

### **Introduction**

Coping with a pandemic is hard. Mastering self-care can help us stay healthy during challenging times.

This reference summary explores coping strategies to deal with stress during a pandemic. It also provides insight on helping our children cope.

### **The Need for Self-Care**

Have you ever heard airline attendants tell passengers to put on their own oxygen mask first, before helping their children and others during an emergency? Well, the same can hold true in other types of emergencies, including during a pandemic.

Self-care is not selfish. Taking care of your own needs first enables you to reach out to others more effectively and calmly later. During a global pandemic, self-care allows you to more easily focus on others who need you.

During a crisis, have you found yourself trying to reduce the stress of others before meeting your own needs?

### **Practicing Self-Care**

There are many ways to cope with stress. What works for one person might not work for another. In this section, we will cover some common, practical ways to take care of yourself during a pandemic. As you read, consider which strategies may work best for you or your loved ones.

Sometimes taking a break from the things that stress you out can help you cope. Setting aside time to play relaxing music, drink a cup of tea or take a bath may help you relax.



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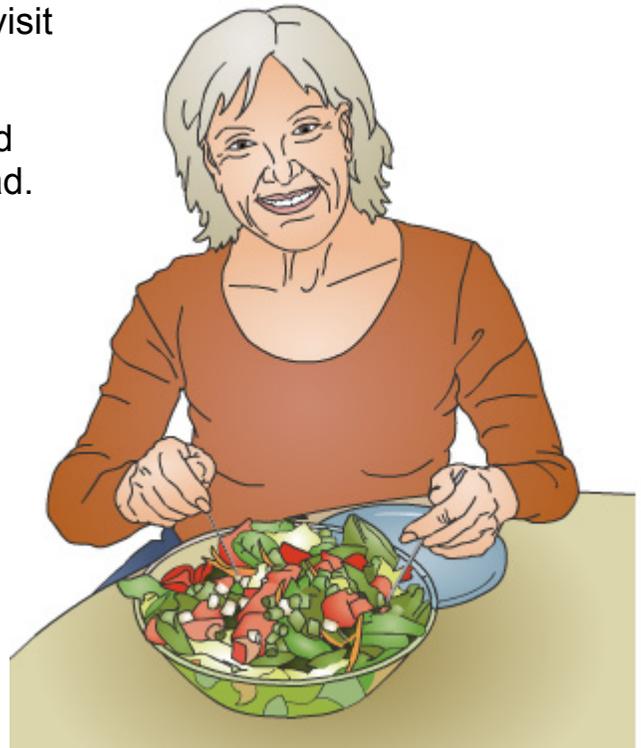
Getting fresh air and enjoying nature can also help you relax. You might enjoy walking, hiking, jogging or biking when the weather's nice. Exercise can clear your mind, and it releases hormones that make you feel good. Engaging in your favorite sport, dancing to fun music or playing a workout video are examples of physical activities you may enjoy.

It may be helpful to schedule time for things you enjoy. This might include reading a good book, doing an art project, playing games or watching a movie. Connect with loved ones online or over the phone if you can't visit them in person.

Eating a balanced diet helps you keep your mood stable and overcome challenges with a clear head. Your health care provider may recommend supplements to help you get any nutrients not supplied by your diet.

Just as electronics need to be recharged, our bodies need rest to combat and prevent illness. That makes sleep an essential component of self-care during a pandemic. Most people find that everything in life feels easier and more manageable when they are well-rested.

Worry and fear can keep people awake at night. The next section suggests other ideas to help you manage strong emotions.



## **Emotional Self-Care**

Strong emotions, such as fear and worry, are very common during a pandemic. Instead of bottling them up, it is better to release them. Taking care of your emotional health allows you to be more available emotionally for friends and family.

Many people find it helpful to talk about their struggles and feelings. You can share your thoughts with someone you trust. This could be a friend, family member, colleague, counselor or spiritual leader. Whatever you learn from them, you can share with others to help your community heal.

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Some people process their thoughts and feelings by writing about them in a journal. Journaling can help a person solve problems and release strong emotions without fear of judgement from another person.

Meditation is another self-care tool. While meditating, you might focus on a specific idea or phrase, such as “good things come to those who wait.” Mindfulness is a form of meditation that centers our focus on the present. It helps us let go of future worries and past mistakes.

Prayer is another tool that helps some people cope.

Gratitude helps people focus their minds on good things during trying circumstances. This can help people feel more relaxed, confident and optimistic.

