

On Managing Fear, Anxiety, Anger and General Stress related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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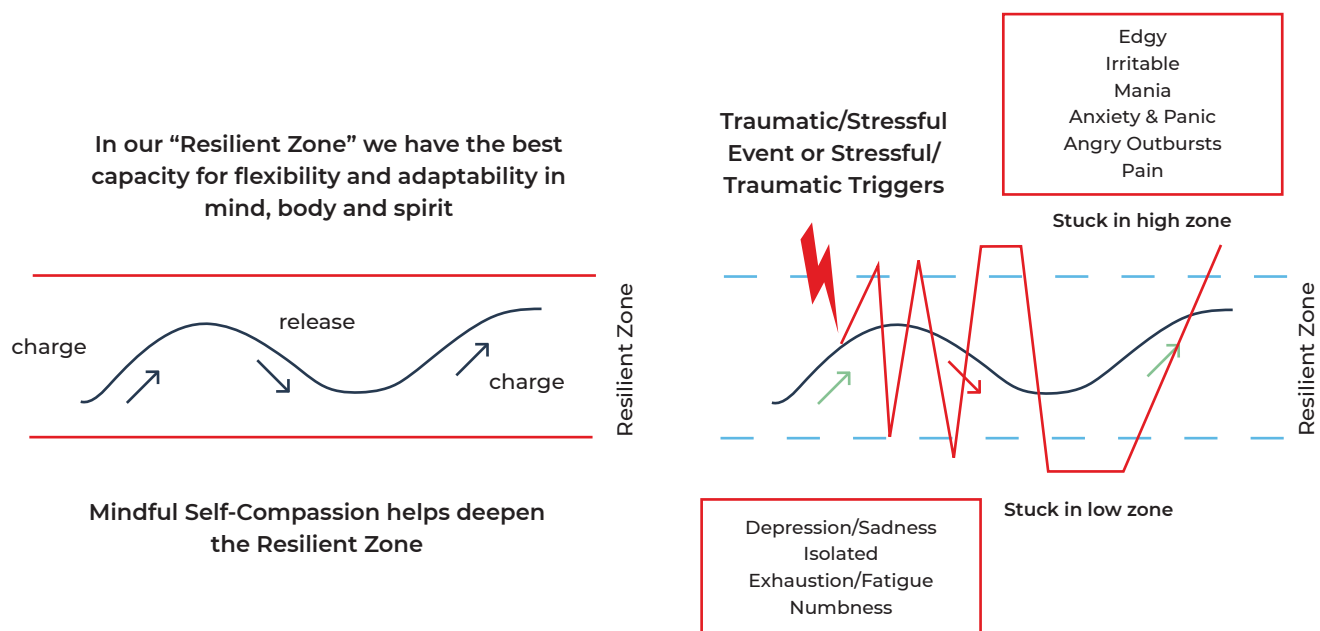
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This post presents several simple practices that can support the well-being and resilience of caregivers to more successfully manage challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak. Specific information and practices known to build resilience are presented along with websites for further information and self-care.

The National Academy of Medicine Action Collaborative on Caregiver Wellbeing and Resilience has brought attention to the urgent need for both personal and organizational strategies to support the wellbeing of doctors, nurses and other health care clinicians. Caregiver stress, burnout, compassion fatigue and depression have severe health consequences.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, this issue has only intensified. The current environment adds to this normal caregiver stress due to fear and anxiety of the unknown, of potential personal illness or death, of extreme work fatigue and most probably anger and feelings of betrayal over lack of control and supplies.

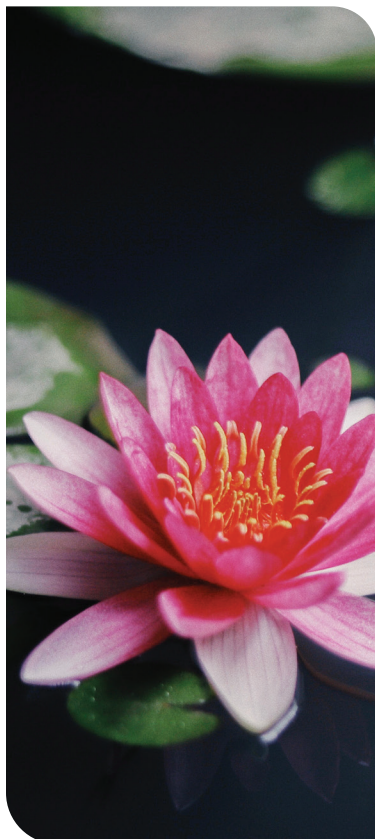
Research in the area of trauma informed care has shown that a powerful way to deal with stress long-term is to attend to the autonomic nervous system responses during high stress and practice methods to modulate this response. This is depicted below.



Our normal nervous system has a homeostatic rhythm between sympathetic arousal and parasympathetic relaxation so that we can maintain stability in our daily life; we are naturally resilient. The sympathetic system becomes aroused to deal with stress and crisis; the parasympathetic system helps to return us to balance (figure 1). When individuals (or social groups) are exposed to repeated stress, or traumatic situations this normal rhythm frequently becomes disrupted and the nervous system can become permanently "upregulated" making it extremely difficult to manage stress and prevent emotional exhaustion, burnout, energy fatigue and anger (figure 2). Our capacity to think clearly, respond with emotional stability, maintain strong immunity to illness and to deal with relationships follows the commands of the nervous system (Trauma Informed Care Resilience Model: <https://healthandjusticejournal.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s40352-017-0050-5>).

