# MANAGING STRESS DURING COVID-19

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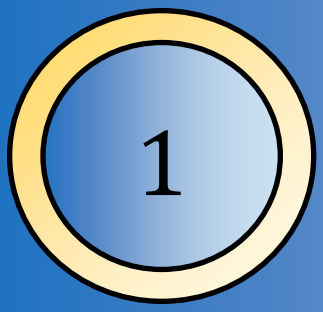
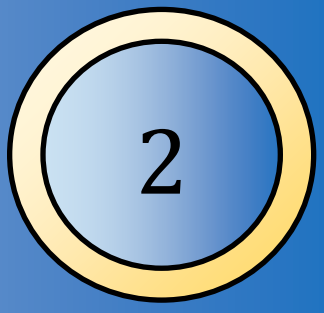
The current situation with COVID-19 is a stressful one and presents a number of new challenges that most of us have never faced before. Although the specific challenges vary across individuals, the most common difficulties we are facing include risk of illness, threats to our financial security, the uncertainty of the situation, the loss of our regular routines, and the loss of our social connections. With all of these stresses occurring at the same time and quite suddenly, it's normal to feel some anxiety. However, by implementing some healthy coping strategies we can help improve our mental health and get through this together!




**Create a new routine:** This one isn't exciting, but it is absolutely necessary. If your regular routines have been disrupted and your days unstructured, it is essential to bring some routine back into your life. Wake up at your usual time, get dressed, schedule your daily activities into a calendar, and set goals for the day. Lack of structure opens up the door for depression as well as a host of other mental health difficulties. Although your routine might look different than usual, having some consistency in your life is important and necessary.

**Limit your exposure to news:** Although staying informed (using credible sources) is helpful since the situation is evolving, constantly being connected to the news is likely to increase stress with limited additional benefit. Limit your news intake to 30 minutes per day.



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**Distinguish between current and potential problems:** With so many rapid changes, you are likely facing some daily problems that you need to figure out. Focus your attention on problem solving *current* problems (e.g., I need to keep my kids occupied while I work from home) and stay away from *potential* problems (e.g., what if I get sick and die). Current problems are things that are happening now while potential problems are 'what if's' that may never happen.

**Practice gratitude:** It's easy to get bogged down with the daily stresses and negativity of the situation, but research shows that noticing the things we are grateful for each day has positive impacts on our mood and mental health. Every day, write 1-3 things you are grateful for that day. You can do this in a gratitude journal, in a gratitude jar, use an app (we like *Gratitude*), or come up with your own system. Focusing on things you are grateful for will not only shift your perspective, but your list is also nice to come back to when you're having a bad day.

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**Relax your body:** During times of stress, our bodies often carry a lot of tension, which in turn impacts our minds. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is an exercise that is designed to relax our bodies. It is helpful as a stress management technique as well as to help you fall asleep. Anxiety Canada has a useful "How To" guide (https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/MuscleRelaxation.pdf ) and you can also find a number of PMR videos online.

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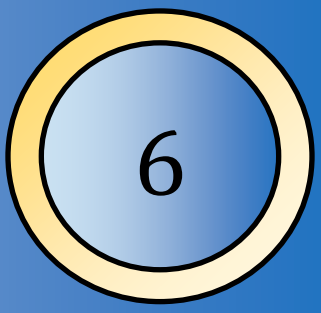
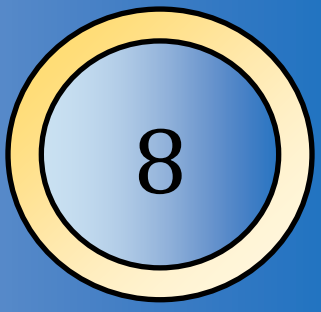
**Stay physically active:** Our gyms are closed and our sports are cancelled,  but that just means we need to get creative (e.g., go for a walk, watch an exercise video, run up and down the stairs, do jumping jacks on your balcony etc.). We all know that exercise is good for our physical health, but it also does wonders for our mental health. Regular exercise is effective at reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and can work as well as antidepressant medication! Set aside at least 30 minutes 3 times per week.



**Physically distance, but don't socially distance:** Although it's important to follow proper distancing guidelines, our social relationships are an important source of support and maintaining those connections is an important part of staying healthy. Set up phone or video chats, do joint activities at a distance (e.g., start a book club, play a trivia game, have a movie night, do a virtual paint nite with your friends etc.), or spend quality time with the people in your home.

**Look for the opportunity:** Although it's easy to focus on the problems and the negative things happening, it can help to look for the opportunity in this situation. For example, do you have a chance to finally do something you usually don't have time for (clean out the basement, call your grandparents, train your dog, do a hobby etc.), spend quality time with family, help someone in need, or volunteer your time. Take this situation, with all it's difficulties, and find the silver lining!

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**Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness is the *practice* of bringing attention and awareness to the current moment, *without judgement* (this is often the part that requires practice since we tend to be experts at judging our experiences). This is most often done through mindful meditation exercises. A good introduction to the idea of mindfulness is the book/app/podcast *10% Happier* by Dan Harris. The app Headspace has also created some meditation exercises called *Weathering the Storm* and has made them free to everyone.

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**Pleasure & accomplishment:** In order to feel good, human beings need both pleasure and accomplishment activities built into their days, and COVID-19 is wreaking havoc on this balance. Pleasure activities are things that you do just for fun or because you enjoy them, while accomplishment activities provide a sense of achievement or mastery. We recommend scheduling a mix of both pleasure and accomplishment activities into every single day. It can help to make a list of both types of activities (like a menu), and then intentionally schedule a couple into each day.

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**Help someone:** Research evidence shows that helping others has benefits for our own mental health and well being. Try to do something to help anther person. For example, do your partner's chores, offer to pick up groceries for an elderly neighbour, donate blood, clean up the garbage in your neighbourhood, or ask a loved one if there is anything you can do to help them out.

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**Get outside:** Although we are socially distancing, walks outside are still allowed (just maintain the recommended distance from people that you meet). Aim to get outside for at least 30 minutes every single day. If you are socially isolating or in quarantine and cannot leave your home, go on your balcony/back yard or open the windows to let in some fresh air.

**Plan what you will do when this passes:** Although this can feel all consuming, remind yourself that this is temporary and it will pass. Make a plan for what you will do when it does. Perhaps you want to throw a party, go on vacation, plan a shopping trip with your friends, or take your nephews to the park. Whatever it is, come up with something special to look forward to when this is behind us.

**Seek professional help:** If you're struggling to cope with the current situation or are looking for help with other mental health difficulties, consider seeking help from a therapist. Many psychology clinics have adopted virtual therapy options to help support our communities.

Additional resources for coping with COVID-19 as well as other mental health concerns can be found on our website: http://waterloocbt.ca/resources/

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# MY ACTION PLAN

Hopefully this guide helped you identify some coping strategies that you can use to deal with this difficult situation. Now it's time to put the strategies into action. Identify what you are already doing that is helping as well as any other strategies (from this guide or elsewhere) that you could try.

**Strategies that I'm already using and want to continue:**

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**New strategies that I can try (include when and how you will do it):**

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**About the Author:** Dr. Dubravka (Dee) Gavric, C.Psych. is the co-founder of the Waterloo CBT Clinic and has years of experience in the treatment of anxiety, OCD, depression and related difficulties.