



Returning to Work

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The Office

Navigating Workplace Change

Many of us will be returning to a changed workplace, whether in the way we do work, the people we're working with or even our attitude about working. Changes in the workplace can leave us feeling vulnerable, anxious and even angry.

Whenever life throws us off course, it presents an opportunity to pause, reassess and reflect on what we truly want to create. Then we can move forward feeling more on course.

One's perspective about what's happening is critical. With a job transition – or any type of change – including a troubled relationship or unplanned life adjustment, one voice within us states, "Why is this happening to me?" while another voice may ask, "What's the lesson in this for me?" or "How do I use this experience to help me grow, and how might I take advantage of this chance for a fresh start?" While it is important to be realistic about all aspects of life transitions and to acknowledge feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and fear, your next move is a crucial choice. Do you want to remain stuck in pain and stress, or are you ready to focus your energy forward, looking at how best to learn from the experience?

Change can be scary and may leave you feeling overwhelmed. Follow the steps below to get started. It is dangerous to oversimplify the complex nature of any life transition, so tailor these suggestions to your own unique reality.

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** Let yourself feel what you feel, and find a way to release some of the emotion. Physical activity, writing down your thoughts or talking with others can help let this energy out and prevent the distraction of negative thoughts and self-defeating behaviors.
- **Reflect and refocus.** Take stock of what you still have, and express gratitude, such as "I still have my ability to think, my special talents and my aspirations. I'm grateful for relationships and for my family." Take a walk, a bike ride or a longer hot shower than usual, and ask yourself some powerful questions, such as "How do I want to feel three months from now? What will it take to get there? What does my ideal week look like? What could I do to realize that? Who could help with that?"
- **Choose.** Entertain the notion that everything is a choice. Decide what you want to choose as the next chapter of your life. Simply choosing doesn't guarantee you'll get it, however. The power of your intentions makes a huge difference. Feeling like you have a choice is certainly better than feeling like you have no influence, so why not adopt this philosophy? Choosing what matters most and what you'll honor as authentic priorities is absolutely up to you. It is about being resilient and truly empowered to choose your life's course rather than being a victim of circumstance and replaying old thought patterns.
- **Get into action.** Start by visualizing how you want to feel or where you want to be, perhaps three months from now. Work backwards from this goal until you find something small enough that you can do the next day or the next week. Picking first steps and finding the right people for encouragement and support will help you realize your goal.
- **Utilize your Employee Assistance Program.** Did you know that your Employee Assistance Program is a free, confidential service for you and your household family members that can take on your to-do list and provide you with the amount of time necessary to manage the changes around you? Examples of services include:
 - Personalized concierge resources including child-, elder- and pet-care solutions, transportation and local errand resources, low-cost home repair and utility assistance, etc.
 - Telephonic appointments with EAP attorneys and financial planners to assist with personal legal matters and financial issues that may have arisen during your time away from the workplace.
 - Confidential guidance from a local counselor to provide stress management assistance during the time of transition.

Surviving Downsizing and Getting Back to Work

Nearly every business experiences downsizing at some point, especially after an economic shock such as the one that has resulted from the COVID-19 outbreak. Knowing that, however, doesn't make it any less traumatic, and even those who retain their jobs will have to cope with a new and often unsettling reality. If you or someone you know has survived a recent layoff or downsizing, the following information can help.

How to Cope with Organizational Layoffs

Anxiety, shock, guilt, fear and confusion are typical reactions to making it through a downsizing. You may feel grateful to still have a job; you may feel betrayed or less than optimistic about the company. These feelings are valid. Instead of dwelling on the recent losses, however, try to keep an open mind and a positive outlook, which can make it easier to cope with the situation.

- Be objective
- Find constructive ways to express your thoughts and feelings
- Balance your time carefully
- Don't try to cope by using alcohol or drugs
- Focus on enhancing your work skills
- Rise to the challenge

Talking with Management

When downsizing does occur, you are likely to have questions and comments, not to mention anxiety. Some topics you might want to discuss with your manager during this time might include:

- The need for increased guidance, leadership and open communication
- Honesty about future expectations
- Assessment of your job security, career path and how the downsizing will improve the company's outlook
- Changes to expect in your duties and those of your colleagues
- Inside opportunities to create new challenges and professional growth
- Assistance with time management. Remember, now, more than ever, balancing work and home is vital to your emotional health and productivity.
- Support, in addition to your Employee Assistance Program, that will be made available to those remaining on the job. An example: skills training.
- Suggestions for taking an active, positive role in improving morale among your colleagues
- How you can support your boss, who likely saw friends and colleagues let go, too.

Accepting and Moving On

So you made it through the downsizing period. One way to deal with the situation is to accept what has happened and keep moving forward. Maybe this is an opportunity to advance within the company; a chance to learn additional industry-related skills and management tools; and a way to showcase your value.

Managing Your Emotions in the Workplace

Everyone experiences emotions at work. We get frustrated with bosses giving more work when they don't understand how much we already have. We get upset with co-workers who don't do their jobs so we can't do ours. We get angry with irate customers who don't realize we are only trying to help. We worry about an uncertain future, especially in times like these.

But with all these emotions, most people don't think they have anything to do with how they are feeling. They believe their emotions are a result of an external cause, i.e., the circumstances or situations of their lives or the behavior of others. It looks that way because that's how you have been taught to think about emotions. It just isn't true.

The first key to handling your emotions in the workplace is to recognize that you have something to do with it! Remember, the root word of emotions is emote – which implies an action or moving energy. So, emotions are an attempt to express outwardly what we believe.

How you feel is a reflection of how you think. Negative thoughts produce negative emotions and behaviors. Positive thoughts produce positive emotions and behaviors. So emotion is not something that happens to you, it's actually something you are doing.

Mastering our Emotions

Managing Thoughts

Identify Facts vs. Beliefs

Our thoughts about what is true in our lives cause our emotional responses. Thoughts are our perceptions and are comprised of attitudes, prejudices, judgments and beliefs that we think are true. When faced with a situation, ascertain the exact facts about the incidents in your life; separate your beliefs about these facts right from the beginning.

Identify Beliefs About Yourself

A primary influence on our abilities to deal successfully with life's challenges is our own belief about us. If you believe yourself to be a loving and kind person, yet you are always feeling sad, tired or angry, work to uncover the true facts from your irrational and unproductive beliefs so you can begin to change.

Accept Responsibility for Your Thoughts

Having discovered negative self-beliefs, you need to ask yourself whether it is good to hold such beliefs. Of course, your answer should be "no." Recognize that, for whatever reason, you have chosen to accept irrational self-defeating beliefs in the past and you are going to choose to believe something more positive in the future. Your thoughts are not determined by others or by what happens around you; your thoughts result from your own choice. Change and growth occur by taking responsibility for what you are choosing to believe within yourself.

Managing Emotions

Be Aware of "Doing" an Emotion

There is a moment when you decide that a particular emotional response is the action to take in a situation. In many cases that moment is unconscious, but often it is a conscious decision. Although it requires much practice, become more aware at the onset of an emotion and you will realize you have the ability to choose a better more productive emotional response in the future.

Accept Responsibility for Your Emotions

You feel what you choose to feel and express what you want to express. What "they" did may be very wrong, but that does not obligate you to feel a particular way in response. You can give yourself the ability to respond in new and more caring ways for yourself and others. You can always clean up your act!

