

Overview

Today's wild turbulence has brought all of us to heightened stress, many to high anxiety and some of us to near-panic. Anxiety is universal, and essential for survival. But as with the immune response, we can have too much of a good thing and in times like now, we must sooth it into to manageable levels. Because we are working against instinct to do this, purposeful practice is key. In a time of heightened stress, practice heightened coping.

Escalate Relaxation

Our "fight or flight" stress hormones stimulate the unpleasant arousal we're all familiar with. The resulting sense of alarm then affects our thinking, as bodily sensations signal the brain to activate vigilance in the form of excessive worry. It also triggers our inevitable tendency to *overestimate* danger and *underestimate* our own ability to cope and respond. All of this is functional when there is a tiger in the forest, but rarely in the modern day-to-day. Some high-yield practices include:

- Controlled breathing may be the single most effective measure. There are many variations, but the essential components are a *slow rate* – slower than you normally want, and using the diaphragm – as if breathing down to the belly. It is not a silver bullet; in fact, it may feel initially as if you are slightly more vulnerable. This is in fact partially why it works, when we experience a benign outcome from a passive-attentive practice. To be effective, continue for a full minute twice a day, plus every time you think of it.
- Physical activity is powerful medicine. Think of it as a way to put your adrenaline to good use. The smallest amount is better than none, and a little something nearly every day is better than occasional.
- Enjoyable activities are critically important. Apart from our many hours of work, we need a balance of low-consequence pleasure. This reduces anxiety and depression both, just as essential carbohydrates reduce hunger. Schedule at least one thing every day, and pay attention to tiny, momentary pleasures.
- Accomplishment is another "essential nutrient". like protein to balance the experiential diet. Work often fulfills this need. If not, make a routine of your daily schedule and be sure it includes items which allow you to say, "I got *that* done."

Remember - because much of this in the face of stress is literally counter-instinctive, *scheduled, purposeful effort* is needed. All of it beats idle rumination.

Harness Worry

Rather than trying to directly limit worry (you can't not think!), make an end-run. In other words, confront "What is the worst that might happen"? In a sense, this allows your mind to do what it is trying to – jump to catastrophic assumptions. It is better to meet your fears than try to push them out. Then, you can form responses. Your "What if?" becomes "Then what?" For example:

- "If my worst-case scenario should really come to pass, how will I cope?" List *all* that you can do, including what we all hope for on the eventual day we take our last breath – peaceful acceptance.
- "Meanwhile, what can I do *today* to avert the worst chain of events, or to balance choices made in the past, good and bad." Among the many the responses to this question, panic, idle rumination and sedation never belong.

Minimize Damage

Take care not to fan your own flames with high-consequence coping. The over-use of alcohol and other chemicals is a clear example. Social withdrawal and sometimes the opposite – taking no moments for rest and privacy - is another. Over-consuming inflammatory news is one for some of us. Regular thoughts of suicide will maintain depression, not alleviate it. What do you need to guard against?

Name it and Tame it

Because anxiety “shouts”, it displaces the other emotions. Recognizing the softer ones helps balance the amplification. This needn’t be an awkward project. Simply try employing your whole vocabulary, e.g. with this list - <https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory> - to find exactly the word to identify what you feel at any moment. Be sure not to override sadness. It is wholesome, when given an outlet.

Let Values Direct

What would you do if distress wasn’t occupying your energy and bandwidth? Whether it’s home relationships, community, exercise, religion/spirituality, study, arts or whatever values you hold high, don’t give anxiety the power to take you from them.

Discover Opportunity

Highly disrupted times do have unexpected positive outcomes. Amidst stress, pain, fatigue and wrenching loss, our shared purpose in facing adversity gives rise to leaps of collaborative innovation. You could develop levels of maturity and wisdom you never expected. You may witness – or demonstrate – grace, citizen leadership, new reserves of strength, and quiet acts of unsung heroism. This your moment to seek and seize such opportunities.

First, settle. Then shine.

Resources

- For a very short video to make sure your breathing practice is right, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UB3tSaiEbNY>
- A good app for breathing and relaxation is Breathe2Relax: <http://t2health.dcoe.mil/apps/breathe2relax>
- For a “Relax in a Hurry” see http://www.mbmi.org/basics/mstress_RIAH.asp
- The Corona Virus Sanity Guide: <https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide>