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This document is being released to serve as a guide to assist individuals in using the science of clinical psychology to cope with common negative emotional reactions that we are all likely to experience, in particular fear and sadness. Unfortunately, as a result of this global crisis, we are all serving in an enormous social experiment that will allow us to determine the impact of chronic fear, social isolation, and significant disruption of people's day to day lives. We are concerned that if this is left unattended, the mental health impact of these factors can be disastrous for many.

Typically, when we produce a paper in academics, we spend months planning, writing, and reviewing it. Given the current rapidly evolving crisis we do not have time for that. As a result, we are doing something highly unusual - releasing a *work in progress that is likely to develop over the next several months as we learn more about the impact of the COVID crisis on mental health.*

We spent the past two days trying to create something useful even if far from perfect. So please excuse typos, grammatical error, and the limited scope. Making an incomplete document available will allow us to get this information out immediately so that people can use what is there for now - and weekly updates will be provided as this guide develops.

If you are interested in receiving an email when updates are available rather than having to check back [CLICK HERE](#).



HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

PHD PROGRAM IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Coping with Fear and Sadness During a Pandemic

Don't Give in to or Fight your Feelings: Learn to Manage Them

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I have spent the past 37 years studying anxiety (fear) and depression (sadness) along with my doctoral students. Specifically, we are interested in:

- (1) What causes these feelings (everyone has them from time to time)
- (2) What purpose they serve (they evolved because they were useful - and are still useful)
- (3) What factors lead to them becoming a significant problem for some individuals (we have a lot of knowledge about this)
- (4) When they become a problem, how to help people manage and reduce these feelings so that they do not interfere with their life (there are scientifically proven ways to do this).

This knowledge is particularly relevant in the current landscape -- the COVID-19 Pandemic. Clearly, COVID represents a potential physical and medical threat for everyone. However, our concern, based upon what we know about anxiety and depression, is that the mental health effects will become the greatest challenge for most of us -- not the physical/medical effects -- and our emotional responses can potentially have a long lasting impact beyond the current pandemic. Unfortunately, as a result of this global crisis, we are all serving in an enormous social experiment that will allow us to determine the impact of chronic fear, social isolation, and significant disruption of people's day to day lives.

Specifically, the present environment is triggering our underlying psychology in a way that is unprecedented - with potentially serious consequences for our anxiety and depression. We already know that about 25% of people in the U.S. suffer from an anxiety disorder at some point in their life, and that figure is about the same for depression. Our brains simply were not built for this type of threat. Imagine if you turned a light switch on and off all day, 24 hours/day, 7 days/week. It's not built for that much use. Eventually it would break -- much earlier than if used "normally." This is what is happening to our psychological mechanisms involved in anxiety and depression -- they are being triggered 24/7 -- way beyond the purpose they evolved for.

Unfortunately, this pandemic is likely to stick around for quite some time. So we offer the following, science-based suggestions, to help MANAGE fear and sadness. The starting point is that of course, anyone not having some increase in their anxiety and sadness probably has an emotion system that is not working as it should. As best we can tell, EVERYONE has had increases in these emotions - as would be expected - because there is some level of validity to these reactions (COVID is legitimately a threat to us thus provoking fear and our lifestyle changes are depressing!). That being said, there are factors that may contribute to these reactions that can be dealt with. The metaphor I will use here is a volume control. When you turn something on it is set at a certain volume. You can then turn the volume higher or lower. What we are detailing in our guide is what triggers turn these negative feelings on, how they get "turned up higher" than necessary, and solutions to how they can be "turned down" --but not off -- so the experience is more manageable.

In our guide you will find a summary of many common 'pandemic-related' issues that we have observed and how they push the buttons of well-known processes that are generally involved in increased anxiety and depression. Solutions to best manage negative reactions follow each of these.

We hope you find this information useful.

Fear, Anxiety, Worry: Feelings of Vulnerability

Let's start with a basic premise: You should feel vulnerable -- and therefore fearful given what is going on in the current environment (from here on in I will use the word fear to refer to anxiety and worry as well even though we make distinctions between these it is not relevant here). In fact, fear is your greatest ally right now. Because when channelled appropriately, it is protecting you and everyone else who may come into contact with you. When channelled appropriately, you wash your hands more than ever, social distance, and avoid going out as much as possible. You struggle in the supermarket feeling like you can't breathe because you may be wearing a mask. But the anxiety keeps you from taking it off.

These behaviors are the most important things that we can do to decrease the spread and overall negative impact of coronavirus. But let's be honest, we only substantially changed our behavior when we became fearful. The more vulnerable we feel, the more likely we wash our hands, socially distance, and avoid going out unnecessarily, etc.

This is a gift brought to us from our [evolutionary history](#): Fear, when appropriately triggered, directs us in a way that protects us from threats in our environment. So let's start by embracing our appropriate level of fear and thanking our evolutionary ancestors who responded to their fear with protective behaviors and survived and ultimately passed this on to us. Because this primordial archetype located deep in our brain is our best weapon against those things that may harm our survival.

Despite knowing COVID-19 was headed our way at least three months ago -- we had to experience the vulnerability in the moment to change our behavior. Let's not look back now with regret, we're just behaving like humans based upon the way they are built. That's true of our leaders as well which is why there was such a disappointing level of preparation for this crisis that was whistling while it approached. But that's another [story](#). The bottom line is we all needed the fear to lead us on the correct path. **SO DO NOT STOP BEING FEARFUL.** (If you were hoping for a guide on how to get rid of all of your fear right now, you have come to the wrong place).