Managing Behaviors

Identify Your Desired Behavioral Goals

How do you want to come across in a situation? What is the desired outcome for the situation you are in? Behavior is motivated by conscious and unconscious desires, so become aware of the conscious desires of a situation.

Identify the Relationship to Your Present Behavior and Your Desired Goals

The way you behave is often counterproductive to your goals. So recognize the difference between the ways you are responding and what the outcome is and you will increase the possibility of choosing the most appropriate behavior.

Mask Anxiety: Calming Yourself while Staying Safe

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends widespread use of face masks, especially in public places where social distancing is difficult to maintain. Some cities and states have even passed laws requiring the wearing of masks in public.

While the measures are intended to slow the spread of COVID-19, they can have some unintended consequences, especially for those prone to anxiety.

Psychologists are reporting a rise in anxiety symptoms and even panic attacks as a result of mask requirements. Those same experts say that it is not surprising given the negative associations we have with masks in general, including illness or threat of violence, as well as the physical and psychological effects they have on wearers. Among the reasons for the rise in anxiety:

- Wearing a mask in public is a novel situation for most people and such situations provoke anxious feelings in and of themselves.
- Humans gain understanding from facial expressions, which are all but erased by masks. Without those non-verbal cues, we can become disoriented and uncomfortable.
- People who have experienced trauma as a result of violent crime in which the perpetrator wore a mask are likely to experience that trauma anew when surrounded by people wearing masks.
- With our natural anxiety levels elevated as a result of the pandemic, wearing a mask may further increase those anxiety levels. That's because, for many people, masks mimic the feeling of being smothered. This in turn excites the "fight-or-flight" response, which raises heartbeat and blood pressure, both of which also happen when we're anxious.

Whether the mask sparks panic for you, or just an uncomfortable feeling, experts suggest some steps you can take to ease the symptoms, including:

- Wear the mask more often. The more time you spend wearing the mask the less novel the sensation and the lower the anxiety.
- Try to ignore the minor discomfort and tell yourself it's only temporary.
- Think about positive thoughts and remember that you are wearing a mask to help protect the people around you as well as the people you love at home.

Reducing Anxiety

Most of us are feeling higher anxiety and stress levels than normal. These are normal responses to tough times. Prolonged feelings of stress and anxiety, however, can have negative effects on our health and general well-being. Learning to relax by reducing stress and anxiety can improve your outlook and your long-term health. Try the following techniques:

Deep Breathing

Breathing from our chests or shoulders can create more tension and stress by preventing air from reaching the bottom of our lungs, increasing blood pressure and preparing the body for action. Deep breathing focuses on using the diaphragm (the spot just under your rib cage) to draw slow, deep breaths of air into the lungs and to release them slowly.

Stretching and Yoga

Stress often appears as tension in our necks, shoulders and head, what's commonly referred to as the stress triangle. Stretching exercises can relieve tension, make your body more flexible and produce a calming effect. Yoga is a more formal method of stretching, but even just shrugging your shoulders, stretching your arms and rolling your neck a few times a day can have positive effects.

Massage

Physically, massage can help alleviate tense muscles, lower blood pressure, promote deep breathing and improve posture. Mental benefits of massage include reduced anxiety, increased body awareness and enhanced creativity. Remember, you don't need anyone else to massage tight muscles. Foam rollers, muscle rollers or even a tennis ball can be used to relieve muscle tension.

Meditation and Visualization

Meditation involves "quieting the mind" by blocking out sensory input and distraction, while visualization involves using the brain's creative capacity to create a stress-free experience, much like daydreaming. Both meditation and visualization can be helpful in relieving stress.

Relieving Stress and Anxiety

Sometimes, your emotions can trigger physical responses and urges in your body. For example, if you are nervous, you may feel your hands start to shake or sweat. Instead of focusing on getting rid of your anxiety and the physical responses that accompany it, try accepting them.

How Stress Affects the Body

Emotional stress often causes tension or discomfort in the forehead, temples, neck, throat, jaw, shoulders, chest or abdomen. Most people feel one (or a combination) of these symptoms when they are stressed, while others experience numbness. At times, attempting to ignore or push these feelings away can worsen the discomfort. Instead of thinking about sweaty palms, shaking hands, stiff shoulders, a tight throat, or a quick heart rate as weaknesses, think of them as natural responses to your feelings.

Developing Mindfulness

When you are experiencing pain or discomfort, take a minute to focus on it and ask yourself the following questions:

- Where do I feel uncomfortable?
- Does it have a certain shape?
- What does it feel like?
- Does it move or stay in one place?

Breathe deeply and acknowledge your discomfort and its characteristics. Accept how you are feeling and take 10 slow, deep breaths. Recognize that the emotional discomfort you are experiencing is fleeting and that your body is simply responding to stress. Imagine your discomfort expanding and contracting as you breathe. As you go about the rest of your day, allow yourself the space to feel uncomfortable. Learning to accept your emotional discomfort as you are experiencing it will ease some of the anxiety and tension associated with the physical symptoms of stress.

It is important to remember that being uncomfortable is not a weakness. Just as laughter is a response to humor, discomfort is a response to stress. Both laughter and discomfort are natural responses to emotions.

Keep in mind that it is natural for physical symptoms of stress to come and go. Knowing that feelings of discomfort are temporary responses to stress will allow you to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

Maintaining Calm

Lowering and controlling stress and anxiety levels takes regular practice. Keep in mind the following tips to help you:

Talk about your feelings. A good way to alleviate fear is to discuss it. Chat with a friend or family member, or take advantage of the help available through your Employee Assistance Program.

Focus on what is important. Playing with your children, for example, is more productive than watching all the news coverage of the world's woes. Focus your energy on what is important to you.

Decide what you can and cannot control. While it is smart to be aware of your surroundings and what is going on, dwelling on events out of your control can be detrimental.

Reduce your stress. Incorporate basic stress-reducing activities into your life, including exercise and leisure activities such as watching a movie or reading a book.

Carry on with your daily life. Disruptions caused by excessive worry will only increase stress levels for yourself and those around you. Adhere to your routine as much as possible.

Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Physical health plays a key role in keeping your mental health stable.

Seek professional help. If you are suffering from sleep or eating disruptions, talk with a professional. Start with your Employee Assistance Program, which can provide short-term counseling and refer you to resources for more intensive treatment.

Getting Back into the Habit of Success

There are some basic habits shared by everyone who achieves success on the job. As we get back into the swing of the workplace, it's probably not a bad idea to keep these habits in mind:

- **List your to-dos for the week and prioritize.** Keep in mind that prioritizing your tasks takes a lot of mental effort. Try planning when your brain is freshest. For some people, this may mean first thing in the morning; others may prefer to wait until later in the day.
- **Organize tasks by importance and how long you think you will need to complete each task.** Make sure to coordinate your schedule with when you are more productive.
- **Establish a routine for daily tasks.** A routine can help make you more efficient. For example, if you need extra time to get focused in the morning, answer routine emails when you get in. This will give you time to settle in and prepare to take on bigger tasks that require more focus.
- **Schedule similar tasks back-to-back.** Try making all your phone calls one after another or writing and sending emails all at one time.
- **Take breaks.** Complex tasks, like writing or strategizing, take a lot of brain work. It is critical to give your brain a chance to relax. Take a short walk or socialize with a co-worker. When you get back to work, it will likely be easier to focus.
- **Don't multitask.** When you do, you divide your attention between two activities. It is easier to forget things because your focus is split. Focus on one item at a time to ensure that you catch any mistakes and do not have to redo the task.
- **Go slow; it will actually save you time in the long run.** Instead of rushing a response to a critical email, take the time to write a thoughtful and thorough reply. This will help prevent confusion. When writing a report, work slowly and talk with others about your conclusions. Doing so will help you better understand your findings.
- **Organize your day around your body's energy levels.** Tackle your most important work when you have the most energy and save low-intensity tasks for periods when energy is low.
- **Take care of your health.** It's hard to be productive and successful when you're tired, are battling a health condition or your body is craving nutrients you're not giving it due to a poor diet.

