



Mental & Emotional Well-Being During COVID-19

Facing Isolation Anxiety,
A Sense of Loss &
Uncertain Times

Facing Uncertainty

It's hard. The ground beneath you is shifting during this COVID-19 pandemic, as you try to come to terms with being in limbo. There's no firm endpoint in mind and the "usual" of your life has been disrupted. That's an unsettling feeling, no doubt.

Most of us aren't wired to tolerate uncertainty and disruption well. We crave predictability and routine, often finding uncertainty more stressful than knowing something bad is going to happen. That's why, in the middle of these difficult times – when you're worried about academics, friendships, relationships, finances, going back to school, job prospects, health and the future – it's important to **remind yourself that this uncertainty won't last**. You *can* make it through.

Building Resilience

As you face today's uncertainty, you're building lifelong resilience to bounce back from hard times. Being resilient, according to the Academic Resilience Consortium, means you have capacities for...

- Persistence
- Creativity
- Emotional intelligence
- Grit
- Cognitive flexibility
- Risk-taking
- Adapting to change
- Delaying gratification
- Learning from failure and success
- Overcoming adversity

Try to frame it like this: The current pandemic is allowing you to practice your resilience. To illustrate that, pick one of the capacities above and think about how you're currently putting it in practice. For instance, "creativity" could be how you're staying connected with friends despite social distancing. And "emotional intelligence" could be how you're looking out for others rather than retreating internally.

For better or worse, **this moment in time is now part of your college story**. You're working through it with strength, perseverance and resilience. So, do what you can to focus on the skills you're building and feel all the emotions. A new normal is upon us these days. Truthfully, you'll likely experience other disruptions throughout your life. By getting solidly through this one, you'll be that much better prepared.

Source: Academic Resilience Consortium, academicresilience.org

To Cope: Grab Hold of What *Is* Certain



In uncertain times, it can help to remind yourself of the constants that *are* certain, such as...

- Your interests
- How much you like your major
- Family/friend love and support
- How important college is to you

Name a few certainties for yourself. It'll give you something solid to grab hold of during rocky times.

Making Room to Mourn and Grieve —

The things you've lost amidst this pandemic and its associated limits, disruptions and shutdowns are significant. You have every right to mourn the quick goodbyes to friends, uncertainty about when you'll see each other again, missed celebrations, end-of-year events and so much more. In fact, **mourning can be very healthy as you name your grief and face it head on**, rather than pushing it aside like nothing happened.

That grief may involve losing...

- **A Sense of Belonging.** You may no longer have all the people around that make up your community, causing wonder about where you fit.
- **A Sense of Place.** Campus is where you've spent much of your time, energy and effort, so it takes time to adjust.
- **A Sense of Independence.** This may feel stunted by suddenly needing to head home or to another living arrangement.
- **A Sense of Well-Being.** Then, there's this, which is being compromised for everyone as we work to stay healthy and keep others well in the face of COVID-19. Economic difficulties, employment uncertainty, academic shifts, and the loss of anticipated gatherings and celebrations can leave all of us feeling traumatized and uneasy.

There's also something called **Anticipatory Grief** that many people are experiencing. It involves concerns about what the future holds when we're surrounded by uncertainty.

And **Ambiguous Loss** and the grief attached to it is when we can't quite get our heads around the loss of dreams, imagined futures, feeling safe and living in a stable world.

The accumulated losses are significant. So, give yourself time to grieve, cry, be fearful and feel things are unfair. Comfort one another, let out the sadness and anger, and discuss what you're mourning. Only then will you be able to eventually emerge from your grief and take the next steps.

Source: *Harvard Business Review*, 3/23/20

"It's shattering to lose innocence, it's traumatic to feel things were stolen from us and it is very sad to miss the things we hoped for and anticipated."

— Psychologist Lauren Rockwell (*The Mighty*, March 2020)

To Cope: Name Your Grief



Identifying your grief is often necessary to accept it and work through it. So, **consider what losses you're mourning.** End-of-the-year events? Research that's been stalled? The athletic season? Friendships that were just blossoming? When you name your grief, you have a better chance to put your emotions in motion and face them directly.

Dealing with Anxiety

Even before this pandemic hit, 62% of students in the U.S. said they had experienced overwhelming anxiety within the past 12 months, reported the American College Health Association. Add in a pandemic where you have little control and it makes sense that you may feel surrounded by worry and anxiety.