However, that being said, what can be modified substantially is our level of fear. Many are at a panic level of fear as though COVID is a tiger ready to make us its lunch. For most of us who are in fact not that vulnerable to COVID, the following should become our guiding principle, perhaps a mantra:

COVID-19 will pass, humankind will survive, almost all of us will still be alive in its aftermath.

The scientific evidence clearly supports this statement. For an existentialist, this statement is reason to celebrate! But not a reason to ignore our fear. Because it is our fear, once again, when channeled appropriately as detailed by the [CDC](#), that will guide us to protect ourselves and others. And that will lead us out of this mess as quickly as possible!

Keep in mind that while fear has received much of the early attention as COVID descends upon us in New York, and the U.S. in general -- I believe sadness will be the one that needs to be dealt with over a longer course of time. That is, as we feel more safe and less vulnerable (e.g., as the curve flattens), we will still need to engage in many behaviors that will be more likely to trigger depression (e.g., social distancing, social withdrawal, not going to work, lack of pleasurable group social activities). Although that is perhaps not immediately salient as I write this on April 5, 2020 -- I do believe sadness/depression will replace the national mood of fear.

Below we will cover some of the triggers for fear, unhelpful responses, and solutions.

With regard to fear, I've tried to paint a different picture of our vulnerability above -- hopefully this will provide a new lens to view the nature of this threat. But unfortunately, there is something working against us, and more than anything, in my opinion, it is fueling our fear.

Most important suggestion to reduce fear and psychological distress in general: Reduce total media consumption (television, social media, print media) to a maximum of one hour per day.

Do not watch any television news. Zero.

Proceed with extreme caution with following social media postings about COVID.

Proceed with extreme caution with the print (including internet) media.

You can spend your one hour per day on the following to keep informed:

[Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center](#)

[New York Times Coronavirus Section: Latest Updates](#)

See below for details about this

Trigger: The media -- all of it (television, newspapers, social media) to varying degrees manipulates our risk perception in the worst way: It increases our sense of vulnerability. There is an old saying in the media, *If it bleeds, it leads*, a statement that is used to describe the relative attention the media plays to articles. The idea is the more horrific the story (e.g., the more frightening), the more likely it will be the headline and receive a lot of time or space in the way the media source covers it. Why? Because the more horrific the story the more people watch, buy the newspaper, click on links, retweet postings, etc. With respect to the present issue - the best I can come up with related to *If it bleeds it leads* is: *If it doesn't cause fright - it won't be on tonight!*

Are we all sadists looking for these stories? Not really. But once again, thanks to evolution, our mind is built to pay attention to threats (those that did not deal with them well and were eliminated from the gene pool). So the media just *gives us what we want*, so to speak, or at least what our minds want. They just want to make money and need eyes on their product. If people would follow positive stories in the same way as horrific stories -- that's what they would give us. But do you think a news organization like CNN is going to devote a full day to coverage of someone engaging in charity work. No. But they will spend a whole day and more on a school shooting. In fact, they will cover 5 minutes of actual news (real information) about a school shooting for a full day as a story emerges. So you can be watching for hours and learn nothing new. Newspapers, internet print media, social media all work in the same way. Activity picks up when something bad is happening.

Here is the real problem. You may have known the above information already. But if you watch, follow, etc. it still affects you. I remember reading a book in college, *Captains of Consciousness* (1976) by S. Ewen. The main idea of this book is that advertising co-opts our consciousness and leads us to be materialistic (e.g., want and buy their products). I doubt he would have ever anticipated the level of media that exists now (there are more media devices in the phone in your pocket than there existed in an entire person's home). But I think his title, and premise, applies now. The media are captains of our consciousness -- beyond advertising. It shapes what we believe in the most fundamental ways (there is substantial literature on this, but I do not want to digress, so trust this statement for now).

So what does this have to do with fear in general, and more specifically COVID? The coverage is 24/7 -- with the most horrific scenes (people dying on ventilators, overfilled morgues, stories of the sickest patients, etc). And of course our eyes are glued on that (take a look at the front page of your newspaper whether it be in print or online and see if I am correct). There are not stories interviewing tens of thousands of people who had no or mild symptoms - overwhelmingly the typical course of COVID. Or even people that were quite sick. The most extreme cases are covered.

So what does that do to our thinking -- or more specific -- the way we process information and form our beliefs and attitudes about things:

Black and White Thinking: You see COVID in extremes. Either you do not get it -- or you end up on a respirator. There is no middle ground or shades of grey.

Selective Attention: You only focus on the worst cases. If a celebrity announces they are COVID positive and has no problem you forget about him or her. But if a celebrity is very ill that is the example that sticks to your brain.

Catastrophizing: You only focus on the worst outcome and personalize it -- you are going to end up hospitalized with COVID just because that is a possibility. You lose the distinction between possibility (anything is possible) and probability (what is likely to happen based upon knowledge of base rates).

Emotional Reasoning: Because you feel anxious about this highly contagious virus that everyone else is anxious about -- you assume it is dangerous -- just because you feel it is. Watching media that displays cases and deaths like a scoreboard continues to exaggerate your anxiety further even though proportionally these are relatively low numbers compared to the entire population.

Unhelpful reaction: You believe you need to know as much about COVID as possible so you watch hours of television news, read newspapers, and follow social media articles with a bias towards the worst case scenarios as mentioned above. Basically you are continuing to feed these irrational extreme beliefs and the cycle above continues.

