

Self-care and stress management during the time of COVID-19

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Anytime I start working with a new client, one of the first things I do is evaluate self-care practices. I have a corny expression: *self-care is like a chair*. If you have a chair that has four legs, each one of those legs is important for supporting the person sitting in the chair. If you cut off one of the legs, or if the chair leg is too loose, it's very possible the person is going to fall and get hurt. Think of each one of those legs as an aspect of self care in your life: physical, social, emotional, and spiritual. If you are neglecting any of these, you're not going to be taking the best care of yourself – and also you won't be any good to others who need your support. Here are a couple examples of good self-care within each category.

Physical self care

- Exercise: any walking, running, cardio workout, strength training or stretching
- Sleep: try to get somewhere between 6 to 8 hours of sleep
- Food: find a balance between having some comfort food, but be sure to get some intake of fresh fruits and vegetables each day

Social self care

- Stay connected with others in ways that are meaningful. Obviously we can't get together in person, but perhaps now is the best time of any to call that old friend you haven't talked to in months and ask how he or she is doing with everything going on
- This is also a good time to remember old-fashioned ways of connecting, like letter writing. In this time when everyone is trying to stay connected through the help of electronic devices, it may really brighten someone's day to receive a handwritten note in the mail from you. It will probably make you feel pretty good to write the note as well!
- Give someone unexpected gratitude. Leave a thank-you note for your postal carrier, put a note under your spouse's pillow for something simple he or she did for you, or send a colleague some heartfelt thanks for ways in which he or she helped you recently

Emotional self care

- Take up a new self care practice like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or a guided meditation. There are various great meditations and muscle exercises available on YouTube and the app Headspace.
- Write down your thoughts each evening for a couple minutes, including the emotions you experience during the day. Recognize the small successes that happened during the day and have gratitude for them.
- Consider trying to make amends with someone who has hurt you in the past. Perhaps it would be too difficult to actually write the person a message or speak with him or her, but in your heart, forgiveness may be very healing for you at this time when it feels like our mortality is in the forefront of our minds.

Spiritual

- Set aside an amount of time for a quiet prayer by yourself. It does not need to be lengthy in order to be impactful. Once you set aside this time, you may feel a deeper sense of peace and desire to do it for a longer period of time.
- Read scripture. Reflect the scripture that comforts you in times of distress. If you don't already have a verse that comforts in times of distress, the Psalms tend to be a place of comfort for many.
- Think of those people in your life who seem to have it together from a spiritual standpoint. If you feel comfortable, ask those people what it is they do to stay spiritually strong. Perhaps they would have some wisdom they would be happy to share.
- Keep a written list of prayer intentions. Create a note on your phone, have a piece of paper next to your bed or in your Bible to keep track of the requested intention and the date it was requested or offered.

Lastly, don't stress out about being stressed out. It's OK that you are stressed. You're certainly not alone. Really, in the current climate, everyone is experiencing some level of stress. I've heard numerous people express that they will need to talk to a counselor or get on medication before this is all over. If there is any part of you considering counseling or medication, don't wait until things get really bad before you do something. Most therapists have quickly shifted into doing telehealth sessions over the phone or by way of some video platform.