
Coping with the Stress of a Pandemic

A Mental Health Guide for CUIMC Students



COLUMBIA

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IRVING MEDICAL CENTER

STUDENT HEALTH SERVICE

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Coping with the Stress of a Pandemic:

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On March 12, 2020, COVID-19 was [declared a pandemic](#) by the World Health Organization. The scale and unpredictability of this global event may bring up experiences of uncertainty and danger, which can evoke feelings of shock, confusion, frustration, and worry. The following may provide some guidance as you develop a mental health plan to support feelings of stability and security through the coming days and weeks.

What is Your Response to Stress?

We all develop patterned responses to things that worry us. Keep in mind that responses are neither “good” nor “bad”—stress responses are different ways we’ve adapted to threatening circumstances. Which of the following patterns resonates with your current [stress response](#)? Knowing your stress response can help you determine the best coping strategies that align with your needs.

- **Response:** *I feel the need to **mobilize**. I have a desire to take action or take control.*
Coping Strategy: Focus on balance—set goals and take breaks.
- **Response:** *I want to **run away**. My thoughts are racing and I feel keyed up.*
Coping Strategy: Soothe worried feelings by decreasing sensory information—set boundaries with media consumption and identify negative thinking patterns.
- **Response:** *I feel **immobilized**. I don’t feel like doing anything and can’t motivate myself.*
Coping Strategy: Support your mood by increasing sensory information—plan on connecting with a friend and create a flexible daily schedule.
- **Response:** *I feel **disconnected**. I compartmentalize negative feelings and avoid addressing them.*
Coping Strategy: Make time to reflect and connect with intolerable feelings in small doses. Journal or talk with friends. Move on to something lighter when you begin to feel overwhelmed.
- **Response:** *I feel **okay**. I have ups and downs as I adjust but am able to stay within a comfortable enough emotional range. I’m consistently taking steps towards my goals.*
Coping Strategy: Engage in self-reflection to identify the coping tools you’re using; this will help you harness them reliably when needed.

Develop a mental health plan that fits your current stress response and needs. Remember that your response and needs may also change over the coming weeks and months. When it’s accessible, also feel and express gratitude, compassion, and hope. Recognize that most people—yourself included—are doing their best with the knowledge that they have. The goal is to have a good enough plan, not a perfect one!

Structure Your Day

Your daily schedule has likely been significantly altered. Identify your preferred way of scheduling days—highly structured, flexibly structured, or unstructured. Re-create that in your current reality.

- Keep your schedule consistent when it comes to class, meals, and bedtime. Use familiar apps and programs for scheduling and reminders. Change your clothes throughout the day.
- Re-evaluate expectations and focus on what you can realistically accomplish.
- Create bounded spaces to work and rest to help you shift mind states. For example, if you work in bed, re-arrange your pillows differently from your sleep set-up. If you live with others, set ground rules and discuss how to share space during periods of self-isolation or quarantine.
- Stay active and exercise. Explore virtual workouts—many do not require equipment.
- Make time to do things that lighten your mood: take breaks, read, watch movies, make music, dance, play games, and revisit past hobbies or start a new one.

Connect with Others

Self-isolation and [social-distancing](#) can bring up feelings of boredom, frustration, and loneliness. It can be helpful to maintain a sense of belonging by engaging with others.

- Schedule time to communicate with friends, classmates, coworkers, as well as biological and chosen family. Video chatting, telephone calls, texting, and emailing are ways to stay connected with others without in-person contact. Comcast is offering an "Internet Essentials" package and two free months nationally to new customers who meet eligibility requirements. Learn more and apply on the [Comcast Internet Essentials](#) webpage. Spectrum has also announced similar access to service; find details on the [Spectrum press release](#) page.
- Connect with family members at your comfort level. You may be placed in situations where you need to interact with people that you don't have a good relationship with. Maintain physical and emotional proximity at the level that is right for you.
- Advocate for your needs and use privilege to support more vulnerable community members. Shame and guilt are common feelings placed onto marginalized groups – notice if those feelings are coming up for you and be aware of placing those feelings on others.
- Engage in religious or spiritual activities—many are moving into virtual spaces.
- Revisit a hobby, interest, or a new creative endeavor. Share this with your support network. It's important to allow space for creativity and okay to experience pleasure during difficult times.

Set Boundaries with E-mail and Social Media

While online communication facilitates being “on” all the time, this is often not helpful. Identify the most important communication channels and manage how frequently you engage with them.

- Set a schedule for interacting with social media and email. For example, limiting screen-time before bed can decrease anxiety and increase sleep quality.
- Consider which emails should be reviewed immediately and which can wait (e.g. updates from your school or program vs. shopping deals).
- Uninstall social media apps from some of your digital devices to decrease usage.
- Block social media for a few hours a day on your browser. Apps and programs are available for many platforms, including [Google](#), [Apple](#), and [Android](#).

Set Boundaries for Media Consumption

Information is rapidly changing and news outlets provide constant coverage. Consider what level of media consumption is right for you. Aim to be informed and updated rather than overwhelmed.

- Obtain information from credible media outlets, public health websites ([CDC](#)), local public health authorities ([NYC Public Health Department](#)), and [CUIMC](#).
- Maintain distance from sensational media coverage that may be exaggerated or not grounded in scientific evidence. [Be aware of COVID-19 scams](#).
- Consider setting concrete limits on the number of minutes or hours per day that you spend obtaining news updates.