Solution:

Stimulus Control: Limit media consumption to 1 hour maximum per day. Select reliable resources such as those contained in the grey box at the beginning of this section. Many people react to this by saying they can't do it because they must keep informed. I have them right down each day what they learned that is new. Other than the numbers of people affected (which is not very useful since we are behaving as though the problem is endemic -- that is as though everyone has it) -- there is no other information they can report on. There have been almost no new developments in the past couple of months. So overconsuming media just for this purpose serves no role.

Cognitive: Correct the way you read the news with an eye on the distortions described immediately above. Once you realized you are processing information in a selective, biased way it should allow you to see things more accurately and less anxiety provoking.

Sadness and Depression: Feelings of Loss, Hopelessness, Helplessness, Self-Criticism

Sadness (depression) is an emotional response that is primarily triggered by losses that are perceived as irreplaceable. These can be tangible losses, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job, and they can be more abstract, such as failing to live up to your own expectations, or failing to have the marriage that you expected. From an evolutionary standpoint, it makes sense to go into a period of “resignation” when using effort and energy would be futile (the loss is believed to be irrevocable). However, when the resignation is triggered by PERCEPTIONS of irrevocable losses (e.g., the world is never going to survive this, there is no way to fix the economy - it will be bad forever) it can lead to *hopelessness* and *helplessness*. These processes, as described below, end up contributing too and maintaining the depression -- and people end up in a downward spiral that is hard to escape from.

Hopelessness

Trigger: All of the bad news, especially that which are predictions about the future being bleak because of the impact of the pandemic.

Unhelpful Reaction: Following/watching media more and more, hoping for some good news, but hearing only more bad news. This will make you feel more hopeless about the future -- and believe that things are never going to get better -- and feel increasingly resigned and depressed.

Solution:

Stimulus Control. Stop following so much media (will make this general point in the info). This just continues to trigger these feelings of hopelessness. Remember, the media wants eyes on their material. As a result, they tend to present the most dramatic, negatively slanted information because that is more likely to trigger emotions and thus hold your attention or lead you to click on an internet link.

Reappraise. Yes, the news is bad. That's realistic. That being said there have certainly been other bad times including wars, terrorism, financial collapses/recessions/depressions, and even epidemics and pandemics. Humans are resilient. We evolved in the harshest conditions and now for the most part control our environment unlike any other species. So while things are bad - it's not hopeless. The problem with hopelessness is it leads people to think something like “What's the point of trying!?” and resign themselves to the circumstance. Things not getting better becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Just knowing that there will eventually be light at the end of the tunnel -- there has always been -- can change one's whole perspective. Remember, once you lose hope you lose everything.

Helplessness

Trigger: Helplessness is related to hopelessness (see above). If you feel hopeless, or believe a situation is hopeless, that means there is nothing that can be done -- you are helpless. It's like you just jumped in the pool in deep water but you do not know how to swim.

Unhelpful Reaction: When people feel helpless then there is nothing they can do. They are overwhelmed by their hopeless feelings about a situation. *The economy is so bad - what can I do to improve it - nothing? Or, this virus is spreading so rapidly there is nothing I can do to avoid it?* The helplessness can actually cause the very thing you do not want to happen because you stop trying.

Solution: Do what you can that is in the right direction, even if in the most minimal way. I always liked the recycling motto: Think globally, act locally. For example, you alone are not going to fix the economy even if you were a billionaire. But if you can afford to, can you order dinner at a local restaurant that is now offering takeout or delivery? If so, and if many others did so, it may mean keeping that restaurant in business and those individuals employed. And that will allow them to do something similar. What often happens with helplessness is people start thinking in an *all or nothing* way. If I can't do it all -- then why do anything? If I can't clean out the whole closet, what is the point of just doing the top shelf. So for example, try to connect the dots -- think globally (big picture), act locally (what can you do that might make even the tiniest difference, but if everyone did so, the scale would be enormous). By connecting the dots you can feel empowered -- the opposite of helplessness. *I can buy dinner tonight and contribute to reviving the economy in my own way!* If 100 million others did this it would make an enormous difference. But if everyone acted helplessly then we're sunk! As another example, *I can reduce my food shopping to twice a week.* While you still expose yourself to some risk to contracting the virus, and that may be inevitable because you need to buy food from a supermarket, you are not helpless in reducing your risk by decreasing your exposures as a result of decreasing shopping. Once again, it is not an all or nothing game here. If you are behaving helplessly, What's the point, I'm going to get it anyway! And therefore do not change your behavior you increase the likelihood of contracting the virus.

Non bereavement related loss (e.g., activities, work, etc. disrupted)

Trigger: The ways in which we lived our normal day to day lives is *lost*, and the world is experiencing a [collective loss](#). Social distancing has limited the usual socializing with friends and family, the routine of interacting with coworkers at work, or the hugs of a grandparent. Our day to day routines have drastically changed, and in cases of job loss, some normal day to day routines and sources of income have been completely diminished as well. Playing sports with a group or working out at a gym, once sources of self-care and release, are also lost. We've lost normalcy, sense of safety, social connection, personal freedom, and economic stability, to name just a few of the things we've lost during the COVID-19 crisis. We are missing the life we had a few weeks ago, and even though we'll most likely have it again in the future, it's normal to still miss it.