Some simple breathing practices are particularly helpful for autonomic self-regulation because they stimulate parasympathetic balance during stressful times. This ability to self-regulate will help you to think more clearly in chaotic situations and respond rather than emotionally react. Ability to strengthen and operate from your resilience zone also supports optimal immune system balance.

Here are **three exercises** you can learn quickly that are very useful during times of stress, anxiety and fear. It is important to practice them at home so that you will be prepared to use them in the clinical setting.



GUIDED SOFT-BELLY BREATH EXERCISE

Once you learn this technique, you can simply take 2-3 deep abdominal breaths in 30 seconds or less any time, any place to calm your nervous system.

Take several deep abdominal breaths, and with each breath notice the belly softening. Let your awareness follow the breath deep into the belly, and allow the breath to dissolve any tightness or constricted places in the abdomen, softening, opening. Use each out-breath as an opportunity to let go...Letting go of physical tension, everyday thoughts and worries....

As you breathe out, allow any tightness to be released from the body.... Release any worries or thoughts.... as the belly softens. Belly rising on the in-breath and floating into relaxation on the out-breath..." Breathing in, I am aware of breathing in. Breathing out, I am aware of breathing out."

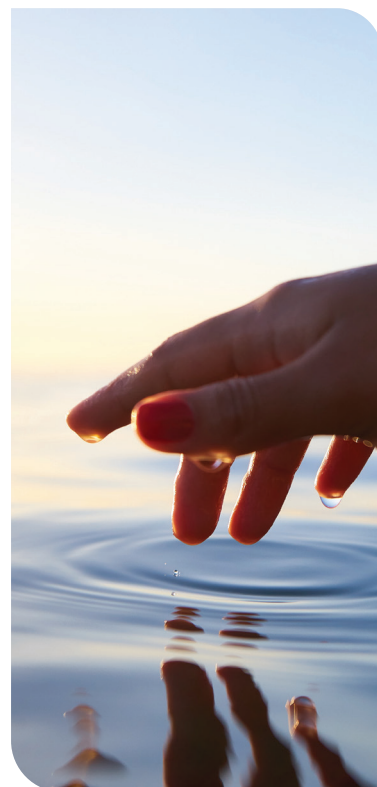
Releasing the jaw and letting go in the head and face.... Letting the shoulders relax and become soft and heavy....Feeling the body sink further into relaxation and balance around you....If the mind wonders, gently return focus to the breath. Breathing in and breathing out....gently focus on the breath as the body relaxes and the mind stills.... Let the attention become present in the belly...

TRACK, GROUND, RESOURCE

This exercise, adapted from Threshold GlobalWorks (<https://www.thresholdglobalworks.com>), was developed specifically for medical personnel and clients dealing with trauma. This can be done in 30 seconds or less.

- 1. Sensory Tracking**—Tune into your autonomic nervous system. The Body tells the Story! Be aware if you are experiencing high sympathetic activity (heart rate, breath, muscle tension, racing thoughts, lack of focus, anxiety).
- 2. Grounding**—Take a deep abdominal breath and put your attention into your feet. Focus on the support of the ground and the sense of stability the ground provides.
- 3. Resourcing**—Allow an image to enter your awareness that provides you with a sense of security, peace, calmness or clarity. The image can be anything; it is your resource. Hold the image in your mind and take another deep breath.

Now recheck your nervous system and notice the change.



SAFE PLACE/ INNER SANCTUARY

Stop, take a deep abdominal breath and remember a place or time where you experienced a sense of peace and healing...where you felt safe, relaxed and at ease.

Allow the image to emerge and be aware of as much sensory information as possible.

What are you feeling; what smells, sounds, textures or tastes do you notice; is there anyone with you; what stands out in the environment? Really allow this image into your awareness and take another deep breath.

Use your imagination to bring this image back along with the feelings and relaxation whenever you need to.

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Be intentional about taking care of yourself during this time. We all need you to stay healthy.
- Walk and breathe in nature as much as possible. Notice the environment.
- Think about three things you are grateful for each morning and say them out loud.
- Reframe “social distancing” to creating “Caring Spaces”. Language is important.
- When you experience fear or anxiety be aware that feelings attenuate when you let yourself really feel them, take a breath and get to the underlying thought. You can then deal with them.
- Acknowledge the gift of your colleagues whenever you can.

Thank you for your Courage and Caring.



RESOURCE LINKS

Tips for Disaster Responders: Managing Stress

<https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/disaster-responders>

Stress Management podcasts specific to COVID-19

https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide?utm_campaign=cv_response_website_banner&utm_medium=website&utm_source=cv_response

National Academy of Medicine: Collaborative for Clinician Wellbeing

<https://nam.edu/initiatives/clinician-resilience-and-well-being/>

Grateful Living

https://learn.gratefulness.org/?mc_cid=14577f79e8&mc_eid=277e6ca4ae

Mindful Magazine

https://www.mindful.org/free-mindfulness-resources-for-calm-during-covid-outbreak/?mc_cid=4e485a3c87&mc_eid=a598986fc3

Insight Timer

<https://insighttimer.com/meditation-timer>

Qi Gong for stress, anxiety and energy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCicH-iz1oU>

REFERENCE ARTICLES

Associations of sympathetic and parasympathetic activity in job stress and burnout: A systematic review

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0205741>

Harvard University: Understanding the Stress Response:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>