How to Listen to Someone in the Workplace Who is Suffering

Whenever people face mental health issues resulting from loss of a loved one, trauma, or any other reason, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners.

Unfortunately, many of us try to avoid listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

What Typically Happens

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals, such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professionals can help in special ways and provide the suffering individual with insights that most of us are not able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

What to Do

Though each situation is unique, the most important thing to do is simply be there and listen and show you care.

- Find a private setting where you will not be overheard or interrupted. Arrange things so there are no large objects, such as a desk, between you and the person.
- Keep your comments brief and simple so you do not get the person off track.
- Ask questions which show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking. For example, "What happened next?" or "What was that like?"
- Give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing your interest. Do not hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate.
- Let people know that it is OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It is also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.

What Not to Do

Do not be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an immediate emotional response while another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later.

Emotions are rarely simple. People who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person is usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.

It is natural to worry about saying the wrong thing. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation. Use this to guide you:

- Do not offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.
- Do not turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, "I know exactly how you feel," because everybody is different.
- Do not say anything which tries to minimize the person's pain such as, "You shouldn't take it so hard" or "It could be a lot worse."
- Do not say anything which asks the person to disguise or reject his or her feelings such as, "You have to pull yourself together."

The 5 A's Model of Intervention

The 5 A's model was developed by the National Cancer Institute to help people quit smoking, but it is often used as a model for intervention in the hopes of bringing about behavior change. The 5 A's stand for:

Ask

Are you ready to do something to change?
Can I help?

Assess

How bad is the problem and how can we help?

Advise

Make clear, specific, personalized recommendations

Assist

Help where and when you can

Arrange

Refer to them to supports at work, such as your EAP, or in the community

Afterward

Once you have finished talking, it may be appropriate to offer simple forms of help such as:

- Checking about basic things like eating and sleeping
- Sharing a meal may help the person find an appetite
- Giving a ride to someone too upset to drive may mean a lot
- Ask what else you can do to be of assistance.

After you have talked to someone who is hurting, you may feel as if you have absorbed some of that person's pain. Take care of yourself by talking to a friend, taking a walk or doing whatever helps restore your own spirits.

Getting Along With Co-workers

Developing good work relationships can be difficult because everyone has different personalities, working styles, goals, attitudes and moods. Add to that all the stress people are feeling in trying to regain a sense of normalcy after the stresses of the recent outbreak, and you can see how conflict can arise. Working well with others involves understanding human nature, being willing to compromise, and looking beyond the surface to understand people and the reasons for their actions.

Employees who get along with different types of people in the workplace show off their flexibility and adaptability, two traits that are highly sought after by employers. For a company to be able to regain its momentum and be successful, employees need to respect each other and work together. The most important thing to remember when dealing with co-workers, especially difficult co-workers, is to remain professional. Here's how:

- Treat others as you would like to be treated
- Keep an open mind
- Focus on team spirit
- Be cheerful, and do not concentrate on minor disappointments or issues
- Be polite
- Never lie or spread gossip
- Never confront or ignore a co-worker
- Never make promises to others that you cannot keep
- Be kind and encouraging to co-workers
- Take an interest in their lives and activities
- Do not discuss topics in the office that would make co-workers uncomfortable
- Respect a co-worker's decision not to participate in a conversation that makes him or her uncomfortable
- Do not worry about receiving praise or credit; concentrate on doing a good job and keep a good work ethic, and praise will naturally follow
- Try to work out problems with co-workers before going to a supervisor
- Respect the moods of fellow employees (understand that everyone has a bad day every now and then)
- Try to solve problems instead of creating them

Dealing With Difficult People

Work relationships can be challenging because people have different personalities, working styles, goals, attitudes and moods. This can especially be true these days, when most people are feeling elevated levels of stress as they work to re-establish their routines. Working well with others involves understanding human nature, being willing to compromise and looking beyond the surface to understand people and the reasons for their actions. Here are some ways you can improve your interactions with people at work.

Co-workers

- Always remain professional
- Be polite, keep an open mind and treat others as you would like to be treated
- Stay positive and do not concentrate on minor disappointments or issues
- Do not discuss topics in the office that would make co-workers uncomfortable

Managers, Supervisors and Bosses

- Do not be afraid to talk to the boss about problems or questions
- Express feelings in positive ways
- Maintain a professional relationship with mutual respect

Customers

- Keep a positive attitude
- Be polite, even when a customer is rude
- Always be eager to provide assistance
- Apologize to the customer if he or she is dissatisfied
- Try to resolve any issues the customer presents

Job Stress in Difficult Times

Even under normal circumstances, everyone experiences some amount of stress in their occupation. In extraordinary times such as we are currently facing, stress will likely be a problem for most if not all of us. Over time, stress can affect job performance, impair physical and mental health and cause strains on your relationships. Although job stress may be unavoidable, it can be manageable when you adopt the appropriate techniques and attitude.

Understanding Stress

Stress is a normal response to life changes. An ability to react to stress is crucial for human survival. Each of us possesses an innate “fight or flight” response mechanism to potentially harmful or dangerous situations. When faced with stress, the adrenal glands secrete stimulating hormones; extra glucose is burned for energy; the heart rate accelerates; blood is channeled to working muscles; and your brain releases epinephrine, cortisone and other hormones to get you ready for the challenge.

While stress can keep you sharp and alert, prolonged stress can strain the body. Unrelieved tension builds up, causing an array of physiological and psychological symptoms that may include:

- A weakened immune system (lower white blood cell count)
- Headaches and migraines
- Stomachaches and ulcers
- Back and muscular pain
- Cardiovascular disorders
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Concentration difficulties
- Chronic fatigue
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Depression
- Panic attacks

Job stress also may lead to:

- Deterioration in work relationships
- Decreased productivity
- Low workplace morale
- Work absenteeism
- Substance abuse

Common Causes of Job Stress

Job stress often is caused by:

- Job insecurity (downsizing, co-worker terminations)
- Lack of creativity and flexibility in your position
- Deadline pressures
- Excessive workloads
- A workplace change (e.g., department restructuring, office relocation)
- A leaner workforce and limited resources
- Stressed co-workers and bosses
- Intimidating technology
- Information overload

Ways to Cope with Workplace Stress

If you feel yourself getting stressed about your job, try these tips to decrease your stress level and improve your performance:

- **Identify your stressors.** By recognizing the reasons behind your stress, you can learn to feel more in control and work to change the stress. Determine whether the stress you experience at work is due to worries or conflict at home.
- **Avoid setting too many lofty goals.** Set realistic expectations, and attempt challenges that are doable.
- **Anticipate boss and co-worker stress.** Prepare a few responses to stressful situations that may be presented to you by a supervisor or co-worker. For example, instead of reacting hastily to a question or request by a co-worker, ask whether you can get back to the person with your decision at a later time.