Unhelpful reaction: On top of increased fear and vulnerability during the crisis, we may feel sad and down because we have lost our accustomed way of life. One can even say that "our normal way of living" has died, and just like a loss of a loved one, you may be experiencing grief. While it's often common to think of "bereavement" as only related to the death of a loved one (which is also a possibility during this pandemic), grief is also a normal reaction to other types of loss, including a loss of a job, loss of a sense of safety, or loss of your Saturday nights with your friends. While we are grieving a loss, we go through specific stages of grief, and the order and intensity of these stages can vary person to person. *Denial or avoidance* may play out in denying that the virus will affect you or that it's a big deal. You may even want to avoid talking about the pandemic all together. In *anger*, you may get angry at the government for the social distancing and stay at home protocols or angry at people who aren't taking those protocols seriously. *Bargaining* is also a stage in grief, "maybe if I take social distancing seriously for the next week, things will go back to normal?!" or "I'll make sure I'm keeping 6ft apart from people but still go to this party." *Sadness* is also a stage of grief, and you may have the blues around the losses you've experienced and not knowing when things will return back to normal.

Solution: The last stage of grief is *acceptance*, which is where we accept what is happening in our lives and figure out ways to cope and move on during this crisis. All of the above stages of grief are normal reactions to what is happening right now in our lives. While these reactions while grieving are common, there are research backed ways to help move forward and work through our grief.

Name your grief. In a journal or on a piece of paper, write down your losses (job, social life, thrift shopping, tag football, a sense of identity). Then write down the kinds of feelings and emotions that come up when thinking about those losses. Think back to another time where you've felt that emotion- what helped you cope with it? Try thinking of some [coping strategies](#) that can and will help you when you feel down, angry or anxious.

Claim your grief. Look at each loss you wrote down on that list above and brainstorm ways to move forward in that area. If you're grieving the loss of your social life, you can plan out weekly trivia nights over Zoom that can replace the in person game nights you had going with your friends. Your tag football team? - organize at home workouts that your teammates can do collectively and remotely so you can train up for the next season. Some losses may feel impossible to claim, like losing a job for instance. Reading up on new innovations in your field while in quarantine can not only help you cope right now but it may also help you in the long run when you go back to your job or apply to other ones. Try to reproduce what you are missing from your own life.

(Physically distant) Social Support. It's one of the best ways to cope with grief. Stay connected with family members, friends, and classmates through texts, calls, facetimes, or over Zoom! If you can hear the other person's voice or see their face, that may help even more than just talking over text. Try scheduling weekly facetimes with a friend, while doing whatever friends do, like playing video games, blasting music with facemasks on, or just talking about what's going on and how we are feeling. Its important to remember that everyone is going through something during this crisis; and while each person may be at different stages of grief or having different responses to the crisis, your social supports may also need your social support! Being there for eachother during this time is not only important, but can also serve as great bonding time! Learn to play chess over Zoom with a friend, watch a Netflix movie at the same time, make funny Tik Toc videos together. Here are some other ideas for [techy social distancing](#).

Social Disconnection/Loneliness

Trigger: Global quarantine and social distancing regulations have resulted in significantly limited social contact with friends, family, colleagues, and human beings in general.

Unhelpful Reaction: Social and physical resignation (e.g., not reaching out and/or not responding to others; staying inside) and getting stuck to upsetting thoughts that may arise as a result of limited social contact (e.g., "I'm alone and will be for a while"). -- All of which typically exacerbate feelings of loneliness even more.

Solution: *Validate your feelings.* We are social creatures by nature, and thus, it makes complete sense that limited social contact can be extremely upsetting for many individuals. Cancelled plans with loved ones in general can result in feelings of sadness/loneliness, so of course coping with social distancing regulations during a global crisis for an unknown period of time is distressing!!

Tweak your thoughts. Right off the bat it might be helpful to re-label the current guidelines from “social distancing” to “physical distancing.” Just because we need to be physically distant for now, doesn’t mean we have to limit our social connections. Try to change how you’re thinking about the isolating regulations – we need to remember that we are separated now, so we can be together later. Upsetting thoughts are typically the fuel for upsetting emotions - Notice when you’re experiencing upsetting thoughts related to loneliness and try not to get stuck to them (*we want your mind to resemble a Teflon pan!!*) Shift your attention away from these unhelpful thoughts and try to think of this as a time to focus on, build, and/or create meaningful relationships. Is there a meaningful and healthy relationship in your life that has been neglected? Rekindle that relationship.

Take action NOW and get creative. Zoom video chats; facetime; Netflix movie parties (you can now watch movies and video chat with others at the same time!!); handwritten letters; video games; virtual exercise classes; texting; online forums; online support groups; virtual game nights; hugging a stuffed animal; purchasing long distance friendship lamps (you and a loved one can purchase lamps and when one is touched, the other emits the same glow); yelling across the street to your neighbors. Although it is normal to have urges to resign and isolate during upsetting times, it’s not helpful to do so. This is such an important time to connect with others. We agree that it is of course more pleasurable to connect in-person, but right now we have to try and focus on how we can make the best of the situation we are in. When you were younger (*or recently, no judgments here!*), did you ever wave to passengers of other cars while driving around? If so, remember how exciting it was when someone simply smiled and/or waved back?! This shows how important simply feeling acknowledged by someone else is for our well-being. If you’re feeling lonely and isolated, imagine how nice it might be for someone to smile or wave at you, even if it’s six feet away. Give yourself that opportunity – in addition to building your virtual world, get outside at least for a little bit each day (*while following state regulations*). Don’t wait. Take action now – get creative and get connected. Most importantly, remember that the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is there for you 24/7. Call 1-800-273-8255 or go to <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/> and chat online with someone today.

