

Coping and Caring for Oneself During COVID-19: Practical Steps for Nurse Leaders

COVID-19 brings forth a new level of stress and uncertainty to the world and health care. To care for others well during this season of COVID-19 will require us to learn how to care for ourselves at the same time.

Here are some practical steps you can take to ensure that you are properly attending to your own needs so that you can in turn sustainably attend to the needs of others:

1. Take the necessary steps to protect yourself and loved ones.

The World Health Organization suggests staying informed but avoiding overexposure to news that might cause you to feel anxious or distressed. Take reasonable and well-informed measures to ensure your own safety and your loved ones.

2. Acknowledge that you need to cope.

You can't cope with an emotion or a problem that you are unwilling to accept that you have. "I shouldn't feel anxious or tired or overwhelmed because my circumstances aren't as dire as others" is the language of denial. Others can have legitimate needs AND you can have legitimate needs both at the same time.

3. Be mindful of how you compensate for your lack of control.

It is entirely human to seek out certainty and any semblance of control in the midst of a disorienting and rapidly changing environment. Some of us compensate through vigilant and meticulous micromanagement (which will often lead to angry outbursts at the slightest derailment) while others compensate through disengagement or helpless surrender. What is needed for such a time as this has been nicely captured by Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

4. Stay in the present moment.

Broadly speaking, anxiety is reflected in a mind that is perpetually oriented to the future while depression is reflected in a mind that is perpetually oriented to the past. Staying in the present moment (or even in the present day) ensures that the burdens we carry today are just today's burdens (rather than the burdens of yesterday and tomorrow as well).

5. Take care of your body.

Eat healthy, regular meals—to the extent that you are able. Exercise regularly. Spend time outside. Breathe deeply. Get plenty of sleep and avoid strenuous mental or physical activities as you approach bedtime. Avoid/limit alcohol.

6. In moments of acute distress, distract yourself.

While holding your breath, splash your face with cold water or press the area between your eyebrows with a cold pack (this triggers what scientists call the ‘dive response’). Engage in intense exercise for a short time, like running, jumping or doing sit-ups. And then afterwards, watch your favorite comedy while enjoying your favorite snack (in moderation).

7. Stay connected with others and reach out for support.

Research suggests that one of the most consistent and powerful predictors of resilience and recovery in the face of emotionally distressful situations is social support—being reminded that others care and that we are not alone. As nurses, we are used to being on the side of giving social support to others. And it’s also a gift that we need to receive as well. There are many types of social support—it can be emotional (aimed at meeting emotional needs), instrumental (aimed at meeting practical needs), formal (with professionals such as psychologists or counselors) and informal (with family and friends). Every type is helpful and at any given point, we may find ourselves needing one form more than another.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [NAMI COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Information and Resources](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association](#)
- [American Psychological Association: Pandemics](#)
- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America \(ADAA\)](#)
- [Psychology Today Therapist Directory](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#)

If you’re feeling alone and struggling, you can also reach out to The Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741 or to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by calling (800) 273-8255.

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