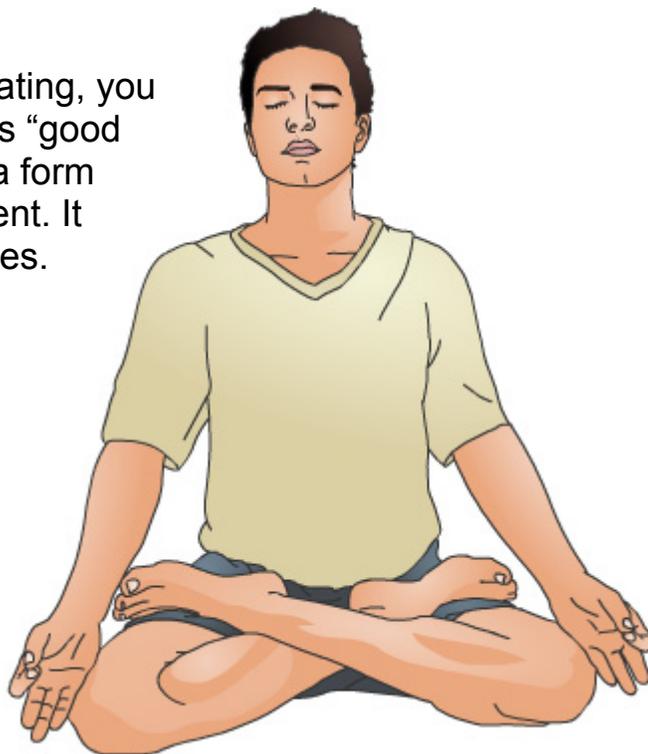
We all talk to ourselves throughout the day inside our minds. This hidden, inner dialogue is known as self-talk. Sometimes self-talk can be detrimental to our mental health. Just as we speak to others gently and compassionately during a crisis, we should also speak lovingly to ourselves.

Consider setting realistic goals and taking small steps towards them. Unrealistic goals can bring on more stress when we can't achieve them.

As much as we want to, helping everyone around us is very difficult. Setting appropriate expectations about how much help we can give and receive will help ease feelings of guilt.

Consider limiting the amount of time you spend listening to the news and setting boundaries with people who drain your energy.

Just as lifting weights builds physical strength and stamina, developing healthy coping skills builds resilience. The more you practice healthy coping strategies, the more capable you will feel.



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Do you find that limiting news consumption, sharing your feelings with others, meditating or practicing kind self-talk lowers your stress levels?

## **Coping with Loss**

Losses during a pandemic can be big or small. Losing a loved one or a job are examples of big losses. Not being able to meet with friends and family in person or having to cancel travel plans are less obvious losses.

Big or little, loss is hard. Although others may seem to have it worse, it's okay to feel down or discouraged about what you have lost.

Give yourself time and space to grieve. Acknowledge that what you lost was meaningful to you and that things are different now. Letting yourself feel and acknowledge the loss will help you move forward in the healing process.

Well-meaning friends and family may minimize certain losses. They may try hard to make you feel better or expect you to move on faster than you are ready. Most people are uncomfortable with grief. Be patient with yourself and others. Working through grief takes time.

Take a moment to consider what you have lost during a pandemic and how it has affected you.

## **Helping Children Cope**

Children cope with stressful situations differently than adults. The way they respond depends on their age, personality and other factors.

Children who are struggling to cope may display behaviors you thought they had already outgrown, such as wetting the bed or throwing tantrums.

If a child is struggling, they may:

- Avoid fun activities.
- Complain of aches and pains.
- Cry more or become more irritable.
- Have trouble focusing or get worse grades.
- Sleep or eat more or less than usual.



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Teens may spend more time alone and avoid friends or family or spend more time with friends. They might turn to drugs, smoking or alcohol.

The best thing you can do for your child is to model healthy coping behaviors. Taking care of your body and mind in a healthy way will help your children learn self-care.

Eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, relaxing, doing fun things and connecting with loved ones are all good habits to encourage.

Children may need extra support to deal with loss. Encourage your child to share what they are thinking and feeling. Offer age-appropriate answers to their questions.

Staying calm and offering reassurance that they are safe can be very helpful. They may need your advice to learn how to navigate difficulties in life.

Changes to a child's routine can be hard on them. Kids and adults alike often need routine and structure to feel settled and in control.

One way to establish routine is to wake your kids up at the same time each day and make breakfast before school. You could designate one room of the house just for school and another just for meals.

Plan fun activities to do together. This might be eating dinner together and then going for a walk each weekday. Or you could play a favorite board game every Sunday night.

Limit exposure to scary news and social media posts.

Seek help from a health care provider, school counselor or therapist if your child is not able to cope.

In what ways are you modeling healthy behavior for your children or the next generation? How can you improve?



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## Reaching Out

Research shows that helping others during a crisis can make you feel good. You might enjoy buying groceries or running errands for a neighbor, donating to a food pantry or volunteering at a homeless shelter.

Reaching out by listening to the concerns of others can help them feel understood, valued and supported.

Listening well involves:

- Trying to understand the situation and how the person feels about it.
- Repeating what the person said and how they feel in your own words to make sure you understand.
- Resisting the urge to interrupt, give unwanted advice or compare the person's situation with your own.

Reaching out also involves asking for help when you need it. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but of strength.

Most people want to help others. It allows us to take action and gain a sense of control when we may otherwise feel helpless. Asking for help gives others the opportunity to serve and to feel good about their contribution.

## Summary

Self-care is not selfish. When other people see you take care of your body and mind in a healthy way, they learn to do the same. Eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, relaxing, doing fun things and connecting with loved ones are all good habits to encourage.



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Emotional self-care may include:

- Sharing your feelings.
- Practicing mindfulness, gratitude, prayer or meditation.
- Using positive self-talk.
- Setting realistic expectations and appropriate boundaries.
- Establishing clear, realistic goals.

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