Loss of Reinforcement

Trigger: Throughout our lives we get different *reinforcers* or positive responses to our behaviors that make us want to do more things. For example, people go to work every day, to get paid or I may visit a restaurant I love often because the food tastes good. In these cases, money and tasty food are the reinforcers and working and going out is the behavior. These days, we might have lost a lot of our reinforcers, with people losing their income, restaurants closing and not being able to interact socially with people.

Unhelpful Reaction: It makes a lot of sense then if we don’t have these reinforcers, that we will result to decrease our behaviors and not to do things i.e. socially *isolating*, which is different from distancing or not seek out or change our lives to find other reinforcers such as not eating anything different for days because you can’t go out to a restaurant.

Solution: These are totally normal reactions to this loss of reinforcement. What you can do is find creative ways to keep yourself motivated and increase the behaviors you find helpful. You can organize social gatherings online to still get that social reinforcer or try to recreate your favourite meals at home to get that restaurant experience. Once you understand how reinforcers work, you can also use it to help motivate you to do the things that you may not enjoy doing such washing your hands regularly or wearing a mask. Set up a reward system for yourself so that was

Loss of Meaning

Trigger: Many people are no longer actively involved in careers or roles that bring a sense of meaning to our daily lives.

Unhelpful Reaction: It can be tempting for people to sleep in, skip the normal daily shower, and spend the whole day on the couch watching TV, wearing pajamas. Our days can start to feel meaningless and we can start to feel useless.

Solution: It's OK to mourn the loss of your old role. Whether it was going to work, watching the grandchildren, or something else, that role brought you a sense of meaning. However, while it's true our lives have changed significantly, that does not mean our days are meaningless. Rather than getting caught up in what we can't control, focus on aspects of your situation that are in control. One possible solution is to use this extra time to re-engage with hobbies that you may not have had time for previously. Alternatively, you could learn a new skill or engage in a new practice. Our perspective is different when we are in the moment compared to when we look back at the moment. Think about how things might be different in the future -- how can you spend your time now purposefully? Journaling about your experiences might be viewed as a way to tell your children or grandchildren about this historic moment. Consider small actions like making a telephone call to someone who lives alone, or sending a text message to a friend you haven't kept in touch with for a while. These simple gestures might brighten someone's day, decrease their loneliness, and be tremendously meaningful. Or, if you wish to contribute to the crisis more directly, it could be a good time to dust off the sewing machine you've been too busy to use and [sew a fabric mask](#) that can be given to a friend or family member. There is also an urgent need to [donate blood](#), which is an excellent way to contribute to those in need.

Rumination

Trigger: The perpetual uncertainty and lack of a hard end date of the global pandemic. We dwell on headlines that are written to scare us and obsess over statistics that only tell us one side of the story.

Unhelpful Reaction: Our minds, understandably, go to the worst case scenario - we will get sick, our loved ones will be hospitalized, we will not recover. We replay these negative thoughts over and over again in our minds. We may even think that our increased attention to COVID is helping us and perhaps we will eventually arrive at a solution to a global crisis.

Solution: The bottom line is – there is no 'holy grail' solution to this problem, its outcome is largely out of any one person's hands and, our increased repetitive negative thinking about it ultimately hurts us more than it helps us

Guilt

Trigger: Many individuals may have discovered that they tested positive for COVID *after* they were in contact with several people and/or may have gotten loved ones sick. Many individuals are not currently able to actively help during this crisis (e.g., regulations urging us to stay at home). Many cannot see loved ones who might be hospitalized, in nursing homes/assisted living centers, and/or are living independently and thus, home alone. Additionally, many individuals might be feeling more fortunate than others who are struggling (e.g., some have had COVID and recovered while others have not recovered, some can afford delivery options for their groceries while others cannot, & some have remained employed while others have lost their jobs).

Unhelpful Reaction: Self-blaming, punishing yourself (whether intentionally or not), and resigning. Getting stuck to “should” statements (e.g., “I should have stayed home when I knew I could have been asymptomatic”). Questioning “why” (e.g., “Why did my best friend lose her job, but I still have mine?”). Continuously thinking about your privilege and/or your lack of ability to help/visit others.

Solution: We tend to feel guilty when we think we have done something wrong. Listen, maybe it would have been a better idea to stay home, even if you were feeling fine, because you can be COVID positive and asymptomatic. But we are humans and we all make mistakes. So think of this as a learning experience – take the appropriate amount of responsibility for your actions, make reparations for any harm you might have caused, and then forgive yourself.

It's not helpful to keep beating yourself up and focusing on mistakes you've made. Instead, “do” more than “think” - take action and get out of your head. If you are someone that may have come in contact with others while contagious - you can reach out to them and let them know (maybe even consider apologizing to them), spread the word about the importance of staying at home even if you're feeling fine, and offer to help others that are sick (*after you self-quarantine for 2 weeks*).

The same goes for continuously thinking about others who are struggling and asking yourself why you might be more privileged than others – it makes sense to have these thoughts, but it's not helpful to fixate on them. If possible, take action (e.g., send a care package to someone struggling; order takeout from local restaurants; reach out to someone who might be lonely, make a donation).

We also often take a lot more responsibility for negative outcomes than we have control over, leading to heightened and inaccurate levels of guilt. For example, even though we have no control over the current restrictions we are facing, we might feel like we are doing something wrong when we don't visit loved ones. Notice when this might be happening, try to pinpoint what you're feeling guilty about, and evaluate how much responsibility you have for it.

