

Well-Being Self-Care Tips for Challenging Times

BY ROBIN OAKS

May you be safe and happy.
May you be free from suffering.
May you experience joy and ease.
May you hold all your difficulties gently and with care.
May you be well.

I started this article with these specific words because acts of kindness and care, including to ourselves, are a type of medicine and response-ability that is needed in these challenging times. We all are responding and reacting in our different ways to an unexpected natural event that has sent shockwaves, affecting our global communities, financial and governmental institutions, public health systems, and our confidence and well-being. As we are collectively joined in a shared type of suffering, it is important to realize we do have control over how we experience and respond to our circumstances.

While the virus is spreading person-to-person the harmful effect of stress is also causing dis-ease. Even if you feel that you are comfortably riding the tsunami of changes affecting many aspects of life, it is certain that someone you know, a family member, or a client you will interact with is trying to stay afloat emotionally, physically, financially, or socially. Self-care practices that broaden our awareness and strengthen our abilities to think clearly and emotionally self-regulate will help us handle difficult circumstances.

The words set out above come from a practice known as compassion meditation, also referred to as loving-kindness or maitri/metta meditation.¹ The intention is to move from disconnection and judgment to open-hearted feelings of care and acceptance for self and others. The practice involves 1) sitting quietly, 2) focusing on the heart area, 3) breathing slowly, and 4) then silently directing these thoughts to yourself, to those you love, and, expanded in ever widening circles of interconnection, to all others in the natural world.

Researchers at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studied the effects of compassion meditation on people practicing over a two-week period. They found that only seven hours of training increased altruistic behavior and created changes in brain functioning in response to human suffering.² Dr. Helen

Weng, the lead researcher, noted, “Your eyes are a window into what you care about and we wanted to know: Does looking more at suffering in the ‘mind’s eye’ translate into looking more at suffering out in the real world, and can this be done with less distress? We found from learning compassion meditation, the people who were able to look more at suffering also were able to have less brain activity in areas that usually signal distress – the amygdala, insula, and orbitofrontal cortex. This may show that it is possible to learn to be calm and balanced in the face of suffering by practicing compassion meditation.”

However, recent findings concerning mindfulness techniques suggest that gratitude and compassion meditation practices alone are not the most effective stress buffers when sudden shock, trauma or emotionally challenging events occur. So what can we do during these stress-inducing times to help ourselves and others build resilience?

At present, all of our coping strategies are getting activated at the same time, which contributes to many of us functioning outside of our “Window of Tolerance.” Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, and co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center, coined this phrase to describe the state at which we function well in the face of stressors. Survival mode responses – fight, flight, freeze – are arousal states that try to protect us when we perceive something threatening or harmful, but are not meant to sustain us.

It is important to be aware that everyone has different ways and degrees of coping. Certain stressors, but not others, can cause us to move beyond our tolerance capacity. Behaviors that signal we are experiencing overwhelm or shutting down include changes in energy levels and activity, increases in irritability, anger outbursts, crying, worrying, frequent arguing, judgmental opinions, and blaming of others, along with physical complaints such as difficulty relaxing or sleeping, digestive distress, and muscular pain or tension. These reactions are normal in times of heightened uncertainty about the future or fears about ensuring safety for ourselves and others. When dealing with rapid change, we feel helpless and out of control.

One of the reasons that practices targeting our thinking



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patterns and emotional intelligence are so important, especially in times of crisis, is because we are wired to interpret circumstances through a lens that is skewed to focus on negative, not positive experiences. This adaptive evolutionary function, referred to as the “negativity bias,” involves our tendency to focus on, remember, and assimilate negative, threatening information far more readily than we process events perceived as positive. Negative events occupy far more bandwidth than pleasant ones, fueling excessive worrying and anxiety. Our brain’s neuroplasticity provides the antidote because we have the capacity to engage in mind-body practices that rewire our thinking and interpretation of events. Specific mindfulness and attention practices help build our capacity to handle challenging life events, not because they calm us down, but because they wake us up. These practices empower us to have choice, a sense of control, and capacity to self-regulate our reaction. Sharon Salzberg writes in *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*, “Mindfulness helps us get better at seeing the difference between what’s happening and the stories we tell ourselves about what’s happening - stories that get in the way of direct experience. Often such stories treat a fleeting state of mind as if it were our entire and permanent self.” Physical well-being and emotional well-being are intimately linked. The following is a list of mind-body practice tips and reminders for how to maintain peak performance and foster resilience when circumstances feel precarious:

