

Be your own Cheerleader: a Compassionate, Encouraging Approach to Manage Stress

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Feeling stressed and overwhelmed from time to time is absolutely normal; we all experience such feelings when life's demands overcome our perceived or objective capacity – in terms of time, strength, mental or emotional space, skills, and support from others.

Stress can also be layered with anxiety, especially when uncertainty about future outcomes dominates our thoughts. To some degree, we have all been feeling anxious since we found ourselves trapped in the global pandemic, afraid of getting sick with Covid-19, having to isolate from our families, friends, coworkers, and dropping activities we enjoy or take for granted like a haircut or a handshake, and important medical visits and procedures we've either been delaying or pursuing with extreme concern and extra cautions. As social beings, humans suffer in isolation, and especially our elderly and our youth.

Many of us experienced getting sick with Covid or know someone directly who contracted the disease, and may be experiencing lingering effects. 600,000 families in the USA alone lost a loved one to the virus and experienced powerlessness, grief, and the heartbreak of not being able to be with their loved ones, and had to forgo gathering for a memorial service, no hugs, no support, or shoulders to cry on.

We know from research that stress that persists over prolonged periods of time can cause our body-mind to start showing symptoms of discomfort and dis-regulation, which we can interpret as alarm bells. We need to then pay attention and listen to our bodies.

Our response to stress can affect our emotional health and interfere with relationships and normal daily activities, like accomplishing tasks, focusing, making decisions, and remembering. Too much stress can weaken our bodies' immune system, increase our risk for physical illness, or make existing medical conditions worse. Prolonged stress can keep cortisol levels high and create inflammation in our tissues and cells, a major culprit in generating disease (Creswell, 2012).

Anxiety can be one of the alarm bells. One might feel worried, afraid, on edge, overwhelmed, or out of control. In the body it might manifest as a "knot" or tightness in the solar plexus area, shallow breathing, racing heart rate, elevated blood pressure, headache, tight jaw, neck, and/or shoulders.

Or it can show up as anger, irritation, or impatience, often directed outward. Or it might turn inward as feeling sad, down, helpless, or guilty, fatigued, having trouble sleeping. In fact, "fighting" stress can be exhausting and perpetuate the cycle of fatigue and helplessness.

Unchecked or unskilled coping behaviors that might help short term quickly become maladaptive and detrimental if persistent, like overeating or skipping meals, working too much or procrastinating, giving in to passive activities like binge-watching tv, couch-surfing, shopping, to even becoming dependent on smoking, drinking alcohol, or using drugs.

Resilience is innate in human beings, but it needs to be fostered, nurtured, encouraged, and supported; there are many modalities and tools to help us build our resilience muscles, healthy responses to stress, and uplift our spirits short and long term, so we can be also better supporters of others.

As we get to know ourselves, we become aware of less desirable and detrimental states on the onset and with practice, we can switch to a truly helpful, nurturing mode.

Gratitude - Research shows that by practicing gratitude daily creates a positive outlook and benefits our health. We can practice gratitude by identifying and journaling about one positive experience or item to counteract the very natural tendency to pay attention to what is not working, an evolutionary feature of our survival instinct which protects us by alerting us to potentially dangerous situations. A post-it note on the bathroom mirror works too!

Enjoy this 10 min Gratitude meditation:

<https://www.mindful.org/a-10-minute-gratitude-practice-to-notice-shift-and-rewire-your-brain/>

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction / MBSR – a modality which trains us to cultivate present moment awareness in mind and have us tune in to our body sensations. It helps us notice and decrease ruminating, it supports our reframing, our focus on the here and now where we can investigate, accept, make choices and act. Identifying personal strengths and areas of vulnerability can help us be more effective and also recognize when we need to ask for help or get into learning mode.

Yoga and breathwork practiced with skillful guidance can be truly transformative and benefit us in body, mind and spirit. Simply slowing down our breathing, with even longer exhales, and moving our bodies with the breath shifts us to our parasympathetic nervous system, activates the vagus nerve, lower our blood pressure, as we journey from anxiety to a more peaceful and healthier state.

Art making whether it is solo or with other people is a great activity to relax, play, focus, find new ways to see our world, create some distance from a stressful experience, take safe risks, learn to accept, and possibly transform our creation and ourselves in the process.

“It’s important that we share our experiences with other people. Your story will heal you and your story will heal somebody else. When you tell your story, you free yourself and give other people permission to acknowledge their own story.” — Iyanla Vanzant

Through art we have participated and encouraged communities in making colorful banners with uplifting messages to hang outside balconies and windows.



Here is a brief videoclip for inspiration: Banners and Flags

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf0OtH2ozfo>

Move – keep moving in nature whenever possible or at home with plenty of videos and zoom classes, many at no cost. Gardening can be a great way to get your physical activity in nature, uplifting, satisfying, and adding some healthy ingredients to our meals. Even gathering with family and friends via zoom for a meal, or an exercise, yoga, or dance class helps us maintain the camaraderie of the shared experience, plus the endorphins and relaxation. Put on your favorite tunes when doing house chores.

Connections - Use what technology you have available to stay connected to people you care about, and also reach out to neighbors and to the global community; a simple creative idea I learned about has been used during the pandemic in Colombia: in the poorest sections of Bogota, families would hang a red rag or t-shirt outside their doors or windows, to let neighbors and aid workers know they needed help, food, and/or medical care. Very moving and effective.

Nurturing Nutrition – easy gathering ingredients and cooking following recommendations, research, and tasty recipes at Mary Hollander’s Reality-Based Nutrition blog <https://www.realitybasednutrition.com/>, following Hippocrates’ motto: "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food".

Kindness - “Be kind whenever possible – it’s always possible”. ~ H.H. The Dalai Lama. A kind act or words which bridge the gap, notice a lovely accessory, acknowledge a positive feature, or make another person feel heard, seen, and validated can change us from the inside out. Include yourself in choosing who to be kind towards 😊

Modalities and Class Resources, safe for cancer patients, are at <http://sdcri.org/educational-links/> and www.NancysList.org .