Finally, remember – we often feel guilty because we are caring beings.

Unrealistic Expectations

Trigger: Media articles and social media postings revealing people who are maximizing the use of all the free time many now have (e.g., learning a language, writing a screenplay, cleaning out the entire house).

Unhelpful Reaction: Judge yourself by this standard and feel bad about yourself for not maximizing the use of your time. This will lead you to feel less-than others, sort of like a loser.

Solution: *Reappraise*. Recognize that seeing the reports of those who are maximizing the use of their time probably represent only a small percentage of people. Those are the ones who are writing articles or posting on social media. = Those who are not maximizing their use of time are not posting on social media -- *Hey, I'm sitting around all day and binge watching the Kardashians!* People only post the good stuff (we call it virtue signalling). So you end with a biased perception based upon what you see: You think almost everyone is doing it even if it is not true. And then it affects the way you feel about yourself.

Frustration

Trigger: Seeing the news or reading articles about the coronavirus pandemic and spread, followed by wanting to buy cleaning supplies and order groceries online to minimize contact with others. You look online, but all of the things you want aren't available (e.g., Clorox wipes or American cheese). You look at several online stores/delivery services, and keep seeing "out of stock" signs, time after time. Why can't stores just manage their inventory, and why can't I just get the things I want/need?!

Unhelpful Reaction: Get stuck with the idea that this is a never-ending, devastating catastrophe with a definite bad outcome: "If I can't get any cleaning supplies, then I have no way of sanitizing packages or my space, and I'll get coronavirus for sure". Or, overgeneralize and come to the conclusion that if you can't find specific cleaning supplies, there is no alternative option: "I can't order any packages because how can I bring them into the house if I can't clean them if I can't get Clorox wipes?". Also, falling into the trap that the uncomfortable feelings that come along with seeing "out of stock" signs are indicative that everything is falling apart: "The world is ending, this is a disaster, I can't even get everyday items, what's next?!". Relatedly, believing these uncomfortable feelings are indicative of immediate danger, which then leads to falling into an overwhelming spiral in your own head: "I can't do this, it's too much, how long can this go on for, I don't know what to do, I can't handle this, etc.". Finally, jumping to conclusions and predicting the (defeated) future: "if I can't get certain items, then there's no use in looking for anything else - they probably won't be available and that would make me feel even worse so I just won't try".

Solution: First, give yourself permission to take a step back and distract yourself with a different activity, with the idea that you will get back to what you were doing once the frustration and other emotions become less intense - which they will. Remind yourself that emotions ebb and flow; they get intense, and then the intensity lessens with time. Separating facts from interpretations is also a good strategy: imagine you're in a grocery store and someone bumps into you (in a non-coronavirus world). The fact here is that the person bumped into you. How do you interpret the bump? If you're having a decent day, you may shrug it off or think the other person might just be a little clumsy or distracted, not putting too much weight in it. If you're having a bad day - you had a fight with a friend, refrigerator broke and all your food spoiled, put a red shirt in your laundry with all your white clothes and dyed all your clothes pink - you may have a very different reaction to the person bumping into you. You might be enraged - "what a jerk!", or even snap at them. Be mindful of your reactions and interpretations, knowing that right now interpretations are likely influenced by the current difficult circumstances. In the example earlier, a fact would be that Clorox wipes and American cheese are not available at the stores I am looking at online. An interpretation might be: "everything is falling apart". Interpretations are colored by many things - our current feelings, life circumstances, relationships, the weather, etc.... and importantly, our interpretations tend to change. Right now, recognize that things are tense and stressful, and interpretations will likely lean towards the negative. Lastly, try to reframe the situation, i.e., think about some food items being out of stock as an opportunity to try some new things. Maybe you've stuck to the same general foods for awhile; there are plenty of new foods to try that may make for an interesting experiment and break up some of the quarantine monotony, and who knows - maybe you'll find a new food favorite.

Blurred Boundaries

Trigger: We're quarantined and self-isolating - we're not going anywhere. We're all home, and if we're also working from home, work knows where we are and how to get a hold of us 24/7. We're also constantly around technology and communication devices (phones, computers), so our bosses and clients have easy access and know we're likely to see their messages quickly. Work schedules may be changing, and the days of going into the office from 9-5 are over (for now). Work may think, "if you're home, doing nothing, why not work?" - leading to confusing boundaries. Do you work all day long? Maybe you think, "it seems everyone else at work is always on e-mail or in Zoom meetings, so I should be too". What about the quality of our work: are we still expected to perform to the same high standard, even in the midst of a pandemic?

Unhelpful Reaction: Withdraw and avoid anything work-related entirely: "if I don't see the e-mail from my boss or virtual meeting invitation, it's as if it doesn't exist". We know that avoidance, including e-mail avoidance, isn't helpful and often causes increases in anxiety. Relatedly, avoiding projects because they may not be as strong as prior work that was done at the office under different conditions may also cause increases in anxiety (the project isn't disappearing). Burnout is also very real, so accommodating work at all hours isn't a good idea either. Being overly accommodating and working at all hours may make you feel like a top employee at first, but be mindful - you may end up resenting it or exhausting yourself.

Solution: Come up with a reasonable schedule that you feel comfortable with and try to stick to it. That way, you know when you're "on duty", and can have guilt-free time off when you're not. Without these boundaries, you risk blurring all of your time together, and constantly thinking "I should be working right now". From cognitive-behavioral therapy, we know that our thoughts influence our feelings (as well as behaviors), so thinking that we should be doing work all the time may lead to feelings such as anxiety and guilt, which may then lead to unhelpful behaviors (i.e., overeating) in an attempt to self-soothe. In a pandemic world, the last thing we need is another thing that gets in the way of being able to relax.

