



Mindfulness for Better Living

Maintaining Mental and Physical Health in Challenging Situations



Monitoring Our Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic

[Holly Tiret, Michigan State University Extension](#) - June 23, 2020

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The past few months have been a whirlwind of emotions for many as we adapt to our new normal during the Covid-19 pandemic. Adapting to change is difficult. Adapting to change during a crisis is even more challenging. Yet adapting to change that seems ongoing is like trying to find your footing in an earthquake. That is how one might describe the rollercoaster of feelings, moods, thoughts as time progresses, and researchers are taking notice as well.

In a March 2020 Letter to the Editor of Brain, Behavior and Immunity, author Montemurro suggests high levels of stress are affecting frontline workers as well as the majority of people. Mental

health professionals are seeing psychological impacts in people who already are dealing with mental health issues and those who have not been previously diagnosed with depression and anxiety. This should be a signal to all to pay attention to one's own mental health as well as monitor the mental health of others.

There is rising concern over an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder and potential for suicides. In the United States, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has a dedicated page on emotional well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. On their page, they have a downloadable tool kit with recommendations to support yourself during social distancing such as being your own advocate by connecting with others, educating yourself, and understanding mental health risks.

Look for symptoms of stress in yourself and those close to you such as: not being able to sleep, sleeping too much, over or under eating, being moody, or being hypervigilant. If you notice these types of behaviors, take action by talking about what is stressing you out. Some refer to this as 'name it to tame it', as described by Dr. Daniel Siegel in his book, "The Whole Brain Child" (2012).

Although we can't change or eliminate stress, research has shown by intentionally changing our response to stress we can increase our resiliency, or a person's ability to bounce back from adversity. Try bringing more fun into your everyday life, watch a comedy, reach out to friends and family virtually, go for a walk or cook a new healthy recipe. Commit to exploring ways to practice mindfulness and meditation online as another healthy way to respond to stress.



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In an article posted in the *Journal of Health Psychology* (2020), author Matias and colleagues suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic has presented a challenge to our own coping mechanisms during crisis of being able to get back to balance of basic human needs (physical, emotional, social). They encourage the benefits of including some physical activity into each day, to whatever extent a person is able in their current physical state. People benefit both physically and emotionally from daily exercise and this helps us maintain or reset our body and mind to a state of balance.

Coping with Loss During Covid-19



[Holly Tiret](#), [Michigan State University Extension](#), and Dr. Kathleen Burns-Jager, MSU Employee Assistance Program - August 12, 2020

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In 1969, [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#) wrote a book about the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Since then there have been numerous books and articles written about grief and loss. Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. There is no predictable beginning or ending to the process.

Normally, friends and family have rituals to recognize and ease pain through funerals, wakes, sympathy cards, casseroles, and spending time together. During the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, many of these rituals have been prohibited, which can lead to added challenging feelings of distress.

Authors Zhai and Du (2020) recently published an article in the journal [Brain, Behavior and Immunity](#). In the article, *Loss and grief amidst COVID-19: A path to adaptation and resilience*, they recognize that many individuals are experiencing significant losses due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They describe different types of loss and caution that not recognizing and finding ways to cope with the stress of loss can lead to disruptions in physical and mental health. The authors discuss five types of loss:

1. Primary loss – such as the death of a loved one.
2. Secondary loss – consequences of primary loss such as companionship, intimacy, or family status.
3. Multiple losses – such as employment, housing, medical insurance.
4. Stigmatized loss – facing shame for contraction and/or transmission of Covid-19.
5. Ambiguous loss – separation from family and friends.

[Dr. Pauline Boss](#) has spent years studying and writing about family stress. In particular, she has helped to bring the subject of ambiguous loss into forefront of social and emotional health and well-being. Ambiguous loss is any loss that is unclear



and therefore has no closure. Boss describes it as a problem that comes from a situation, not from your inner self. The concern is loss without closure denies the family or individual of social acknowledgement or rituals such as a funeral and other normal means of coping as described in the Kübler-Ross model.. Families and individuals struggle to heal and move forward with their lives when closure or moving forward feels quite uncertain.

There are two type of ambiguous loss:

1. Physical absence with psychological presence (missing, disappeared, kidnapped, military deployment, quarantine due to pandemic).
2. Psychological absence with physical presence (traumatic brain injury, coma, dementia, addiction, autism, depression, Alzheimer's disease).

Dr. [Kathleen Burns-Jager](#) who is a Counselor with the MSU Employee Assistance Program shared her thoughts when asked about loss during the Covid-19 outbreak. She notes that some of the losses we are all facing have to do with the interruptions to the family life cycle. This includes the cultural rituals we share during births, deaths, birthdays, holidays, school, vacations, graduations, baby showers, weddings, sports, etc. Many parents are experiencing a collision of roles which involves some loss of freedom. Some have had to adjust to working from home, home schooling and continuing to provide all the home maintenance that comes with raising a healthy family (physically, socially, emotionally).

People are experiencing losses and feelings of uncertainty related to the usual structures of their lives that have been shifted or pulled away indefinitely. She recognizes that part of the problem is that there is not a finite ending to all of this. This type of a loss can be a source of constant stress whereby realizing there will be a new normal, but not knowing what that will be like, or when it will happen makes it hard for people to plan anything or to reassure themselves that things will be okay. It's important for people to ground themselves in their own resilience and remember to accept what is lost but also to look forward to what is possible.

