

JANE CASSANO, MSW RSW

MENTAL HEALTH TOOLS DURING COVID 19



7 Quick Practices
Anytime, Anywhere

During times of stress,
we resist change and we
gravitate to our old ways of
coping. The practices
outlined here can be done
in a minute or two. The
beauty of these tools is that
they can be done anytime,
anywhere. They are small
gestures but they can have
a big impact on our
mental health.



Grounding

Grounding exercises can be used whenever we feel like our emotions are out of control. They can anchor us in the present moment which is always helpful. Typically, when our feelings escalate and we become overwhelmed, we also experience physical symptoms such as a racing heart, fast breathing, sweating or stomach sickness. When we have strong emotions and physical discomfort, we can direct our attention to the present moment. This will calm us down and allow us to access more rational thoughts. If you are already thinking “I don’t have time to do these things” – beware, you might be making excuses to avoid something new.



Exercises

Practice 1: Soles of the Feet (Kristin Neff & Chris Germer)

Feel the soles of your feet on the floor
Notice the sensations, the sense of touch
Try gently rocking forward and backward on your feet
and side-to-side
Perhaps make little circles with your knees, feeling the
changing sensations in the soles of your feet
Feel how the floor supports your whole body
When your mind wanders,
just feel the soles of your feet again
Breathe deeply
Do this for a minute or until you feel more steady

Practice 2: Anchor in the present moment by naming:

5 Things you can see
4 Things you can feel
3 Things you can hear
2 Things you can smell
1 Thing you can taste

Anchoring is helpful during a panic attack, to regulate
emotion or anytime you feel 'disconnected'
from your body

Perspective Taking

Thinking about all the implications of a pandemic will overwhelm any one of us. During this time, it is important to practice keeping things into perspective. It is a pandemic, it is serious and we all need to take measures to keep ourselves and our community safe (physical distancing, handwashing, avoid touching our face, no large gatherings). Taking measures to keep safe is wise and it demonstrates deep care for all human kind. Being in a constant state of anxiety and fear is exhausting and unfortunately, it will not protect us or our communities. This is the time when practicing dialectical thinking can help. Dialectical thinking is when we hold two polar opposite concepts at the same time. For example, we believe we will come through this pandemic stronger AND it is a really hard thing to go through. Both these things are true. Keeping perspective during a pandemic can be difficult but there are practices that can help.



Exercises

Practice 3: CALM Practice (Brene Brown)

Calm is perspective, mindfulness and the ability to manage emotional reactivity

Ask yourself two questions when you are overwhelmed:

Do I have enough data to freak out?

Will freaking out help the situation?

Practice 4: Identify Your Resources?

We often think of our limitations and overlook the various resources that we have access to. Make a list or 'map out' the various resources you have during the pandemic. You can identify outer resources like friends or family and inner resources like humour and compassion.

Practice 5: U-Turn (Tara Brach)

When it feels like your emotions are out of control, stop what you are doing and take a pause. Take 3 long, deep breaths. Tune inward and notice what you are believing in that moment - what story might you be telling yourself. Is it true? Once you have paused long enough to settle, you can make a u-turn in your thinking, take a direction that is less distressing and less anxiety-provoking. We don't have to absorb everything at once - making a u-turn in our thinking will help us manage our reactions.

Exercises

Practice 6: Gratitude

Think about one thing you are grateful for, either at the beginning or end of your day. You can write it in a journal or on a sticky note. Be sure to stay with the gratitude thoughts for 20-30 seconds so you can soak in the feeling.

Another way to practice gratitude is to think about 3 things you are grateful for before your feet hit the ground in the morning.

Any moment that you bring focus to what you are grateful for will help rewire your brain to see the positives.



Self-Compassion

It is important to have compassion for others during this time AND extending it to ourselves can be beneficial for our state of mind. Cultivating self-compassion will not lead to selfishness or indulgence. In fact the research by Kristin Neff proves that it helps lower feelings of depression and anxiety.

There are three components of self-compassion: mindfulness, common-humanity and self-kindness.

Bringing awareness inward, remembering people around the world are having the same experience and going easy on yourself right now is key.



Exercises

Practice 7: Self-Compassion Break (Kristin Neff and Chris Germer)

First, acknowledge that you are having a hard time. Recognize the struggle and stop for a moment to close your eyes and take a deep breath.

In your mind or out loud, say these three phrases to help you through the difficult moment:

- 1.This is difficult (you may also say this is hard, or this is a moment suffering – use words that fit with who you are and how you would normally speak.
- 2.Other people are going through the same thing, I am not alone.
- 3.May I be kind to myself



Final Thoughts

Using the above tools will help you manage your emotions and reactions during COVID 19. They do not take a lot of time, they do not require prior training and they really work! Remember, whatever you practice grows stronger so be picky when it comes to your thoughts during a pandemic. Overthinking the scary things will create fear. Watching the news too much will make you feel panicked. This is not a historical event that we are reading about and it is not happening somewhere far away so be aware of what you let in right now. Also, individualize your toolbox - what works for you may not work for others so test the practices and see which ones make a difference. There are no side effects to these exercises! We don't have control over what will happen next but we can influence how we react.

Be safe and stay well.



Developed by Jane Cassano, MSW RSW

janecassano.com

April 2020