Manage Negative Thoughts and Feelings

Uncertainty can bring up thoughts and feelings related to change and not knowing. Take time to reflect on your mood and what is coming up for you.

- Identify and label your feelings. Are you feeling disappointed, bored, excited? Sooth big feelings by [meditating](#), journaling, shifting environments, or doing something until the feeling passes (e.g. cook or take a hot shower for 15 minutes).
- Identify negative thinking patterns. Are you catastrophizing, fortune telling, or defining things in black and white terms? Take some time to [challenge defeating statements](#).
- Stigma and rejection may be experienced by health-care workers, people in affected communities, and those with other illnesses. Separate out institutional, cultural, and personal aspects of the problem. This can help you see the total picture and separate systemic issues from ones that you can control.
- If you use alcohol, cannabis, or other substances, also [utilize harm reduction techniques](#). Additional resources about harm reduction and resources for people with substance use disorders are available under [Resources](#).

Make Plans

It's normal to experience concern about contracting disease during a pandemic. Develop plans that balance out your needs with the needs of others.

- Know the [symptoms of COVID-19](#).
- Update emergency contacts and keep helpful phone numbers in an accessible place.
- Make a simplified contingency plan if you become ill—who can help you with daily activities like shopping and errands? How will you notify professors?
- Think through how you can support someone you know who becomes seriously ill or who experiences a loss during this period.

Connect with Mental Health Services

Consider how you are going to take care of existing or emerging mental health needs. [CUIMC Mental Health Services](#) (MHS) provides updates regarding services through the [Student Health Service](#) website.

- People with existing mental health conditions may find that the pandemic increases symptoms. Reach out to established providers for support, medication refills, and update your treatment plan as needed. If you are already in treatment with a clinician at CUIMC MHS, please contact your provider via secure message through the [SHS Health Portal](#).
- If you are not already connected to a mental health clinician, consider initiating contact with a provider. Most insurance carriers provide telehealth, including psychiatry and psychotherapy services. You can schedule an Initial Telephone Appointment at CUIMC MHS through the [SHS Health Portal](#).
- Look into [online self-help groups](#). There are a number of peer support groups for a range of topics (e.g., depression, co-dependence, substance use, eating). They can provide a place to share experiences, discuss coping skills, and get or give support.
- Add relevant 24/7 hotline numbers into your phone. These resources offer both phone and text options.
 - [National Suicide Prevention Hotline](#): **1-800-273-8255**
 - [SAMHSA Disaster Distress Hotline](#): **1-800-985-5990**
 - [NYC Well](#): **1-888-692-9355**

Resources

The following are additional COVID-19 related resources:

Columbia University Resources

- For life-threatening emergencies, **call 911 and go directly to the nearest emergency room**. If you have an immediate concern about suicide for yourself or someone else, call SHS at **212-305-3400** and request to speak to a clinical or nurse immediately. You may also call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **800-273-8255** or walk yourself to the nearest emergency room. View the [SHS Emergencies](#) page for more information.
- The team at [Center for Student Wellness](#) + [AIMS \(Addition Information + Management Strategies\)](#) offers support with problem solving and connecting to resources. As learning at CUIMC transitions to a virtual environment, we can help you prioritize self-care, problem solve, and think through how to establish new routines. We can discuss coping techniques, give suggestions and tips for practicing mindfulness, provide ideas for communication strategies, provide a listening ear, and more.
- AIMS utilizes a harm reduction approach and is available to assist students and their friends, family, and colleagues who experience issues with or have questions related to substance use and concerning behaviors. AIMS also provides resources for students in recovery. The following are additional resources for people with substance use disorders, folks in recovery, and more on harm reduction.
 - [Harm Reduction Coalition: COVID-19 Guidance for People Who Use Drugs and Harm Reduction Programs](#)
 - [National Institute on Drug Abuse: COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders](#)
 - [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](#)
 - [Online Intergroup Alcoholics Anonymous](#)
 - [Narcotics Anonymous Meetings](#)
- [Sexual Violence Response](#) is operating on a remote service structure. The SVR Helpline remains available 24/7/365 and can be accessed at **(212) 854-HELP (4357)**. Our survivor advocates continue to provide students, faculty, and staff with information, referrals, reporting options, and telephonic support through crisis counseling and intervention. They are also able to conduct confidential appointments with survivors and co-survivors via phone or the secure Zoom online platform.
- [The Food Pantry at Columbia](#) will be open through the rest of the semester and through the summer with locations at Lerner Hall and Barnard Hall. [The Food Bank for NYC](#) is also a resource available for people staying in the city.

Mental Health Guides

- [CDC Mental Health Response: Reducing Stigma](#)
- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty](#)
- [Psychology Today: COVID-19 and Pandemic Anxiety](#)
- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America: Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty](#)
- [Psych Central: Coronavirus Anxiety: 4 Ways to Cope with Fear](#)
- [American Psychological Association: Keeping Your Distance to Stay Safe](#)

Higher Education Resources

- [Hope Foundation: BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Supporting #RealCollege Students During COVID19](#)
- [American College Health Association: Coronavirus Anxiety: 4 Ways to Cope with Fear](#)

Free Tools & Videos

- [Free Meditations with Headspace](#)
- [Video: Mind Wise Institute](#)
- [Video: My OCD Care](#)

Family Resources

- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)
- [Kids Health: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): How to Talk to Your Child](#)