Let's say you make yourself a schedule and decide to try it. What happens if distractions arise: the cat knocks over your water, the dog won't stop barking, the kids need attention, your roommate gets a call and is a loud-talker, sirens blare outside, etc. Maybe the distractions are within your own head: worrying about loved ones, feeling lonely from the quarantine, etc. We're never in a distraction-free world, and working from home is especially far from it. Remind yourself that you're doing the best you can, and that it's okay to feel what you're feeling; it's also okay to be frustrated by the distractions. A "win" here isn't in the outcome of a fully productive day; it's in the attempt to stick to the schedule and the willingness to keep trying amidst a global pandemic. You may find that by removing some of the pressure of performing perfectly, you're better able to focus.

Since you're living and working out of the office, in your home, physical boundaries are important too. Try to have a separate space for where you do work and where you spend your time doing other activities. If that's not possible, try setting up some rules for yourself (i.e., at 5 pm, I will turn off my computer and not check my work e-mail until the morning). This is also a good time to practice being assertive and discussing boundaries with co-workers - a useful skill to build. Remember, this is a hard time, and self-care is especially critical right now (e.g., prioritizing physical and mental health, sleep, etc.).

Lack of Sunlight

Trigger: Restaurants, theaters, and other places are closed. Team sports and outdoor gatherings are cancelled. Many people are not commuting to work, where they might spend some time outdoors by consequence.

Unhelpful Reaction: Staying home means spending more time indoors, away from sunlight.

Solution: Exposure to sunlight can boost brain chemical levels that promote positive moods. Aim for at least 30 minutes of sunlight a day, every day (weather permitting!). At least in the Northern Hemisphere we are lucky to have warmer weather coming our way. Go outside and read a book or make a phone call. Take a walk while listening to music, an audiobook, a podcast, or just enjoy the sounds of the neighborhood around you. Enjoy nature - go for a hike, or walk near water. If you don't want to get out of your car, you can drive to a nearby park and roll the windows down while reading a book or listening to the radio. Finally, if getting natural sunlight is still difficult, [light therapy lamps](#) can be a great way to keep depression at bay.

Lack of Physical Activity

Trigger: Gyms are closed, team sports cancelled, working at home has us sitting at our desks even more than before, and weekends are spent on Netflix binges.

Unhelpful Reaction: It's easy to fall into a sedentary lifestyle, which can lead to negative emotions and contribute to "cabin fever". Lack of physical activity is associated with more depressed mood.

Solution: Guidelines suggest getting [150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise a week](#), but most people struggle to meet this goal. Like any new habit, [start small and be consistent](#). Commit to a small goal when you're just starting out, and then add a little bit more each day. Reward yourself for working towards this goal - behavior change is hard! The good news is that even smaller amounts of low intensity exercise can provide benefits. One suggested starting place is to aim for [4,000 steps a day](#). Some people like to track their activity levels with a fitness watch, but there are plenty of free mobile apps you can download onto your smartphone device. Fortunately, states with "stay at home" orders still permit getting outside for daily exercise. Call a friend and take a socially distanced walk around the neighborhood together - just stand six feet apart or maybe on opposite sides of the street. Go for a run or hike in nature. On a rainy day, consider playing an [activity-focused video game](#) or signing up for a [Zoom yoga class](#).

Zoom Fatigue

Trigger: Countless Zoom work meetings, video chats with friends as a sole source of social interaction, and the novelty of quarantine wearing off.

Unhelpful Reaction: Emotionally withdrawing from the activities that are now taking place via videoconferencing, and falling into unhelpful patterns that will ultimately make you feel even less engaged. You sleep late, log on to your work meetings without brushing your teeth or putting on real pants, and zone out for the duration of the calls. At the end of the day you decide you're tired from all of said meetings, so you cancel your scheduled chat with a friend and instead binge-watch The Office for the third time this week.

Solution: Treat your virtual get-togethers the same way you would treat those events in real life. Although it might be tempting to roll straight out of bed and into your series of Zoom meetings for the day, it's helpful to remember that if you want to feel normal, you need to behave as close to normal as possible. Get up at your regular time, shower, eat a good breakfast, and use the time that you would normally be commuting to go for a walk. Instead of looking at Twitter or the news during your meeting, stay engaged by asking questions. Get dressed for video calls with friends instead of chatting from your bed in sweatpants, and give the call your full attention as opposed to making dinner at the same time.

Also, help your brain by creating a clear delineation between work-related video calls and social video calls. Designate one specific spot in your home as your workspace— somewhere that you don't do anything else (i.e., not the kitchen table). When your workday is done, leave that space and have some screen-free time before taking calls with friends in a different spot. It may also be helpful to use different apps for work calls versus social calls; for example, if your place of employment uses Zoom, connect with friends via Houseparty, Skype, FaceTime, or WhatsApp.

Finally, talk about any feelings of burnout with friends or the people in your household, and ask them to help hold you accountable: "I'm having a hard time sticking to my normal routine right now. I'm setting my alarm for x time; can you make sure I get up then?" or "I've been feeling pretty tired after days full of Zoom meetings, but I'm excited to FaceTime with you tonight. Don't let me bail!"