- *Structure*: Create routines throughout your day that bring a sense of structure when life otherwise feels chaotic. Especially important is going to sleep at a consistent time each night, and limiting screen time as bedtime approaches.
- *Touch*: Take a hot shower or bath before sleeping. Try practicing body brushing by lightly stroking with a soft bristle

brush all over your skin, always in the direction of the heart, moving from feet to head to activate the relaxation response and move lymph. In Chinese Medicine, there are areas on the body known as acupoints, and, in Ayurvedic Medicine from India, they are referred to as marma points. Chi or prana move through these points and optimizing its flow is

considered beneficial to health and well-being. Many who have experienced acupuncture or massage (such as shiatsu and foot reflexology), or practice yoga, know about these ancient healing methodologies. Certain points are believed to help emotional balancing. For instance, one located on the mid-line near the center of the sternum, is named the Sea of Tranquility. Gently resting your hands over this area, which is above the thymus gland, and breathing slowly, may be calming. • *Nourish*: Try to reduce or minimize your intake of stimulants, caffeine, and sugar, which contribute to tension and irritability. Nourish yourself with nutritious foods during stressful times, and don't skip meals or eat too late. Drink plenty of clean spring water. • *Unplug and pay attention*: Take technology breaks throughout the day. Watch your reactive tendencies by paying attention to your patience or impatience with uncertainty. For instance, notice how long you can wait to check who called or texted? This can become an opportunity to practice where your attention flows, and build your awareness muscle that can counter reactivity. Can we stay mindful of what is actually happening, and not be swept away by thought? With practice we can intentionally self-direct our attention; our brain's neuroplasticity means that we become whatever we practice. • *Movement and exercise*: Move in place; do yoga, qi-gong, tai chi, and martial arts; engage in running, walking in nature and neighborhoods, dancing, biking, stretching, laughing and shaking off tension. Yoga poses with forward folding movements are particularly effective in calming and activating parasympathetic (alert calm, rest, digest, restore) nervous system responses. One useful stretch to clear tension from your neck and shoulders involves clasping both hands behind your occiput and neck area and pulling slowly back from your elbows, creating a stretch along the spine, scapula, and upper shoulders. Now fold your elbows forward slowly until you are gently touching the sides of your head. Do this cycle a few times while breathing in and out. Arch slightly and fold forward a little further through each repetition. • *Enjoyment practices*: Read a book, cook, build, sew, watch something entertaining, listen to inspirational or informative podcasts, play games, sing, create, play music, learn a new skill, be in nature and experience awe. Hit the pause button, especially if overthinking or excessive doing becomes a norm. Notice when and what causes any type of "overconsuming," and curtail it. Set limits for how much news you digest because news feeds our negativity bias, which can lead to physical and emotional reactions similar to bingeing and addictive ill effects.

• *Acceptance and forgiveness*: Accept feelings as natural. Mirror for others, without judgment, what they may be experiencing if they reach out for support. Mindfulness

teacher and author Tara Brach advises that in times of loss, fear, and uncertainty do not turn away from what you are experiencing but "meet your edge, then soften." Softening is not surrender, but a capacity to be with and build a relationship with yourself and life that will empower, strengthen, and enrich you. Efforts to resist feelings only make them persist; building capacity involves practice. If you need a helping hand, ask for it, and proceed with care. • *Connection*: Humans need interaction and relationship. Connect with others, including animals, nature and whatever brings you joy. Seek out those who can listen and be present with your feelings. Find creative ways to honor any orders for "physical distancing," but keep socially connecting in a way that meets your needs; laugh, cry, console, share, and support each other. • *Come to your senses*: As often as possible through the day, pay attention to your breathing. Breathe through your nose, and slow your breathing down. Practice diaphragmatic breathing. Specialized clusters of neurons in the brain continually monitor the various types of breath characteristics (slow, rhythmic, or rapid patterns, sobbing, yawning, gasping, laughing, sighing). Based on what patterns are detected, messages are sent throughout the body so there is a coordinated reaction of all systems to signals of either alarm or calm alertness. You have the power to intentionally adjust your breathing patterns and control your physical and emotional experiences. Imagine spaciousness behind your eyes, around your jaw, neck, shoulders, lower back, hands and feet; with attention you can relax these areas of chronic tension. Putting a smile on your face, even a subtle "Mona Lisa" one, releases "feel-good" neuropeptides, including dopamine, endorphins and serotonin, that calm the nervous system and balance stress hormones. A smile is contagious, in a good way; consider spreading it to others.

We are all experiencing together, on a global scale, rapidly changing conditions that may create feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, loneliness and uncertainty. Consider any of these self-care well-being tips as your "first responders" to build resilience and provide support to navigate these challenging times. If anyone wants to share any beneficial wellness practices, or has ideas for exploring well-being topics that may be of interest to our legal community, feel free to contact me. ■

"I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship." - Louisa May Alcott

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