- **Learn to delegate responsibilities.** If you are a manager, empower your subordinates to take on more responsibilities and make more decisions. Encourage this as an opportunity for growth and training for a possible future promotion. Divide extra tasks fairly and reasonably.
- **Be more assertive in your responses to requests.** Be honest, but tactful. Learn to seek alternatives or to say no when necessary.
- **Examine your schedule.** Is your work schedule compatible with your home/personal life? Perhaps you can try a different shift, vary your work days or arrange to work from home on certain days.
- **Redefine your role.** Work with your supervisor on revising your job description to include more creative, empowering and satisfying duties.
- **Consider a different position, department or work location.** Ask your boss if this is possible.

Here are some suggestions for getting organized to eliminate clutter and reduce stress. These tips are especially important as we all begin to resume our workplace routines:

- **Organize your workspace.** Rearrange it for maximum efficiency. Create lists and schedules to help you meet deadlines.
- **Tackle one task at a time if possible.** List your duties in order of priority, and complete one at a time. This can make you feel more organized and in control, leading to a sense of greater accomplishment.
- **Learn time-management techniques.** Take a class or read books on how to better manage your time.
- **Do not procrastinate.** Tackle your most difficult projects first. Putting them off may lead to increased anxiety and stress.

Relaxation and exercise are effective ways to reduce stress. Follow these ideas:

- **Take occasional breaks.** Listen to your body. If you feel tired, nervous, tense or have achy muscles, take a break. Step away from your work for a few minutes, or practice relaxation techniques to recharge your mind and body. Do not work through lunch; take a real break.
- **Take breaks between meetings.** Try not to schedule too many meetings back to back.
- **Practice yoga and stretching exercises.** These can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible, and produce an overall calming effect.
- **Create an exercise routine.** Use your lunch break to work out or go for a brisk walk, or exercise before or after work. Exercise has been proven to work off stress by burning off excess adrenaline and relieving tension.
- **Practice breathing exercises.** Drawing slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm promotes a more efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide than chest or shoulder breathing. Exhale slowly and evenly. If you are highly stressed, try this while lying on your back.
- **Practice progressive muscle-relaxation techniques.** These involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. For example, make a fist, and hold it tight for at least five seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and arm. Finally, relax your hand, and visualize the tension escaping your body. Do the same with your other hand, your neck, your face, limbs, etc.
- **Try meditation.** By sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day, you can learn to achieve relaxation quickly.
- **Attempt imagery techniques.** Try concentrating on an image that symbolizes your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; you also can let your mind go blank. Try the infinity exercise: draw and continue to trace the infinity sign slowly without losing eye contact. Alternate drawing hands, then trace the sign with both hands. Draw the sign in the air with your fingertips if you do not have pen and paper. This exercise stimulates peripheral vision and produces a calming effect.
- **Ergonomically improve your workspace.** A more supportive, comfortable chair, desk and computer accessories may reduce physical stress.
- **Socialize with co-workers.** Do not be an island; strike up interesting conversations with fellow employees to release tension.
- **Take advantage of paid days off.** Consider spreading your days off over several weeks instead of taking them all at once.
- **Minimize taking work home.** Enjoy your time away from work, and use it to recharge yourself. Teach yourself to be efficient at work so that you can enjoy your time at home.

- **Get involved with hobbies.** Join a work-sponsored sports team. Take an art class. Stay active with your children's sports and activities.
- **Learn to laugh more at life.** Try to find humor in negative outcomes. Relieve tension by laughing at your mistakes and faults and working to improve them.
- **Consider counseling.** Talk therapy with a professional can release pent-up anxiety and prove to be an effective outlet for discharging unhealthy stress.

Remember that stress affects not only job performance, but also career satisfaction. Be aware of the consequences stress is imposing on your life, and make a commitment to reduce your stress level.

Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress

Positive Reinforcement

Dealing with Life in Troubled Times

Troubling times are a fact of life. War. Disease. Natural disasters. Much as we'd like to, we can't control them. What we can control is how we react to them. Here are some things to consider when the weight of the world is weighing on you:

Talk about your feelings: A good way to alleviate fear is to discuss it. Chat with a friend over coffee, call a crisis hotline, take advantage of the help available through your Employee Assistance Program or join a support group.

Focus on what is important: Playing with your children, for example, is a more productive than watching all the news coverage of the world's woes. Focus your energy on what is important to you.

Decide what you can and cannot control: While it is smart to be aware of your surroundings and what is going on, dwelling on events out of your control can be detrimental.

Reduce your stress: Incorporate basic stress-reducing activities into your life, including exercise and leisure activities such as watching a movie or reading a book.

Get back to your daily life as much as possible: Disruptions caused by excessive worry will only increase stress levels for yourself and those around you.

Eat a healthy, balanced diet: Physical health plays a key role in keeping your mental health stable.

Seek professional help: If you are suffering from sleep or eating disruptions, talk with a professional. Start with your EAP, which can provide short-term counseling and refer you to resources for more intensive treatment.

Your Employee Assistance Program provides free, confidential emotional support, practical resources and legal and financial consultation to support you and your family members. Call anytime, 24/7, to speak with specialists who can help you find resources and support to deal with the issues that you may face.

Financial and Legal Concerns

Speak confidentially by phone with a financial expert and receive information and resources tailored to your situation.

- Recovering from reduced income
- Budgeting
- Managing expenses
- Deductibility of expenses and other tax questions

Work-Life Matters

- Finding child and elder care
- Getting help with household tasks
- Accommodations for a sick child
- Resources for family entertainment

Emotional Issues

- Coping with a family member's disability or illness
- Managing stress
- Talking to children about an illness
- Referrals to counselors, support groups and other resources for you and your family members

Navigating Life's Transitions

With more people coping with stress from the COVID-19 outbreak, we are experiencing a massive wake-up call. More and more people have been heard saying, "Suddenly I have a new perspective on what really matters."

Whenever life throws us off course, it presents an opportunity to pause, reassess and reflect on what we truly want to create. Then we can move forward feeling more on course and avoiding that uneasy feeling that we are just going through the motions with no feelings of accomplishment or satisfaction.

One's perspective about what's happening is critical. With a job loss, troubled relationship or unplanned life change, one voice within us whines, "Why is this happening to me?" while another voice may ask, "What's the lesson in this for me?" or "How do I use this experience to help me grow, and how might I take advantage of this chance for a fresh start?" While it is important to be realistic about the negative aspects of life transitions and to acknowledge feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and fear, your next move is a crucial choice. Do you want to remain stuck in pain and stress, or are you ready to focus your energy forward, looking at what's possible?

Making life changes can be scary and may leave you feeling overwhelmed. Follow the steps below to get started. It is dangerous to oversimplify the complex nature of any life transition, so tailor these suggestions to your own unique situation.