Claustrophobia

Trigger: Sitting in front of your computer in the same room all day and night, as well as a lack of day-to-day variety. This is not claustrophobia in the traditional sense of the psychological disorder, but a unique feeling of discomfort related to being "trapped" at home. This may be particularly true for those living in apartments, in cities where ample space is rare, and/or with several other people. You feel stir-crazy yet exhausted.

Unhelpful Reaction: If you're sharing space with others you might find yourself snapping at them. If you're by yourself you might find yourself struggling to combat negative thoughts about being alone. You convince yourself that the walls are closing in on you and decide that you're fed up with quarantining, and you think maybe you'll get together with *just a couple* friends this weekend to help you feel a bit better.

Solution:

First, allow yourself to have some self-compassion around how hard this is— and know that you're not alone. Most of us are not used to being confined to the same limited amount of square footage for many days at a time, to having the lines between home and work blurred, to be unable to go grab dinner with a friend, and to be uncertain about when any of the aforementioned things will change. If you're feeling tired yet agitated that is understandable, but it's also a cue to use any and all resources available to you to change things up. Rearrange your furniture so it feels like you have more space. *Create* more space by using this time to do all the de-cluttering and organizing that you've been putting off for months. Get outside at least once a day. If you're in a densely-populated city and the idea of walking around makes you uneasy despite social distancing policies, spend time on your roof if possible. Not an option? Open your window while you do yoga. Do what you can to move your body and get fresh air.

Finally, change your mindset to create meaning in the quarantine. Instead of thinking “I’m being forced to stay inside,” tell yourself that you are *choosing* to stay inside in the service of stopping the pandemic. Think of a specific person you know who is a member of a high-risk population (a grandparent, a friend with a medical condition), and when you’re feeling antsy tell yourself “I’m doing my part to protect them.” Even if it sounds silly, tell yourself that your Friday night on the couch isn’t just that; it’s an altruistic act. You’re in the middle of a major event in history, and you’re making a difference by making the choice not to go out. When you frame your situation this way, you feel a greater sense of agency and control over your environment as opposed to your environment controlling you.

IF YOU NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP

If in reading this you realize that a self-help guide is not going to help you enough because your symptoms are severe you should find a therapist to work with directly. If you do not know of one, you can use the following national organizations referral services. Most therapists are using telepsychology (remote therapy by video) and thus it should be much easier to find someone who is licensed in the state you live in (which is typically a requirement for remote therapy).

www.abct.org
www.academyofct.org
www.adaa.org

SUBMIT A QUESTION

If you would like to submit a question or issue for us to consider and respond to in a future update you can submit it [here](#)

SUBMIT YOUR EMAIL TO RECEIVE AUTOMATIC UPDATES

If you would like to receive weekly updates that include new information via email, rather than checking back at this site on your own in the future, you can submit your email [here](#)

USEFUL ARTICLES ON COVID RELATED ISSUES

While there are thousands of articles out there on these topics it can get overwhelming. We thought the listed below are particularly good must reads from a variety of sources.

ADVICE TO MANAGE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

INFORMATION TO HELP WITH YOUR ANXIETY PROVOKING THOUGHTS

<https://elemental.medium.com/if-youre-feeling-overwhelmed-here-s-a-science-backed-way-to-take-control-a9650718365c>

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/think-about-the-best-case-scenario-how-to-manage-coronavirus-anxiety?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

<https://newpaltz.edu/media/idmh/covid-19/IDMH%20COVID19%20Community%20Stress%20Management%20Tip%20Sheet%202020%20Final.pdf>

HOW TO MANAGE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING AND QUARANTINE

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/opinion/scott-kelly-coronavirus-isolation.html>

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/ten-tips-scientists-who-have-spent-months-isolation-180974547/?utm_source=smithsonianmag&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20200405-Weekender&spMailingID=42188561&spUserID=NzQwNDU2NTU3NzkS1&spJobID=1740515199&spReportId=MTc0MDUxNTE5OQS2

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/well/family/coronavirus-loneliness-isolation-social-distancing-elderly.html>

HOW TO DEAL WITH GRIEF: MISSING THE WAY THINGS WERE

https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief?fbclid=IwAR0kOOWk-kKECz_5R8THiKwbjU1h6OIZ8MHfKIDmDkrQgYKkr706E2N4ook

https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/nostalgia-before-coronavirus-missing-the-recent-past/609196/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=atlantic-daily-newsletter&utm_content=20200401&silverid-ref=NDM4MDY5OTI2NTg3S0

ADVICE TO MANAGE RELATIONSHIPS

HOW TO KEEP QUARANTINE FROM RUINING YOUR MARRIAGE

https://ideas.ted.com/how-to-keep-quarantine-from-ruining-your-marriage/?utm_source=recommendation&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=explore&utm_term=ideas-blog-1

HOW TO SPEAK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>

VERY PRACTICAL HOW TO ADVICE

HOW TO OPEN AND HANDLE PACKAGES SAFELY

<https://thewirecutter.com/blog/coronavirus-packages/>

HOW TO GET FOOD

https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-how-get-food-safely/608008/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=atlantic-daily-newsletter&utm_content=20200318&silverid-ref=MzEwMTkwMTM3ODg3S0

HOW TO STOP TOUCHING YOUR FACE

<https://theconversation.com/how-to-stop-touching-your-face-to-minimize-spread-of-coronavirus-and-other-germs-133683>

HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN CLOTH MASK

<https://www.nytimes.com/article/how-to-make-face-mask-coronavirus.html>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfyTDy_Vlek