**Advice for Mental Health During The Coronavirus Pandemic**

**1.Connect (safely)**

Stress and anxiety result physiologically from the “fight or flight” – or sympathetic nervous system – response triggered by cortisol and norepinephrine. Connection, on the other hand, produces oxytocin (known as the “cuddle hormone”) and triggers our relaxation – or parasympathetic nervous system – response. To make matters worse, isolation and disconnection both breed and exacerbate anxiety. In other words, connection is essential for maintaining mental well-being always, and particularly essential during high-anxiety times.

More than ever, we need to be proactive and intentional in our connection. We can no longer get our fix from morning chitchat with our barista, grabbing a bite with a colleague, or checking out a new bar with a Hinge date. Post hand-wash interactions with roommates, family, and neighbors are now precious commodities. Having (or fostering) a pet has never felt so necessary.

For many, organic connection is dead. For the sake of your mental health, I urge you to build connection into your schedule. Of course, connection in the time of “social distancing” has its limitations. Your quickest solve? Remember when we used to call people on the telephone? Consider bringing it back. There’s even a group FaceTime option now… it’ll bring you back to the simpler times of three-way calling. Many organizations are offering support groups or safe versions of their in-person group meetings using Zoom. If “reaching out” comes more easily to you, check in on others – humanity needs your socially-distanced compassion right now.

**2. Remember: there WILL be a vaccine. This WILL end. We won’t be socially distancing forever.**

When we’re experiencing uncomfortable emotions, we often forget that they’re not forever. In twenty years, we won’t be telling our grandchildren, “Back in my day we used to do things in groups” or, “When I was your age, we didn’t need to wear protective latex suits if we wanted to leave the house.”

While we don’t know exactly when a vaccine will be ready, we do know it could be as soon as [within a few months](https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/17/health/coronavirus-vaccine-first-dose-participant/index.html). This is a season of discomfort. This is a season of mental and emotional challenge. And this crisis is temporary.

**3. Get creative with self-care, and use this as an opportunity to practice setting boundaries**

Personally, my self-care used to look like time with friends, dance, yoga, acupuncture, massage, soccer, pedicures, therapy, and afternoon matchas at my favorite coffee shop. I frequent WeWork for structure and a change of scenery, and look forward to attending multiple events a week for entertainment and connection. The beautiful life I’ve designed in New York City has been paused indefinitely, and I’m learning how to take care of myself in a very different environment (for now, living with my boyfriend’s sister’s family).

It looks like this is going to be a marathon, not a sprint – which means self-care is more important than ever. As much as it’s tempting to turn to destructive coping mechanisms, try to build a toolbox of more serving ways of supporting yourself. Make a list of activities that feel replenishing: journalling, emailing old friends, walks, at-home yoga videos, meditation apps, movies and popcorn, remote therapy, reading, making art, gardening, cleaning, baking, baths, puzzles.

An integral aspect of self-care that’s often missed in the rhetoric is boundaries. If you aren’t familiar with this term, now is the time to learn and practice. Boundaries are our personal limits, needs and “rules of engagement” we expect to be respected interpersonally. Boundaries have two stages: recognizing them, and communicating them. Many of us who identify as “people pleasers” struggle with recognizing and setting boundaries for fear of conflict or abandonment (I’m still working on them); yet our mental health and relationships suffer and we feel resentful to others for crossing the boundaries we haven’t recognized or communicated.

In this situation, here are some examples of boundaries:

“There’s no one else I’d rather be quarantined with, but I need to go for a daily walk alone.”

“I can hear that you’d prefer to “Stay positive” right now. I feel better preparing for things to get worse, and I’d appreciate it if you’d stop telling me to practice gratitude right now.’”

“If we’re both working from home, I need us to do so in silence. If you want to listen to music or the news, please do so with your headphones or in the other room.”

“I understand you’re not concerned about your kids having playdates, but I’d prefer mine only have contact with our family during this time.”

**4. Don’t judge yourself for feeling…everything**

Whether it seems the world has turned upside down, or your biggest stressor thus far is adjusting to working from home, discomfort is a universal, natural, and – in many cases – healthy response to our current reality. As humans, we rely on an illusion of a predictable future to mitigate feelings of anxiety. It’s from this illusion that we make plans and feel a sense of control. So, even if you’re feeling relatively secure in your health and job at the moment, there’s a collective sense of being “on edge” as we all adjust to the chronic and omnipresent uncertainty.

Couple that with the removal of routine and coping, and the added stressors of counterintuitive social distancing practices, and it’s unrealistic to expect yourself not to be affected. Over the last week, much of my work with clients has focused on helping them adjust their expectations for their mood at this time. As I mentioned earlier, this is a season of discomfort. Hopefully, it won’t be a long one; but just as we expect and prepare for temperatures to drop in the winter, we ought to expect and prepare for heightened anxiety and other difficult emotions at this time. Judging or attempting to resist these difficult emotions actually creates additional suffering and moves us further away from what we need.

You can experiment with this right now: first, try saying to yourself, “Relax” or “Stop thinking about it!” What do you feel? Now, try telling yourself “It’s understandable you’re feeling [insert difficult emotion/s here] during this time of transition and uncertainty. Anyone else in your shoes would be feeling this way.” Now what do you feel? If you’re like most of us, self-empathy is more helpful than dismissing or judging our feelings.

Finally, a reminder that anxiety precedes action. It’s there to tell us to pay attention to a potential threat. In this case, without anxiety, we wouldn’t be motivated to take the threat seriously and protect ourselves – individually and globally. It’s only when we respond to our emotions without mindfulness or wisdom that we risk irrational or impulsive decisions.

**5. Trust in our individual and collective resilience**

A traditionally effective way of working through anxiety is to play out the worst-case scenario: saying “And then what?” until we get to a place where we regain a sense of control and certainty. Yet in this situation, it’s hard to envision what we’ll be working with should things devolve as significantly as our minds fear. While in many cases, anxiety tells us dramatic and improbable stories; in this case, it’s tough to discern between when anxiety is catastrophizing, versus when it’s forecasting.

With so many unknowns, it’s not realistic (or wise) to blindly trust that “Everything will be okay!” It’s more realistic to expect that there will be challenges ahead, and to prepare for them as best as possible. But alongside spending time in warranted fear, I encourage you to spend moments trusting in our individual and collective resilience as humans. Look back on our history as a species: we’ve lived through wars, pandemics, natural disasters, and recessions. We are programmed to adapt, heal, and support and care for each other. Look back on the difficult times you’ve been through thus far: you are stronger and more resourced than you know. We will get through this. We will rebuild. And we will do so together.