We appreciate your service and the sacrifices you are making to ensure our community’s health and safety. We offer the following suggestions and resources to guide you in caring for yourself and in staying connected in this challenging time.

Emily Pichler, PhD, Postdoctoral Fellow, Psychological Services, UVM Medical Center
Shira Louria, PhD, Staff Psychologist, Psychological Services, UVM Medical Center
Marlene Maron, PhD, ABPP, Psychological Services, UVM Medical Center

The current coronavirus pandemic is a challenge for each of us. News of the spread of COVID-19 is daunting and overwhelming. We worry about the welfare of our patients and loved ones, our own health, and the economic impact on our families, neighbors, and coworkers.

Health care workers, particularly on the front lines, may experience a level of distress and anxiety that feels new and very jarring. Some might feel similarly to the way they did in the face of previous trauma.

Emotional responses to this pandemic are wide ranging and the impact of social distancing has begun to have a significant impact.

We are accustomed to caring for others who feel vulnerable and frightened. We signed up for a lifetime of service. And yet, we are also human. We are vulnerable and struggling with what we are experiencing and may face in the weeks and months ahead.

So, what can we do?

We can remind ourselves of why we do the work we do. We can work together and creatively to observe social distancing wherever possible, like using eHealth tools for patient visits. When it is essential to be on site, we can take action to minimize risk to our patients and others.

Doing what we can to flatten the curve and to be compassionate, caring providers, neighbors and community members may help to save lives and remind us of the best of humanity. Our choices also help conserve desperately needed resources.

Our region has shown amazing resilience, kindness and community in times of intense strain in the past; we are good at doing the right thing and doing it together. We are not alone. We will get through this together.

We hope these tips and techniques can help you manage your stress during this unprecedented time.

continued...
GROUND YOURSELF

Notice what is true about the present moment—where you are, who you are with, how your body feels. Focus on the facts and the details. Notice the sounds of the birds, or the people around you. Feel the temperature of the air inside and out. If you feel under the weather, describe “I feel an itch in my throat,” or “as I pay attention to my headache, I notice I breathe less deeply and start to feel woozy.” In Exercises such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation can activate your parasympathetic nervous system and reduce the rumination and worry that prolong the body’s stress response. Plenty of evidence-based mindfulness and relaxation products are currently available for free, especially for health care workers.

IDENTIFY WHAT IS AND IS NOT IN YOUR CONTROL

One way is to draw a big circle. On the inside, write everything that is within your control: where you go, how often you wash your hands, how close you sit to others, and how often you check the news are some examples. Outside the circle, write everything that is not in your control. Reckoning with the limitations of our human control can be challenging. Faith and spirituality may comfort you and guide your personal process of finding your place as a vulnerable person on this planet.

TAKE ACTION ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

Healthy anxiety urges us to take action to anticipate and reduce potential threats. Respect yourself and your loved ones by taking action that is sound and may help protect your family or community. Set a realistic goal and give yourself permission to be done preparing when you have done what you can. Celebrate and recognize your efforts, and the efforts of those around you. We recommend following the guidelines provided by the CDC, Vermont or New York or on UVM Health Network’s COVID-19 page.

BE AWARE OF YOUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Connect to a friend, family member or professional when feeling alone, scared, or overwhelmed. Emotional support in the form of sharing, reflecting, understanding and processing with a trusted person can reduce vicarious trauma and burnout. You may find comfort in connecting with others in your spiritual community or other groups.

During this time of stress, you might notice a resurgence of old habits or ways of coping. In times of uncertainty we tend to adhere to familiar frameworks that serve to organize our experience and that have the capacity to function as containing, familiar, and safe grounds. Hold onto helpful and healthy habits and share them with loved ones, coworkers, and your community! When unhealthy or unhelpful habits take hold, seek support and recognize that these reactions are efforts of your very human body to manage stress and threat.

INCREASE YOUR CONNECTEDNESS...

