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Dealing with Stress and Anxiety

By Lauren Parsons

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The pressure of the covid-19 situation is causing a great deal of distress and anxiety. As human beings we crave certainty – it's one of our fundamental human needs. As the uncertainty continues, it's not surprising that you, your family and your colleagues may be affected and feel stressed or anxious.

More than ever before, we need to stand together, look out for one another and be mindful of our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing to remain calm and resilient.

1. Know that stress can be your friend

First of all, it's critical to understand that **stress is not necessarily bad for you. It's your perception of stress that really matters.** Studies have shown that stress itself isn't harmful to your body, but actually the belief that stress is harmful, which is harmful. Watch Kelly McGonigal's TED talk "[How to Make Stress Your Friend](#)" which explains this brilliantly.

When you see stress as positive and helpful in times of pressure, and understand that it's your body's way of responding and performing at your peak you can actually thrive despite difficult situations. That being said, staying in fight or flight mode all the time is unhelpful. This leads me onto the next point.

2. Oscillate

Your body is designed to deal with stress, it's just not designed to stay on high alert all the time.

When your body is in fight of flight mode, it down regulates what it deems non-essential functions, such as your digestive system and immune system. So right now, when you need to optimise your immunity, it's vital to engage your body's natural relaxation response to avoid compromising your immune function.

To cope under pressure, you simply need to oscillate from that high performance state to a recovery state, and to do so regularly. The key is to engage your body's natural relaxation response.

One of the best ways to do that is by influencing the one part of your autonomic nervous system that you have some control over, and that is your breathing.

3. Breathe Intentionally

Diaphragmatic breathing is a powerful tool during periods of stress. Athletes, performers and even military Special Forces use breathing techniques to shift their physiology, so they can perform at their best.

The great power of breathing is that it's the one part of your autonomic nervous system that you can influence. When you do so, it switches you out of the 'fight, flight, freeze' sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and into the 'rest, repair, restore' parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) where you can remain calm, perform at your best and make wise decisions.



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Relax your shoulders and breathe in through your nose allowing your belly to expand like a balloon, then breathe out slowly through your mouth allowing the belly to relax back to neutral. Keep your chest, shoulders and hips relaxed. It may feel unnatural at first, so try to relax into it.

Take 5 slow, deep breaths at various points throughout your day. Link this to a routine task as a trigger to remind you regularly throughout the day, for example each time you wash your hands. The more often you come back to deep diaphragmatic breathing the more time your body will spend in that PNS state. This is important both for your mental and physical health and to improve immune function.

4. Build a Resilient Mindset

Your physical wellbeing stems from your mental wellbeing. During period of pressure and uncertainty it is vital to understand common thinking traps and avoid them. Here are some keys to a resilient mindset:

a. Focus on what you can control

There will be plenty of things outside of your control, and others that you can control or influence. Direct your thoughts to focus on the things you have some control over. For example, your response, your attitude, what you do right now in this moment, what you eat, how you move, who you talk to etc.

b. Monitor what you feed your thoughts

This is especially pertinent when so many people are closely following various media throughout the day. Be selective and use quality sources of information so as not to get caught up in the fear the media can create.

c. Ask yourself "is this helpful or harmful"

For example, consider whether it would be beneficial to switch off the news feed and get outdoors for a walk, make a healthy snack, phone a colleague, play with your children and do the thing that is most helpful for you right now.

d. Avoid catastrophizing

Pay attention to your thoughts and notice if you are jumping from one worst possible outcome to the next. For example, what if I get sick, what if I lose my job, what if the economy never recovers, what if I never get a job again, what if we lose the house...

The majority of our fears are usually very unlikely to occur. The quickest antidote to catastrophizing is reminding yourself of the facts. The government is putting a whole lot of support in place. The world has recovered from downturns before. The banks and IRD are being flexible with payments. Above all, choose to focus on what you are grateful for.

5. Adopt and Attitude of Gratitude

Gratitude is one of the most powerful ways to shift how you're feeling. Your brain cannot focus on two things at once. When you're feeling worried or anxious and you choose to focus on what you're grateful for, it instantly shifts your thoughts and as a result your emotions

Pause right now and think of three things you're thankful for. Aim to adopt a gratitude practise as part of your morning routine, around the dinner table or before you go to sleep at night to keep refocusing your thoughts.



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6. Be Present and Mindful

Often we spend a lot of time in our own heads either replaying situations from the past or worrying about the future. This can be mentally exhausting. An antidote to spending all this time in the past or future in your thoughts, is to focus on the present moment. Fears are only future possible realities, so when you bring yourself back to the present you overcome them.

Get in touch with how you feel physically and pay extra attention to your surroundings. Tune in to how your body feels, how you're breathing, what shapes and colours you can see and what sounds you can hear nearby and further afield.

7. Embrace Laughter

Laughter is fantastic for your body's physiology. It's never more important to add laughter to your day than right now. Share jokes, pull faces in the mirror until you laugh or watch funny videos on youtube, such as like Michael McIntyre's "Sellotape and scissors" or "People without children have no idea."

Make a point of smiling at people as much as you can, even if it's via technology. We're wired with things called mirror neurons that make us want to smile back, and the more you smile, the more you send messages to your brain that you are calm and happy.

8. Shift Your Posture to Shift Your Mood

Your physiology directly affects your psychology. In other words, how you hold your body changes how you think and feel and can instantly boost your mood.

An incredibly simple yet effective technique to feel more in control is to adopt expansive postures. Often known as power posing, stand with your feet firmly planted at hip width, chin up with your hands

on your hips or arms raised in a 'V' for 1-2 minutes. Try it out, right now. This shifts your physiology and releases hormones that help you feel happy, calm and confident.

Find out more by watching Amy Cuddy's TED talk "[How your body language may shape who you are](#)"

One thing is certain amidst all the uncertainty – we will get through this.

Take good care of your loved ones, colleagues and friends and most of all take good care of you.

Kia Kaha Kia Maia, Kia Manawanui

Be Strong, Be Steadfast, Be Willing

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Lauren is an award-winning Wellbeing Specialist who believes that everyone deserves to thrive. She is passionate about equipping and inspiring people to truly boost their health and happiness. With 20 years' experience in the health and wellbeing profession in New Zealand she is a sought after speaker, coach and consultant.

TEDx speaker, Author of *real food less fuss*, founder of the online programme *Get Fit Feel Fabulous* and the *Snack on Exercise* movement. Lauren helps busy people re-discover how to feel vibrant, confident and energised. Based in the Manawatu, New Zealand, she travels regularly and specialises in helping organisations create a high-energy, peak-performance team culture, which enables people to thrive.

For more see www.LaurenParsonsWellbeing.com