What are some of the things you're worrying about? They may include questions about returning to campus, finances, employment, friendships, relationships, the future, staying healthy as COVID-19 information swirls around and more. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations; your reactions are personal to you and *completely* valid.

What Pandemic Anxiety May Look Like

According to the Centers for Disease Control and UC Berkeley's Health Services, this stress and worry during an infectious disease outbreak can manifest as...

- Anxiety and panic
- Hyper-vigilance about your own health and that of your loved ones
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs
- Anger
- Feeling helpless
- Social withdrawal

Managing Your Anxiety

There are some simple, effective ways to manage these fears and anxieties so worry about COVID-19 doesn't control your life. They include...

- Talk with trusted others and maintain social connections
- Exercise to channel your panic elsewhere
- Take deep breaths, stretch and meditate to quiet your mind

If you have a pre-existing mental health condition, please continue with your treatment and be aware of any new or worsening symptoms. Reach out!

To Cope: Counteract Negative Thoughts



When negative thoughts creep in, try to **counteract** them by writing down a positive, rational counter statement. For instance, "I can't control any of this" could be replaced with "But I *can* control how I'm responding."

Or **reframe** a negative thought such as "This week has been awful" to find five things that have gone well, from getting a paper done early to finding a great Netflix series.

Source: PositivePsychology.com

Dealing with Anxiety

- Eat healthy, well-balanced meals
- Continue with pre-established counseling sessions
- Give yourself half-hour “worry periods” to get things out so you’re not in a constant state of worry
- Treat yourself to simple pleasures to give yourself a boost
- Let go of what’s not in your control
- Get enough quality sleep
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs
- Keep informed with facts from trusted campus and news sources
- Take an occasional news and social media break so you’re not surrounded by upsetting 24/7 coverage
- Stay healthy by following the recommendations to wash your hands frequently or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer, steer clear of sick people, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze, avoid touching your face and stay home
- Seek additional help if you feel overwhelming worry or anxiety

To Cope: Be Mindful



Mindful breathing and grounding exercises can help center and calm you.

For instance, try the **5-4-3-2-1 exercise**, where you ground yourself by identifying 5 things you can see around you, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. Be sure to take long, slow, deep breaths to enhance the calm.

You can also find **free resources** to support your mental and emotional wellness during this difficult time at: blog.calm.com/blog/free-resources.

Plus, recognize that **anxiety can sometimes be contagious**. So, try not to constantly discuss the pandemic and its impacts with others where you feed off one another. You may also be susceptible to **empathetic stress**, where you take on some emotions others are experiencing during difficult times. This makes having healthy coping mechanisms at the ready even more important.

Overall, please keep in mind that **this time of pandemic and worry isn't permanent**. Worst-case scenarios rarely reflect reality, *The Guardian* reminds us, and this *will* end. In the meantime, don't stuff your worry deep inside because you're nervous that a “gang of feelings” (sadness, anxiety, etc.) will overrun you. Instead, cope with your anxiety in healthy ways, reach out for assistance and take good care.

Sources: MayoClinic.org; *The Guardian*, 3/16/20; UC Berkeley University Health Services, UHS.berkeley.edu; Centers for Disease Control, cdc.gov; American College Health Association, acha.org

Navigating Through Isolation

When you're holed up, temporarily isolated from the people and life you knew, it's natural that a bit of **Isolation Anxiety** may take hold. Add the uncertainty associated with the pandemic and mourning lost opportunities, and it can be quite overwhelming.

Preventing an Isolation Spiral

Luckily, there are some wise ways to help prevent an isolation spiral, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America and the National Alliance on Mental Health, that include...