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** Let yourself feel what you feel, and find a way to release some of the emotion. Physical activity, writing down your thoughts or talking with others can help let this energy out and prevent the distraction of negative thoughts and self-defeating behaviors.
- **Reflect and refocus.** Take stock of what you still have, and express gratitude, such as "I still have my ability to think, my special talents and my aspirations. I'm grateful for relationships and for my family." Take a walk, a bike ride or a longer hot shower than usual, and ask yourself some powerful questions, such as "How do I want to feel three months from now? What will it take to get there? What does my ideal week look like? What could I do to realize that? Who could help with that?"
- **Choose.** Entertain the notion that everything is a choice. Decide what you want to choose as the next chapter of your life. Simply choosing doesn't guarantee you'll get it, however. The power of your intentions makes a huge difference. Feeling like you have a choice is certainly better than feeling like you have no influence, so why not adopt this philosophy? Choosing what matters most and what you'll honor as authentic priorities is absolutely up to you. It is about being resilient and truly empowered to choose your life's course rather than being a victim of circumstance and replaying old thought patterns.
- **Get into action.** Start by visualizing how you want to feel or where you want to be, perhaps three months from now. Work backwards from this goal until you find something small enough that you can do the next day or the next week. Picking first steps and finding the right people for encouragement and support will help you realize your goal.

Make a Daily Habit of Success

We all define success differently. Regardless of how we define success, there are some basic habits shared by everyone who achieves it. Here are some habits to keep in mind:

- List your to-dos for the week and prioritize
- Plan when your brain is freshest
- Organize tasks by importance
- Establish a routine for daily tasks. A routine can help make you more efficient.
- Schedule similar tasks back to back. Try making all your phone calls one after another or writing and sending emails all at one time
- Take breaks. Take a short walk or socialize with a co-worker.
- Don't multitask. Focus on one item at a time to ensure that you catch any mistakes and do not have to redo the task.
- Go at a reasonable pace; it will actually save you time in the long run.
- Tackle your most important work when you have the most energy.

The Role of Positive Thinking

Changing the way you think can help you put a more positive spin on what happens in your life. This makes you more productive overall.

- If you are depressed or anxious, think of the opposite. Instead of dwelling on the worst-case scenario, imagine the most likely best-case outcome.
- Pick an area in which you are having trouble and create or invent new options to deal with that situation.
- If your confidence and self-esteem are low, imagine scenes in which your confidence is increased.
- Negative thoughts maintain their power unless neutralized by stronger, positive thoughts. With practice, eventually the positive thought will grow and associate with other positive thoughts.
- When you cannot do anything to change a situation, work toward acceptance.

5 Simple Ways to Improve Your Mood

Whatever has you feeling blue, there are at least five no-fail ways to brighten your day—and they don't take much effort:

1. **Give a little something back.** You might not feel your best right now, but it's been proven that moods can improve with random acts of kindness: helping someone with a chore, presenting a friend with a small gift or writing that note of appreciation you've been meaning to send.
2. **Get moving.** Whether it's peddling around the neighborhood on your mountain bike or hiking a local trail, exercising improves your physical and mental well-being.
3. **Remove that frown.** Even if you're faking it, a smile can improve your mood, confidence and the way others see you.
4. **Stay positive.** Instead of dwelling on what's wrong, or what you feel is wrong, get into the habit of positive self-talk. Remember, the way you think affects the way you feel.
5. **Give yourself some credit.** Just because you're having a tough day doesn't mean it has always been that way. List your achievements on a piece of paper, then take some time to be proud of what you've accomplished.

The best option when all else fails? Talk to someone. Whether it's a partner, friend, relative or a professional counselor, contact with other people gives you a chance to talk through what's bothering you and lighten your mood.

Fostering Friendships

People have a natural need for friends, and with good reason. Friends increase your enjoyment of life, relieve feelings of loneliness, and even help reduce stress and improve your health.

Strong friendships, based on trust and respect, will survive the test of time. But that doesn't mean you can take them for granted. As we return to our normal, busy routines, it can be easy to forget to show friends appreciation. Now that we can begin to get back to normal life, here are some ways you can.

Strengthening Friendships

All it takes is a little effort and creativity to keep relationships alive and fun. Use these ideas to keep your friendships strong:

- Update your personal phone book; it gives you a chance to catch up with old friends.
- Send a card for no reason other than to let a friend know how special he or she is to you.
- Do not wait for the holiday season to shop. Purchase items you know a friend would enjoy, and save them for holiday gift-giving.
- Think of a fun event or trip you and a friend experienced together and call him or her to reminisce.
- Set up an email list, or use a social networking site to message each other, post photos and share announcements and memories.

Workplace Friendships

Normally you spend a lot of time with people at work. Try these ideas to indicate how much you have missed your co-workers and how much they mean to you:

- Arrange to have their favorite food delivered as a surprise.
- If you see a television show or read an article that would interest a co-worker, let them know or email them a link.
- Take on a job responsibility that a co-worker does not enjoy doing.
- If someone helped you out, let his or her supervisor know with a quick email.

It takes time and effort to build and maintain healthy friendships. But it's worth it: Nothing adds more to your life than having the love and support of a truly great friend.

Grateful for Gratitude

By now, most of us are well aware of the emotional and physical benefits of positive thinking, even if it's been difficult to do so lately. But did you know that science is finding that a similar quality, gratitude, may have an equally powerful effect on our well-being? There are ways to increase how often and how deeply we feel grateful, and that has profound implications for our health.

Benefits of Gratitude

Recent studies have found a host of benefits from practicing thankfulness, including:

- Improved heart and kidney function and lower blood-pressure and stress-hormone levels
- Higher levels of optimism and satisfaction with life
- Lower levels of stress and anxiety
- Fewer reports of physical ailments
- Higher motivation to exercise
- Higher levels of personal goal attainment
- Higher levels of alertness, attentiveness and energy
- Stronger emotional support for others
- Increased resilience in the face of hardship

Measureable Improvement

On his Emmons Lab website, Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, sums up some of the recent findings about gratitude and its positive health effects:

- In one study, researchers found that those who kept regular gratitude journals exercised more, reported fewer ailments, felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic than those who recorded problems or neutral life events.
- Adults with neuromuscular disease who were asked to focus on gratitude over a three-week period reported more positive moods, a greater sense of connection to others, more optimism and better sleep than a control group.
- In another study, participants who kept gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals over a two-month period than those who didn't.

Ways to Increase Gratitude

Experiencing more gratitude doesn't need to be difficult or time-consuming. Try these ideas and see what works best for you:

- **Make a list.** Write everything in your life that makes you grateful. Look at this list regularly.
- **Gratitude journal.** Take five minutes each day to think of three things that happened in your life that you are glad you experienced. Then write them down somewhere.
- **Take pictures.** Photograph little things in your everyday life that make you smile.
- **Tell someone.** Whether it's someone you look up to or just someone who makes you happy, take a bit of time to tell him or her that you're glad to have them around.
- **Frame events in a positive light.** We often joke about whether the glass is half empty or half full. Make an effort to see the half-full side of every situation.

What is there to be thankful for?

You can be thankful for anything in your life that makes you feel positive on some level. Some bigger things could include:

- Friends and family
- Achieving a goal
- Your talents and skills
- Appreciating where you live and the opportunities you have
- Your health and happiness

You don't need to limit your gratitude to big picture ideas. Positive things that seem small and happen every day are also worth focusing on. Some small things could include:

- A good joke you heard from a friend
- A sunny day
- A good song on the radio

How do I start?

- Grab a notebook and begin a gratitude journal
- Tell someone when you appreciate something they've done
- Think of three things that you're grateful for and jot them down

Resources

- Emmons Lab: emmons.faculty.ucdavis.edu/
- ReachOut.com: au.reachout.com/all-about-gratitude
- International Positive Psychology Association: www.ippanetwork.org/

Mental Health Maintenance

Sleep and Mood

Sleep is one of the essential elements of good mental health. Yet researchers and the media alike routinely report that people across the globe are sleep deprived. Getting the right amount of sleep is key to proper functioning of the mind, as well as the body. Sleep gives the brain a much-needed break, providing a distraction from the complex cognitive and emotional processing needed during the day.