.....at home and at work. We know from research that social connections are vital to keep us feeling hopeful and safe, and to support a balanced immune response\(^1\). Helping others can activate some of the same beneficial responses as receiving care from others. At work, care for others when you can, and let others care for you by letting them know about your feelings, reactions, or needs for a laugh or distraction. At home, reach out to others by video chat, telephone and group messaging. Group exercise classes, discussion groups, and even dance parties are popping up on video chat platforms!

ALLOW YOURSELF TO SET BOUNDARIES...

...about information consumption and how much you talk about coronavirus. For information seekers, reading and listening to the news, media and social media can be a helpful way to manage stress and stay sharp. Decide for yourself your own limits to COVID-19 information exposure, and encourage others to do the same. These boundaries could take the form of taking your information only from one or two reputable sources, only during certain times of day, for a set amount of time per day or before worry starts to build. We encourage you to talk about your boundaries with colleagues in the same way you’d tell them about a new hobby, television show or exercise routine you have adopted. Remember that it is your job to stick to your boundaries—for example, “I have to tell you, I am trying this new thing where I look at coronavirus news only from the CDC and the Times to see if I feel less panicked at the end of the day. So I’m going to do my charting over here for a bit while you two talk about it.”

ATTEND TO YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

The connection between emotional well-being and the immune system is well established\(^2\), and we can take a few practical lessons from the research. In addition to

continued...
everything you know to do to support your immune system (take care of your body, get adequate sleep, and eat nourishing foods), consider adding yoga, other forms of exercise, meditation, social connection and mental health treatment. Also know that if you do get sick, even a low-level illness response may feel like depression and change the way you see the world while your body is fighting the threat. Since physical activity is one of the most effective stress management and mood enhancement tools, particularly during this exhausting time, moving your body and spending time outdoors to enjoy fresh air and the beauty of our surroundings are especially important. If you feel you can’t get outside and maintain adequate social distance, consider the many YouTube and other virtual yoga and fitness classes that are increasingly available.

**SEPARATE WORRY FROM PROBLEM-SOLVING**

Worry and anxious actions can feel like solving problems, but are mostly about making the feeling of anxiety go away temporarily. For many people, worrying and actions like over-focusing on news can increase our distress and take our minds away from the people and activities we value the most. Because these habits happen automatically, awareness is key! Get to know your own signals that you are worrying—like rapidly shifting attention, furrowed brow, others telling you so—and practice choosing to ground yourself again, and to connect with others.

**APPRECIATE THE GOOD**

Stress can bring out our vulnerabilities, but also our strengths. How are your family, friends, and community showing their strength during this crisis? When someone shows you kindness, see if you can really take that kindness in and let the person know you appreciate them. Take time to look around you and notice any safety and comforts you do have. Savor moments of peace and connection. This may be a time to reflect upon the many people who have worked to further our safety, health, and freedom across generations.

**LAUGH, PLAY, AND ENJOY ART AND MUSIC.**

This is a great time to listen to comedy shows, laugh and play. Several museums, zoos and theatres have offered free access to virtual tours, Broadway shows, and operas. Some libraries are offering free downloads of books. Great works of art might be just what you need to remind you of the beauty, richness and brilliance that is still out there. If you have more unstructured time, consider channeling your urges, impulses, and difficult emotions into creativity: make art with what you have at home, write poetry, take photos, or expand your cooking repertoire!

Use this opportunity to reflect on what matters to you and take action. This time of global crisis invites us to ask, “What do I care about?” and “What kind of person do I want to be?” given the stark realities of illness, change, and loss. It takes strength to approach a crisis, feel fear, and decide to keep trying. Be courageous in ways that matter to you. Reach out to those to whom your voice may be a comfort. Think about how you will want to tell your story of this time to future generations, and let your wisdom guide you.

---


---

**We are good at doing the right thing and doing it together.**

**We are not alone.**

**We will get through this together.**

---

**The University of Vermont Health Network Medical Group**