- **Turn Social Distancing into Social Cohesion.** Connect with your people in all the technological and from-a-far ways you know how.
- **Find Things to Do.** Do one productive thing in your immediate surroundings each day – from projects to helping a neighbor – so you feel less “stuck” and more accomplished.
- **Stick Close to Your Normal Routine.** Doing so will help make you active and engaged, instead of lethargic and unmotivated. Plus, it'll be easier to adjust when the isolation period ends.
- **Help Others.** Become more externally focused to get outside of your own internal struggle. Check on others, send positive messages, engage in local efforts and reach out.
- **Don't Obsess Over Endless Coronavirus Coverage.** Don't skew your perspective and increase your anxiety by Googling every symptom and watching endless news. Instead, limit media consumption and only tap into reliable sources for information.
- **Keep Things Organized.** Be organized and fairly neat because, when your space becomes chaotic, it's easier for your mind to become that way, too.
- **Start a New Ritual.** Give yourself something to look forward to, whether it's a regular video chat with friends, walks, journaling or cooking with a family member. It'll help feel like you're making the most of this time instead of looking at it as lost opportunity.

Note: Isolation can exacerbate existing mental health conditions, so stay on track with counseling, medication and self-care.

Sources: Anxiety and Depression Association of America; National Alliance on Mental Illness

To Cope: Embrace the Pause



You've had to hit pause on your regularly scheduled life. So, how might you embrace the pause?

- Enjoy how it feels to quiet your mind when you're not so busy
- Reconnect with people in your life – from a distance
- Start up a positive new habit that you've been putting off

And then, consider ways to incorporate more pauses into life when this current situation subsides.

Staying Connected

Connecting with other people, even when you can't be with them in person, is crucial during this time of social distancing. **We all need one another's support and care as we struggle with pandemic realities.**

"Social connectedness is critically important to warding off loneliness and resulting depression," according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. What else can connections do for you during a time of isolation? They can...

- Remind you that you're not alone
- Give you new things to think about
- Get you outside of your own head
- Help you focus on others' needs instead of just your own

10 Ways to Stay Connected During a Pandemic

1. Participate in online campus programs and initiatives
2. Start a virtual game night or book club with some friends
3. Do an online workout with other people
4. Hold outdoor coffee meet-ups with friends and neighbors (standing apart!)
5. Use video chat features so you can hear *and* see one another
6. Play one-on-one games like Battleship via video
7. Sing or play music together using a video-sharing platform
8. Start a game of emoji-charades where you and your friends take turns describing movies, TV shows, songs, etc. using only emojis
9. Challenge your friends or family to livestream trivia on Instagram – or host your own
10. Start a Google Doc with friends so everyone can add ideas about in-person activities to look forward to

Let people who are important to you know that. Have fun with friends in new and different ways. And build stronger connections by getting creative. It doesn't matter what you do to stay connected. What's important is that you do *something* and do it regularly.

To Cope: Realize That Life Isn't Shut Down



If you look around, you'll see that life goes on and that you can be part of it during this uncertain time. Try...

- Supporting healthcare professionals on the frontlines
- Thanking grocery store staff
- Sending hard-working professors thank you notes
- Waving and talking with neighbors from afar
- Ordering takeout from a local restaurant
- Calling a local agency to see how you can help
- Anticipating what the needs will be after this subsides – and start working on those things now

When we look for the helpers and what is going *right*, it increases our hope, our sense of community and our feeling that we can be part of the solution.

Making Meaning of It All

This forced slow-down we're in the middle of allows us to **focus on what's most meaningful in our lives**. For instance, think about...

- Interests you're rekindling
- People you're reconnecting with
- Things you're missing
- Things you're *not* missing
- What you're grateful for

"In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to."

– Dave Hollis

When you examine what you're learning about these kinds of things during a difficult time, it can help you find your better self. Plus, it's all part of formulating a Plan B since your initial Plan A was thrown off track. The secret, however, is that many a Plan B turns out *way* better than the original!

So, with all the positivity you can summon, **examine what's going right these days** instead of always focusing on the tough stuff. As a result, you'll be healthier, more adaptable and in a much better place once the world reopens.

To Our Students

As you deal with all the emotions, disruptions and thoughts about this pandemic, know that **your campus family is ready and very willing to help**. Please reach out when you have questions or need assistance of any kind. We're still here. Always.

To Cope: Focus on Gratitude



Anxiety, stress, fear and anger can be contagious, especially during an unprecedented situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, kindness is most definitely contagious, too.

So, now and then, **try to focus on the goodness and kindness you've witnessed** during this time. What have you seen? What have you experienced? By examining what you're grateful for – in your own space and in your own way – you're more likely to make it through this with your better self firmly intact.

"And the world came together as the people stayed apart."

– Jennifer Wagner