Experts suggest adults get at least seven hours of sleep a night to be at their mental, emotional and physical best. Some of the mental health benefits of sleep include:

- Helping you feel energized and well-rested
- Aiding mood and emotional regulation
- Improving learning capacity and memory
- Regulating appetite, energy use and weight control
- Sharpening mental alertness
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Contributing to the stability of relationships

Count the Hours

Experts warn that even small levels of sleep deprivation can chip away at your happiness over time. As a lack of sleep builds, people may feel less enthusiastic, more irritable or even show symptoms of clinical depression, such as feeling persistently sad or empty. All these alterations to mood can affect not only individual mental health but relationships and family dynamics, as well.

Quantity and Quality of Sleep

There is no magic number for ideal hours of sleep because different age groups need different amounts of sleep and these needs tend to be individualized even within each age group. To attain the best quality of sleep, get at least seven hours a night and practice the following habits:

- Develop a bedtime routine
- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends
- Make sure your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable
- Avoid work and video or computer screens before bed
- Do not drink caffeine or alcohol, or smoke four to six hours before bedtime
- Stop eating 2-3 hours before regular bedtime
- Check and monitor all medication, supplements and herbs that may be interfering with sleep

Getting Out of an Emotional Rut

Almost all of us will go through down periods. Family conflicts, personal disappointments, even a couple of weeks of bad weather can give you the blues. If the blues you are feeling linger for several weeks and are interfering with your ability to enjoy life and function effectively, seek help. A therapist can assist you in exploring your feelings. For those simply feeling a bit blue, however, some simple, positive lifestyle changes may be all that's needed to turn things around:

- **Find support in others.** Try confiding in trusted family members and friends about how you have been feeling. An understanding loved one can give you the strength and support you need to help cope with depressive feelings.
- **Manage your stress.** Learn effective ways to reduce your stress and anxiety, which may minimize your feelings of depression.
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular fitness activities can improve your mood and boost your self-esteem. Talk to your doctor about an exercise program that is right for you.

- **Eat right.** Discipline yourself not to overeat. Avoid junk foods and environments that may encourage bingeing. Stick to a nutritionally balanced diet. Avoid alcohol, which is a depressant.
- **Get the proper amount of sleep.** Experts recommend at least seven to eight hours a night. Resist the urge to oversleep, and try to maintain a regular sleeping schedule.
- **Make more time for recreational, fun activities.** Try to spend more time outdoors, especially on sunny days.
- **Consider using a light box.** These devices have been used successfully to treat Seasonal Affective Disorder. Talk with your doctor or therapist about whether the increased amount of light could be helpful to you.
- **Educate yourself.** Learn all you can about depression, support groups in your area and ways to manage your feelings.

Do not let feelings of depression and sadness control your life. Get help to manage your symptoms. Learn to feel comfortable talking about your difficult emotions. Take care of your mind and body by giving it the food, rest and activity it needs. Do not be afraid to treat yourself to the things you enjoy more often. Aim to get out of the funk you may be feeling and to experience life to the fullest.

Resources

- The World Health Organization: www.who.int/topics/mental_health/en/

Getting Help

Dealing With Traumatic Events

The period following a traumatic event can be a difficult time for those directly and indirectly involved. As shelter-in-place laws are lifted and we try to get back to normal routines, it is normal to feel a range of emotions from sadness and anxiety to anger and helplessness. It is important to acknowledge these feelings, let them run their course and allow for enough time to properly process the event. This is part of the healing process.

What are common responses to tragedy?

Emotional responses to a traumatic event may vary. People may exhibit feelings of fear, grief and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness and changes in appetite or sleep pattern, as well as withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last a few days, weeks or even months.

Some of the emotions a person may experience include:

- **Shock.** Feelings of disbelief.
- **Fear.** The feeling that the event may happen again.
- **Anger.** Many people feel rage against a perpetrator or the circumstances that led up to the event.
- **Alienation.** Feeling misunderstood by others or feeling that the event has made the person experiencing the trauma different from others.
- **Helplessness.** Feelings of frustration for being powerless over the event.
- **Guilt or blame.** Feeling responsible for what happened or guilty for surviving the event when others did not.
- **Mistrust.** Feeling unfounded doubts or mistrust about others or similar situations.
- **Sorrow.** Feelings of great sadness about the event.

Stages of Coping

Most people respond to traumatic events through a series of coping stages. These stages may vary from person to person:

1. **Shock.** This stage usually occurs shortly after the event. The survivor can feel confused, dazed, anxious and exhausted as he or she tries to process the reality of the event.
2. **Denial.** As a defense mechanism, the survivor may ignore his/her feelings, refuse to talk about what happened or shut down emotionally.
3. **Intrusion.** Memories and emotions may invade the survivor's consciousness as he or she struggles to accept the loss. The survivor may experience mood changes, irritability, encounter difficulty concentrating, become sensitive to external stimuli and encounter sleep disturbances.
4. **Working through.** The survivor has learned to accept what has happened and adopt strategies to cope with the aftermath.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the difficulties in daily functioning become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

- Symptoms of re-living may include flashbacks, nightmares and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feelings of guilt, extreme fear of harm and numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations and tension headaches.
- Symptoms of avoidance may include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or isolating from others.

- Symptoms of increased arousal may include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability, outbursts of anger and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms linked with PTSD may include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts, drug/alcohol abuse and not being able to complete daily tasks.

When to Get Help for PTSD

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms persist and may last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to one's life, the frequency of the event, history of past trauma and psychological difficulties prior to the event.

People should consider seeking professional help when symptoms affect their relationship with family and friends, or affect their daily level of functioning, including job performance. You can contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or talk with a health care provider to get help.

Tips for Employees Dealing With a Traumatic Event

The following tips can help one to cope with a traumatic event:

- Understand that the reactions are normal, especially right after the event.
- Keep your usual daily routine as much as possible.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the event.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
- Turn to family, friends and others for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.
- Recognize the need for professional help and contact your Employee Assistance Program.
- Reach out to others for support. Take comfort in the love and care of family and friends. Join a local support group for survivors of trauma.
- Take care of your body and your mind. Get plenty of rest. Eat right and exercise.
- Avoid unhealthy coping behaviors. Do not turn to drugs or alcohol to help you cope. Find positive outlets and expressions, such as exercise, volunteer work or involvement in support groups.
- Find healing through writing. Many survivors find that keeping a journal and detailing their experiences through writing becomes a healthy, positive expression and coping technique. Try a daily gratitude journal by writing everything for which you feel grateful that day.
- It will take time to readjust and get back to your daily routine after a traumatic event. Be patient during this period, and do not rush the healing process.
- There may be setbacks and emotional relapses along the way. Do not ignore your feelings or reactions. Be honest with yourself and others. Make a commitment to learn from your experiences and turn difficult events into positive life lessons.

If you are having a difficult time coping with a traumatic event, contact your Employee Assistance Program for help. The services are free, confidential and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Do I need counseling?

Most of us associate counseling with serious mental health issues such as depression or severe anxiety. But that's not always the case. People often find it helpful to speak with a counselor during life transitions, such as when you have had a major disruption in your established routines.

