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Staying Calm in the time of Coronavirus

By Collin Lodico, Ph.D.

These are strange times. People all over the world are being ordered to stay home and told not to go to work, not to go to restaurants, not to see friends and to not even see some family members. The term social distancing wasn't even in our vocabulary until recently and now we hear about it constantly. We see people hoarding and acting as if grave danger surrounds us. One of the consequences of all this is overwhelming fear and anxiety which is not good for our health and wellbeing. You may feel defenseless and vulnerable but there is plenty that you can do to control your fears and lower your stress levels. There may never be a more important time to do so.

Physical/behavioral Coping will help lower the stress response that is being triggered. A simple but effective thing to do throughout the day is stop, take a few deep breaths where you really fill your lungs and then let those breaths out in a slow and steady fashion. This has been shown to reduce sympathetic nervous system activity which is causing the feelings of stress in your body. Exercise is another great way to lower stress in the body. Get your heartrate up for 30 minutes with moderate exercise. When you are done exercising, the body automatically goes into a more relaxed state with reduced sympathetic nervous system activity. Other physical/behavioral coping strategies to try are meditation, yoga, and progressive muscle relaxation. Look up these strategies online and give them a try. They have all been shown to lower stress. Another behavioral coping strategy is Limit Exposure. Turn off the television, quit reading news articles etc. for most of the day. You only need to check the news daily to stay up to speed on any new developments. Instead engage in fun activities that will improve your mood. Distraction is a good way to cope with chronic stressors. It is definitely not helpful or healthy to sit and think about an ongoing stressor all day long. This will result in chronic stress that will lead to exhaustion and depression. It is better to give our minds a break and think about other things. So, distract

your mind with hobbies, activities, goals, silliness and humor. Don't forget humor. Laughter has been shown to lower stress and improve mood. Finally, it is also healthy to get outside in nature. Studies show that being in nature lowers stress and encourages a sense of wellbeing.

Cognitive Coping strategies can also lower the stress response and make you feel better. Cognitive strategies are all about controlling your thinking. The goal is to think rationally, calmly, and optimistically. Remind yourself often that even in this serious situation that the odds are overwhelmingly in your favor that you will be okay. Remind yourself that taking the preventative measures makes it even more likely that you will be okay. Tell yourself often that being fearful and highly anxious is not helpful to you or anyone around you. Reassure yourself and those around you that we will get through this. Stay away from thinking about worst case scenarios. This is poison for the mind and will certainly trigger a stress response. A lot of people do this with "what if" thinking. They spend large amounts of time thinking "What if this horrible thing happens? Or, what if that horrible thing happens?" Stay away from these "alarm" messages where you are really just telling yourself that you are not okay. Thoughts like "What are we going to do? I can't believe this is happening to me" are also "alarm" messages that activate heightened stress. These thoughts usually have a desperate tone to them. Remember, your thoughts are the key to your emotions. Negative thinking leads to negative feelings. You can work on controlling your thoughts. Kick out the negative thoughts and replace them with rational, calm, optimistic thoughts. Reassure yourself and others as much as possible.

Finally, **Social/Emotional Coping** can be very helpful. Social support is so important in helping us get through difficult times. The lockdowns and social distancing present a challenge to getting the support we need. However, we can still reach out to friends and family by phone, text, chat, Facetime, etc. Talk about your fears and feelings and let others provide support and comfort. Also remember to make an effort to reach out to others who may be struggling so that you can provide support, comfort, and a nice distraction from the difficulties of the current situation for them. We are social creatures and we need to lean on each other in times like this.

It is important for all of us to work on healthy coping every day and encourage healthy coping in those around us every day. To minimize the spread of coronavirus we are engaged in social distancing. To minimize the spread of fear and anxiety we need to practice social reassurance. Just as stress can be passed on from one person to another so can comfort. This comfort can bring a sense of calm in a difficult time.