With all this stress that can build up, it is important to focus on ways to build your resilience to stress.

- Develop resiliency and find comfort in the ambiguity – remind yourself that, “It is what it is,” and you will get through this..”
- Use mindfulness to accepting your feelings as they are, when they come up.
- Find a mastery of the controllable in everyday life – cleaning house, cooking, laundry.
- Practice acceptance and letting go – being comfortable with the imperfection of life. No one expects you to be the perfect parent, spouse, significant other, teen...
- Reach out to others – find comfort in community and society. This can be done virtually over the internet, phone calls, and cards and letters.
- Include daily self-care – rest, recreation, accept help, and find humor in life's situations.



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- Share stories – remember the past, share and enjoy pleasant memories.
- Concentrate on making new memories – create new ways to celebrate what is such as host a virtual birthdays/baby showers/weddings, organize celebratory car parades, plan regular virtual family get-togethers.

Maintaining physical health during Covid-19



[Holly Tiret](#) - September 15, 2020

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In an effort to keep patients and health care providers safe during Covid-19, public health messages are by now familiar to most, such as wearing personal protective equipment like masks, practicing social distancing, and hand washing. In a [New England Journal of Medicine article](#), Dr. Lisa Rosenbaum describes how the medical profession has had to quickly adapt to caring for Covid-19 patients while also providing continuity of care for non-Covid-19 patients.

Although there has been a pause on ‘elective procedures’ such as knee surgeries or hernia repairs, other delays may mean life or death. The current environment is a critical reminder to maintain your physical health by increasing your knowledge of risks and preventive measures, maintenance of chronic conditions, and staying up to date with your medical care needs with your primary care provider.

Susan Carr posted an article in [Improve Dx Newsletter](#) in July 2020 that reported the following impacts of Covid-19 due to delayed or missed diagnosis:

- Visits to the emergency department have decreased by as much as 50% in some facilities. People have avoided Emergency Department visits because they are afraid of catching Covid-19 or they are worried about overwhelming the already burdened health care system.
- Emergency Medical Services reported an all-time high number of cardiac arrests in the field. People are waiting too long to seek medical attention for heart issues.
- Emergency Medical Services also reported a four-fold increase in the number of on scene death pronouncements in April 2020.
- A ‘no visitor’ hospital policy added to the fears of the pandemic.
- Care providers put a hold on non-emergency appointments.

What does all this mean to you and how can you assure optimal physical health, even during a pandemic?

- Increase your knowledge about symptoms of heart attack, stroke, and other life-



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threatening conditions. Do not ignore symptoms and seek medical help as soon as possible. Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department. Encourage your family, friends, and neighbors with the same advice to seek medical care should symptoms appear.

- Keep up with your preventive medical care; physicals, blood work, immunizations (Tetanus, Flu vaccine, etc.). Assist others in your care or that you care about to keep up with their routine and preventive healthcare.
- If you have a chronic condition such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or COPD, keep in touch with your healthcare provider on a regular basis. Some chronic conditions require regular medication monitoring and adjustments.
- Educate yourself on the options for virtual healthcare to support your physical health.

In an article posted in [Telemedicine and E-Health](#), the case is stated for increasing and improving virtual visits. During Covid-19, virtual visits keep vulnerable patients safe especially those are in a high-risk category such as older adults and patients with chronic neurological conditions. These authors suggest that combining virtual visits with wearable diagnostic devices can help support health care providers, patients, and their caregivers. Wearable devices can track data for patients with chronic conditions and upload information to medical care providers to be used with telehealth visits.

Things that are already easily monitored include physical activity, blood pressure, electrocardiogram data, and glucose monitoring. Virtual visits can also

work to reduce medical costs and reduce the burden on those patients' caregivers who are responsible for transporting loved ones to appointments. Considering many caregivers fall into a vulnerable population, this is an added benefit to keeping them safe.

The current Covid-19 pandemic is a reminder to all of us to be an active participant in our own healthcare. It is a critical for us to be mindful of our physical health. Keep communicating with your health care team whether that is through timely phone calls, video visits or in person appointments.

Ask your healthcare provider about any wearable devices they may have access to, that may help you track your health conditions. Take responsibility for increasing your knowledge about your risks, prevention, and treatment of chronic conditions. Share information with those who live with you or others you care about to help optimize their physical health.

If you are someone dealing with a chronic condition or you are a caregiver of someone who has chronic condition, you realize the importance of knowing about risks, prevention and treatment of those conditions which includes maintaining good communication with your health care providers. In addition, maintaining physical health may include increasing your circle of support.

One way to do this by taking part in group classes to learn to manage your health and the health of someone you care for. Michigan State University Extension has classes to help support you such as [RELAX: Alternatives to Anger](#), [Stress Less with Mindfulness](#), [Personal Action Toward Health](#), [Falls Prevention](#), and [Powerful Tools for Caregivers](#). These classes offer a way to increase your



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knowledge with research-based information with content experts in a small group format. Please visit our website for more information.

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/rlr/index>

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