When dealing with such situations, counseling may help you prevent stress or anxiety or learn new ways to manage problems that naturally arise during periods of transition. Generally speaking, counseling is beneficial for anyone who feels overwhelmed by thoughts, feelings, actions and relationships that may impair their ability to function effectively in their daily life. People seek the assistance of a professional counselor for a wide range of problems, including:

- Depression
- Marital or family issues
- Stress and anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse and addictions
- Low self-esteem
- Communication problems
- Sexual problems
- Unexpected crisis
- Mental illnesses
- Preparing for a new phase of life

How Counseling Works

Counseling is based on the concept that developing a trusting, confidential relationship with a professional counselor and honestly exploring your feelings, concerns and emotional needs can bring greater insight into the difficulties you may be experiencing. There are several steps involved in therapy, including:

- Admitting to yourself that you have a problem or a challenge
- Seeking the help of a professional counselor
- Setting goals to resolve the difficulties
- Being honest with yourself and the counselor
- Following through with the recommended treatment
- Integrating the newly acquired insight and/or skills into your daily life

How Counseling Can Help in Your Transition Back to Work

Talking with a counselor from your EAP can help, especially with common issues such as:

- Sleep problems
- Guilt or anxiety about separation from your kids
- Negotiating roles as a partner and parent
- Adjusting to life as a working parent
- Maintaining work-life balance

Coping with Depression After Trauma

Trauma can occur in a variety of ways, such as surviving a natural disaster, witnessing or experiencing violence, suffering from the loss of a friend or loved one, or enduring significant, abrupt change to our daily lives, such as the shelter-in-place orders so many have experienced lately.

Typical Reactions

People experience a variety of reactions, including shock, terror and rage. These feelings affect the body, altering brain chemistry and chemicals in the blood stream. Trauma also affects a person's connection to his or herself and to society. It changes belief systems and damages psychological needs.

Reactions to a severe stressor include:

- Anxiety
- Grief
- Depression
- Emotional numbness
- Low self-esteem
- Loss of self-respect
- Shame
- Fear

These feelings are actually normal reactions to abnormal events. Trauma is a sudden and unexpected loss that can permanently change a person's belief system about him or herself and the world. No longer will things look the same, and this experience of dramatic change cannot be undone or erased.

Although other people may be present at the time a traumatic event occurs, each person is touched by the event in a unique way. It is all too common to have a group of people witness the same event and tell the tale in completely different ways. Each person experiences the trauma in isolation, making it theirs and theirs alone and altering their connections to their friends and loved ones.

For some people, the trauma damages their self-esteem or feelings of power and control; for others, it disrupts their trust and feelings of safety.

Depression and Psychological Trauma

Feelings of depression can occur from a variety of origins, but depression that stems from experiencing stress or distress is due to the events being too much for someone to handle. This type of depression generally comes from depleted brain chemistry. The challenges of stress and distress can affect this brain chemistry.

Within the brain is a neurotransmitter known as serotonin. Serotonin is a feel-good chemical. This neurotransmitter is like a telegraph line in the brain that sends impulses that are interpreted as confidence, strength, hope and a sense of well-being that contributes to self-satisfaction and positive self-esteem.

Think of the brain as a kitchen sink with the stopper down, blocking the water from draining away. Then imagine that the water in the sink is serotonin. When a traumatic event happens, the stopper releases and lowers the level of serotonin in the sink. If the serotonin level is lowered, the lack of this neurotransmitter sends the message of uncertainty, doubt, fear or anxiety, leading to a sense of insecurity, low self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Depression and Two Phases of Trauma Reaction

Someone suffering from the reactions of psychological trauma experiences two phases: intrusive and avoidant.

During the intrusive phase, the person re-experiences the traumatic event. This happens because the initial experience is a form of learning; when the experience is severe, the learning is intense. The brain reacts strongly, as if to say, "Whoa, I am not going to let that happen again!"

The brain, like a sentry guarding the camp, goes on hyper-alert. If anything slightly resembles the traumatic event, the brain responds. Thoughts, feelings, sensations and memories surface, and the person becomes depressed from the symptoms. He or she feels trapped and cannot get free from the event. Then, as if to take a break from all this intrusion, the avoidant phase appears.

The person becomes numb and may even use alcohol or drugs to anesthetize the feelings. The person may avoid anything that somehow resembles the trauma. For example, having suffered a serious injury from riding in a train, a person might avoid trains, railroad tracks, toy trains, red flashing lights, etc.

When this happens, the person's life becomes constricted and restrictive. The brain works on repressing associations and memories. This type of depressive reaction helps dull the experiences surrounding the person. Unfortunately, life becomes limited and joyless.

Support and Coping

People who experience depression from psychological trauma should be gentle to themselves and appreciate surviving the incident or incidents.

See a physician for a medical exam to rule out other conditions. Make an appointment with a therapist who specializes in psychological trauma. Medication may be necessary to restore the serotonin level in the mix of the brain chemistry. Antidepressants are commonly prescribed, but it takes a professional to determine the appropriate levels and medication for each person.

Realize the event is an experience, and it does not define a person. The event has happened to the person, but that victim is not trauma.

Recognize that the feeling of depression should pass. Sometimes feelings change quickly, while other times they pass slowly.

Acknowledge that certain events may challenge one's brain chemistry at other times.

For maintenance and support, good nutrition is essential in ensuring that the foods a person eats do not contribute to stressing the brain chemistry. Limit sugars, which can spike blood-sugar levels and cause artificial highs and lows, as well as caffeine, which releases stress hormones into a person's system.

Exercise, such as 20 minutes of brisk walking or any other form of aerobic activity, helps release serotonin naturally within the brain.

Find ways to soothe, comfort and release stress, such as:

- Take long walks
- Enjoy good music
- Find ways to laugh
- Visit friends
- Drink water
- Try yoga or relaxation tapes
- Write in a journal

Know that depression is a normal response to an abnormal situation. It is important to be aware of the symptoms of depression in order to not become overwhelmed by the depression. Sometimes depression can cause a person to forget that it is a temporary condition, even if the feeling has been chronic.

There are typically breaks from even chronic depression. It is helpful for trauma victims to look for those moments. Share thoughts and feelings, and never think that one person's reactions or depression are shameful because it is different from another person's.

Cutting Down on Your Drinking

With the incidences of risky drinking behavior skyrocketing during COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders, public health offices are warning that it is important that people assess themselves for alcohol problems and get help, if necessary. If you are drinking too much, you can improve your life and health by cutting down. There are steps you can take and tips you can follow to stop alcohol from becoming an adverse or destructive force in your life.

Are you drinking too much?

How do you know if you drink too much? Answer “yes” or “no” to these questions:

- Do you tend to drink alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking ever make you late for work?
- Does your drinking worry your family?
- Do you ever drink after telling yourself you will not?
- Do you ever forget what you did while you were drinking?
- Do you get headaches or have a hangover after you have been drinking?
- Does your drinking affect your decision-making abilities and judgment?

If you answered “yes” to one or more of these questions, you may have a drinking problem. Consult a physician to be sure. A physician will be able to tell you whether you should cut down or abstain. If you are an alcoholic or have other medical problems, you should not just cut down on your drinking, you should stop drinking completely. Your physician will advise you about what is best for you.

Set and Work Toward a Goal

The following steps can help you cut down on your drinking:

Write Down Your Reasons for Reducing or Stopping Your Drinking

Why do you want to drink less? There are many reasons why you may want to cut down or stop drinking. You may want to improve your health, sleep better, or get along better with your family or friends. Make a list of the reasons why you want to drink less.

