

Taking care of ourselves during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Since early March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic,¹ our lives have been drastically altered. As the number of COVID-19 cases continued to rise, businesses closed, jobs disappeared, store shelves were emptied, sporting events were postponed or cancelled, the economy tanked, and social distancing became a new way of life.

COVID-19 has created uncertainty in our lives, both professionally and personally. This can be difficult to face because we are programmed to desire certainty, to want to know what is happening around us, and to notice threatening people and/or situations.² Uncertainty can lead us to feel stressed or overwhelmed due to a sense of losing control.² Our mental and physical well-being can begin to deteriorate. We can feel more frazzled, angry, helpless, sad, frustrated, or confused,² and we can become more isolated. These thoughts and feelings can make our daily activities more cumbersome.

To maintain our own mental and physical well-being, we must give ourselves permission to change the narrative from “the patient is always first” to “the patient always—but not always first.”³ Doing so will allow us to continue to help our patients.³ Despite the pervasive uncertainty, taking the following actions can help us to maintain our own mental and physical health.²⁻⁵

Minimize news that causes us to feel worse. COVID-19 news dominates the headlines. The near-constant, ever-changing stream of

reports can cause us to feel overwhelmed and stressed. We should get information only from trusted sources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the WHO, and do so only once or twice a day. We should seek out only facts, and not focus on rumors that could worsen our thoughts and feelings.

Social distancing does not mean social isolation. To reduce the spread of COVID-19, social distancing has become necessary, but we should not completely avoid each other. We can still communicate with others via texting, e-mail, social media, video conferences, and phone calls. Despite not being able to engage in socially accepted physical greetings such as handshakes or hugs, we should not hesitate to verbally greet each other, albeit from a distance. In addition, we can still go outside while maintaining a safe distance from each other.

Keep a routine. Because we are creatures of habit, a routine (even a new one) can help sustain our mental and physical well-being. We should continue to:

- remain active at our usual times
- get adequate sleep and rest

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- eat nutritious food
- engage in physical activity
- maintain contact with our family and friends
- continue treatments for any physical and/or mental conditions.

Avoid unhealthy coping strategies, such as binge-watching TV shows, because these can worsen psychological and physical well-being. You are likely to know what to do to “de-stress” yourself, and you should not hesitate to keep yourself psychologically and physically fit. Continue to engage in CDC-recommended hygienic practices such as frequently washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, avoiding close contact with people who are sick, and staying at home when you are sick. Seek mental health and/or medical treatment as necessary.

Put the uncertainty in perspective. Hopefully, there will come a time when we will resume our normal lives. Until then, we should acknowledge the uncertainty without immediately reacting to the worries that it creates. It is important to take a step back

and think before reacting. This involves challenging ourselves to stay in the present and resist projecting into the future. Use this time for self-care, reflection, and/or catching up on the “to-do list.” We should be kind to ourselves and those around us. As best we can, we should show empathy to others and try to help our friends, families, and colleagues who are having a difficult time managing this crisis.

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To best help our patients, we must give ourselves permission to maintain our own mental and physical health