JOURNALISTS

Managing your stress in the time of coronavirus

TIPS FROM PSYCHOLOGISTS

Reporters are shouldering enormous emotional burdens and even physical danger in the important work of informing the public about the coronavirus pandemic. But you are rarely asked how you are feeling, whether you are experiencing fear, anger, fatigue, stress or pride for providing a vital public service.

Many journalists have covered traumatic events, like mass shootings, murders or environmental disasters, but nothing could have prepared you for a worldwide pandemic that has no end in sight. It can be tough to get a break when the news story you are covering affects your emotional and physical well-being and has far-reaching economic and social impacts.

However, psychologists can help you develop strategies to take care of your emotional needs even during an unrelenting crisis. Their advice rests on the basic tenets of self-care: maintaining a healthy diet, getting adequate sleep, being socially connected, giving yourself breaks and getting exercise.

**Make connections — keep in touch virtually with your colleagues, friends and family.**

Strong social support can help you cope with problems, improve your self-esteem and keep you emotionally grounded. Check in with your colleagues in the newsroom, just as you would if you were in the office together. Knowing that others are experiencing similar stresses helps you to feel less alone and can help you identify new ideas to face your own struggles. Share the joys and the sorrows of work and recognize one another’s successes.
At the same time, keep connected with friends and family, whether it’s by video chat, email or phone. Some in your social network can support you in your struggles whereas others are great people to talk with for a laugh, a distraction or a reminiscence. Maintaining your relationships — and ensuring it’s not all COVID all the time — strengthens our sense of self and provides that needed emotional connection with those we care about.

**Set boundaries.**

Give yourself permission to set boundaries around your work. For example, put your phone in a different room or switch it off for a set period of time. Separate your work space from your home space — even if that means working from a corner of your bedroom instead of on your bed. Identify work hours that enable you to take time for yourself while still getting your work done.

Take breaks from the news and social media — staying informed is important, especially to your job, but be mindful about how often, when and what type of news/social media you are consuming.

**Look after yourself.**

Breaks are important for our brains to have recovery time and to “reset.” Sleep is vital because it physically renews your body. Research has shown that working without breaks makes us less productive. Stress is inevitable and while it can be motivating — such as when you are on deadline — persistent stress drains your mind and body. You might feel fatigued, unable to concentrate or irritable for no good reason. Chronic stress causes wear and tear on your body and can aggravate existing problems. If you are feeling exhausted, it’s your body’s way of telling you to take a break.

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**Stick to a routine, get enough sleep and don’t forget to exercise.**

You can help keep yourself physically and mentally healthy by maintaining a routine. Keep a regular sleep and wake schedule, and get dressed, shower and eat at set times. To help ensure you get the recommended seven or eight hours of sleep, cut back on caffeine, remove distractions such as television or computers from your bedroom, and go to bed at the same time each night.

Try to build in a regular time for physical activity too. Regular exercise will also improve your mood and make your sleep more restful. Research shows that activities like yoga and relaxation exercises help reduce stress and boost immune functioning. The more “routine” these healthy behaviors, the less mental effort you use to decide to take care of yourself and the more likely you just do it.

Watch for signs of burnout in yourself or others. These include irritability, avoiding work, being unable to sleep and avoiding emails or story tips. Remember to take time off so you can rejuvenate even while staying at home.

**Develop coping strategies.**

Everyone’s coping strategies are different and may include meditation, exercise, music, reading, diaphragmatic breathing, playing games, journaling or baking — to list a few examples. Acknowledge that this is a difficult time. Take a break and find time for yourself. Dance in your kitchen, listen to a meditation app or phone a supportive friend — the key is finding something that works for you.

Don’t think that it’s selfish to take time for yourself. Remember, on a plane you need to put your oxygen mask on first before you can help anyone else. Use the same principle when taking steps to bolster your own emotional well-being. You need to be healthy in order to do your job, to get important information to your readers, viewers or listeners and to perform your public service.

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Tread carefully when interviewing COVID-19 affected people.

Journalists often must speak with bereaved families experiencing great trauma. Allowing someone to talk about their loss can provide great healing to them. You are giving meaning and purpose to people who have died by letting their survivors tell their life story. However, be mindful of your purpose and think through what you intend to get from such interviews. Make sure that you are confident that the family of the bereaved will be comfortable with your story when it runs. It’s OK to show your emotions. By doing so you acknowledge your humanity and empathy.

Look forward.

Human beings have an enduring capacity to be resilient. We can move forward — we have done it before, we can do it in the future. If you have tried some of these techniques and are still struggling, there are additional online resources available. For example, consult the Dart Center (dartcenter.org), or APA (apa.org/covid-19), or reach out to a mental health professional who can help you to better manage your stress and/or trauma. Check to see if your employer offers an employee assistance program or ask your physician for a referral to a mental health provider.

Thanks to psychologists Lynn Bufka PhD and Vaile Wright PhD for their help developing this tip sheet.