about all the things that might happen in the future so that you can meet the challenge in front of you here and now with a clear head.

Mindfulness is like a muscle—the more you exercise it, the better it will work when you need it most. You may find that practicing mindfulness first thing in the morning or last thing before you go to sleep helps you better meet the challenges of the day.

Other mindfulness strategies include:

- Paying attention to your breath for 10 breaths without trying to change or control your breathing. Just notice how each breath feels in your nose, throat, lungs, or diaphragm.

- Feeling the water in the shower on your skin. Notice how the shampoo and soap smell. Hear the sounds of the water.
- There are many more mindfulness and meditation exercises on the [Headspace app](#), which is free to healthcare workers.

## 2. Take Care of Yourself

Psychologists often describe oxygen masks dropping on a flight as a metaphor for the importance of self-care. The flight crew always directs people to put on their own oxygen mask before helping anyone else. The same is true in any other kind of emergency. You will be most helpful to others if you take care of yourself.

The most important thing you can do to take care of yourself is to make a plan to ensure you can get your most basic needs met. You will need to sleep, eat healthy food, and drink plenty of water. Another basic human need is social connection—make sure you’re texting or talking with people you care about, even if only for a few minutes.

Next, think about the things you normally do to relieve stress. Those activities will be especially important during this time. Write down three activities that you can choose from when you’re feeling overwhelmed and put them in your phone. You can put them in your notes app, an email to yourself, or schedule them in your calendar. No idea where to start? Activities that **connect us with others** and **help us feel pleasure** are important for managing stress. Here are some examples:

- Walk outside and feel the sun on your skin
- Call someone you love
- Go for a walk or a run. If you’re at work, walk or run up a flight of stairs.
- Listen to your favorite song (bonus points if you dance or sing along)
- Close your eyes and visualize your favorite place on Earth—remember how it sounds, smells, looks, and feels
- Watch a funny video or show (laughing is great medicine)
- Express gratitude to someone
- Sing or whistle
- Tell a joke

## 3. Connect with Your Purpose

When facing challenging and difficult circumstances, it’s important to tune out the noise and re-connect with your inner “why?” In other words, why you do what you do? Not just at work but also as a person. Healthcare professionals feel called to honor their oath to help the sick, often at great personal sacrifice. We also feel called to honor our commitments to our family, friends, colleagues, and community. Reconnecting with these important callings can help us find the strength to meet the challenges of our day.

#### **4. Cultivate Wisdom**

It is important to be well informed, but it is easy to become overwhelmed with information and sensationalist news stories during a crisis. Check one or two trusted news sources daily but no more. Read health system updates and emails. Combined with mindfulness, staying well informed will give you the wisdom necessary to make good decisions for yourself, your family, and your patients.

These four steps will be important to take on an ongoing basis. If you can practice all four each day, you will not only modulate your stress response but you may also improve your immune function. And remember, you are not alone. We are all in this together.

Crystal Schiller, PhD  
Clinical Psychologist