



## 10 Tips for Using Mindfulness to Cope with Coronavirus Stress

*Christina M. Luberto, PhD*

*\* Note that these are educational tips and do not provide clinical or therapeutic advice*

Feelings of heightened stress and anxiety are to be expected right now. We are physically isolated from one another; may have worries about the health and security of ourselves and loved ones; are out of our typical day-to-day routines; and there is uncertainty about what will happen next and when things will return to normal. But while some stress is helpful, excessive stress is not. Mindfulness strategies may help to manage stress.

Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment with an attitude of openness and curiosity. It is the opposite of being on “automatic pilot” and worrying about the future or past. Mindfulness is the first step to making healthy choices about how to cope.

Mindfulness practices and ideas can be used in several ways:

- 1. Practice mindfulness.** We can use short mindfulness practices like awareness of breath to calm the mind and body. Mindfulness practices elicit the relaxation response, which turns off the excessive stress response. The more we practice, the more it helps. If you are new to mindfulness, it may be helpful to start by interspersing several short (3 minute) practices throughout the day – perhaps before or after meals. Staying focused on the present moment also keeps us from worrying too much about the future; even when the present moment is uncomfortable, our worries about the future tend to be even more difficult. We can practice mindfulness in neutral moments and when we have increases in stress.
- 2. Focus on what is within your control.** When times are uncertain, mindfulness can help us focus on what is controllable: our behaviors and reactions. While we can't control the situations around us, we can control how we respond. This is where we should follow CDC and WHO guidelines to take steps to stay healthy (e.g., washing hands, social distancing), and where regular health behaviors come into play (e.g., regular sleep, healthy diet, physical activity). Knowing that we have done what we can to take care of ourselves can help us release the worries that creep in.  
  
Another important behavior is to limit media exposure. We can set boundaries such as only checking the news once/day for 5-10 minutes, limiting social media, getting news from legitimate sources, and asking friends and family to please not share constant updates.
- 3. Stay connected virtually.** Although we cannot be in physical contact, we can connect with others virtually by phone, email, or video (e.g., FaceTime or Zoom). We can be intentional about this, scheduling times to “get together” and being mindful of what we discuss – setting limits for the amount of time we talk about coronavirus (e.g., 15-20 minutes) and focusing the rest of the time on other meaningful conversations. Mindfulness can also help us to stay present in these interactions, really being with people rather than off worrying about other things, so we get more positive emotion and connection.
- 4. Broaden your perspective.** When stressed, we tend to have negative thoughts. Mindfulness can help us to notice these thoughts and broaden our thinking to include adaptive perspectives, such as gratitude and optimism. This can include acknowledging the efforts of healthcare workers and considering ways you are supported in this situation. Even if negative thoughts are true, it may not be helpful to keep thinking about them; finding adaptive perspectives can reduce the extra stress.



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- 5. Find opportunities for growth.** From a more adaptive perspective, we can identify opportunities for positive growth. Perhaps we have more time and flexibility to connect with others, build our social support network, develop new hobbies, or learn from books or podcasts. We may be able to reconnect with our values (the things that really matter to us) and find creative ways to pursue them from home. We can ask ourselves, “what has this experience been teaching me and how can I use it to grow?”
- 6. Have compassion for yourself.** There is no need to blame or shame ourselves for feeling stressed right now. When noticing moments of increased stress, we can be mindful that we are experiencing distress, place a hand on our hearts to soothe ourselves, consider what we would say to a loved one who is upset, and offer these loving thoughts to ourselves. If you are a caregiver, healthcare worker, or community worker continuing to go to work, you can remember that you are doing the best you can in a difficult situation and consider ways to take time for yourself.
- 7. Build compassion for others.** We can also reduce stress by focusing less on ourselves and more on others. After taking steps for self-care, we can more easily care for others. It may help to remember that the intention of social distancing is based on care and concern for others, particularly the most vulnerable. We may find benefit by supporting others and remembering that we are all in this together and there are lots of people doing their best to help.  
  
Loving kindness meditation can help build compassion for others. This practice involves offering loving statements to the self and others. We can practice this in a formal meditation or get creative, repeating loving kindness phrases (“may we be happy, may we be healthy, may we be safe”) a few times while washing our hands, so we can build positive emotions for others while also taking care of ourselves.
- 8. Consider acceptance.** Acceptance means acknowledging the reality of the situation so we can respond appropriately. It does not mean we like the situation and it does not mean we give up. Acceptance offers a way to reduce our struggle by acknowledging what is present, understanding that it is not permanent, and choosing how we respond. Trying to resist reality keeps stress high and can make it worse, and can keep us from engaging in important healthy behaviors.
- 9. Regulate emotions.** While it may be uncomfortable, acknowledging and feeling emotions is an important way to reduce stress. Allowing ourselves to notice how we're feeling, label the emotion (e.g., fear, sadness), and physically feel its sensations in the body (e.g., tense, heavy) helps the emotion to pass more quickly. It also interrupts the negative thinking that makes stress worse, and can keep us from using unhealthy coping strategies (e.g., smoking, stress eating). Using mindfulness to become grounded in the body is a way to check-in with emotions. Additional ways to manage strong emotions include journaling, dancing, exercising, yoga, and relaxation.
- 10. Get support.** We can remember to reach out to supportive family and friends to share worries, and also solutions, with each other. We may need emotional support (someone to listen to us), informational support (someone to give us accurate information), or tangible support (someone to bring us resources like groceries). It is understandable that people who tended to have high anxiety before coronavirus may need more support during these times. Mental health providers may be able to offer virtual visits to provide professional help while maintaining social distancing.