Set a Drinking Goal

Choose a limit for how much you will drink. You may choose to cut down or not drink at all. Women who are cutting down should have no more than one drink a day, while men who are limiting their alcohol intake should not consume more than two drinks a day. A drink equals:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1 1/2 ounces of liquor

These limits may be too high for some people who have certain medical problems or who are older. Talk with your doctor about the limit that is right for you. Then write your drinking goal on a piece of paper. Put it where you can see it, such as on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror. Your paper might look like this:

- I will start on this day: _____
- I will not drink more than ____ drinks in one day.
- I will not drink more than ____ drinks in one week.
- I will stop drinking alcohol.

Keep a ‘Diary’ of Your Drinking Habits

To help you reach your goal, keep a “diary” of your drinking habits. For example, write down every time you have a drink for one week. Try to keep the diary for three or four weeks. This will give you an idea of how much you drink and at what times. You may be surprised. How different is your goal from the amount you drink now?

Tips for Cutting Down

Now that you know why you want to drink less and have a goal in mind, consider the following tips to help you achieve it:

- **Watch it at home.** Keep a very small amount or no alcohol at home. Do not keep temptations around.
- **Drink slowly.** When you drink, sip your drink slowly. Take a break of one hour between drinks. Drink soda, water or juice after consuming an alcoholic beverage. Do not drink on an empty stomach. Eat food before or while you drink.
- **Take a break from alcohol.** Pick a day or two each week when you will not drink at all. Then try to stop drinking for one week. Think about how you feel physically and emotionally on these days. When you succeed and feel better, you may find it easier to cut down for good.
- **Learn how to say no.** You do not have to drink when other people drink. You do not have to take a drink that is given to you. Practice ways to say no politely. For example, you can tell people you feel better when you drink less. Stay away from people who give you a hard time about not drinking.
- **Stay active.** What would you like to do instead of drinking? Use the time and money spent on drinking to do something fun with your family or friends.
- **Get support.** Cutting down on your drinking may be difficult at times. Ask your family and friends for support to help you reach your goal. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble cutting down. Get the help you need to reach your goal.
- **Watch out for temptations.** Watch out for people, places or times that make you drink, even if you do not want to. Stay away from people who drink a lot or bars where you used to go. Plan ahead of time what you will do to avoid drinking when you are tempted.
- **Do not drink when you are angry or upset or have a bad day.** These are habits you need to break if you want to drink less.
- **Do not give up.** Most people do not cut down or give up drinking all at once. Just like a diet, it is not easy to change. That is OK. If you do not reach your goal the first time, try again. Remember: Get support from people who care about you and want to help.

Getting Help

Accepting the fact that help is needed for an alcohol problem may not be easy. But keep in mind that the sooner you get help, the better your chances for a successful recovery.

Any concerns you may have about discussing drinking-related problems with your health care provider or Employee Assistance Program may stem from common misconceptions about alcoholism. In our society, the myth prevails that an alcohol problem is a sign of moral weakness.

As a result, you may feel that to seek help is to admit some type of shameful defect in yourself. In fact, alcoholism is a disease that is no more a sign of weakness than is asthma. Moreover, taking steps to identify a possible drinking problem has an enormous payoff: a chance for a healthier, more rewarding life.

When you visit your health care provider, he or she will ask you a number of questions about your alcohol use to determine whether you are having problems related to your drinking. Try to answer these questions as fully and honestly as you can. You also will be given a physical examination. If your health care provider concludes that you may be dependent on alcohol, he or she may recommend that you see a specialist in treating alcoholism. You should be involved in any referral decisions and have all treatment choices explained to you.

Other Help Available

The following organizations can provide more information on alcohol abuse and alcoholism:

- Al-Anon: www.al-anon.alateen.org
- Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aa.org
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence: www.ncadd.org

Remember, you can call your Employee Assistance Program anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to speak confidentially with someone about any issues you may have.

Family and Home

Preparing You Children for Your Return to Work

Children may experience a variety of emotions when a parent is preparing to return to work, especially if you have been at home together for almost every moment of the past few months. Most of these feelings are due to change, something that children do not always welcome with open arms. Stability makes children feel safer, and with any major change, this stability is no longer certain.

Use the following tips to ease the transition:

- **Communicate with your children well in advance.** This may help to alleviate any fears and may prevent your children from thinking up stories that could be worse than the actual scenario. Being honest and open may help prevent further anxieties.
- **Spend time alone with each child.** Tell your child how much he or she is loved, offer hugs, make playtime a priority and aim to create a deeper emotional bond between yourself and each of your children.
- **Discuss your work.** If your children are old enough to understand, share your pride in your work and its importance to the family.
- **Encourage the sharing of emotions.** Your children may not want to let you know they are scared, upset or angry with you for leaving. If this is the case, bring up the topic by mentioning your feelings. This can lead to a discussion where feelings can be shared between children and parents.
- **Involve your children in preparing for your return to work.** Let your children help you pack your work bag or briefcase and explain why you are packing certain items.
- **Talk about how you will communicate.** Keeping in touch is extremely important for the first few weeks of your new routine. Think of fun and interesting ways to communicate, including email, instant message and video calls. This helps him or her feel special and loved.

When Children Have to be Home Alone

With the uncertainty of finding child care given the current need to maintain social distancing, many parents are facing a decision: Are my kids able to stay home alone when I return to work?

The following information can help you make that decision, as well as help you prepare your children and yourself for them to be home alone.

Assessment

Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well prepared and can boost the child's confidence and promote independence and responsibility. However, children face risks when left unsupervised. Those risks, as well as a child's comfort level and ability to deal with challenges, must be considered.

Keep in mind that, depending on the laws and child protective policies in your area, leaving a young child unsupervised may be considered neglect, especially if doing so places the child in danger. Before you make any decision, check with your local authorities to determine if there is a local or state law regarding the legal age at which children may be left home unsupervised.

Once those requirements are satisfied, parents should determine whether their child is comfortable staying home alone. Children who are easily frightened or do not wish to stay alone are not ready for the responsibility. If a child wants to stay home alone, parents should consider the following factors before making the decision.

Does the child:

- Have good judgment?
- Have self-discipline?
- Follow directions well?
- Manage simple chores?
- Problem-solve well?
- Know how to remain calm in difficult situations?
- Know basic first-aid procedures?
- Have experience handling emergencies?
- Understand and follow safety measures?

Parents who feel comfortable about their child's responsibility and maturity level should first have a trial period. Leave the child home alone for a short time and stay close to home. Thirty minutes is a good amount of time for a trial period. Be sure to be reachable during that trial period.

If this is successful and staying home alone is possible, parents should still:

- Establish rules and be sure the child knows what is and is not allowed when home alone.
- Check in while away to see how the child is doing. If calling, it is good to set an exact time so the child knows it is a parent calling. An alternative to calling the child is to have a trusted neighbor or friend pop in to check on what is happening.
- Get a report from the child afterwards and encourage him or her to share feelings about staying home alone.

Some rules parents might consider establishing while the child is home alone include:

- Having friends over while an adult is not present is not acceptable
- Television and video games have time limits
- Computer and internet rules ban the surfing of unapproved sites
- Cooking and kitchen tool rules (for example, is he or she allowed to use the microwave but not the stove?)
- Doors should always remain locked (and security system turned on, if appropriate)
- Never tell anyone he or she is home alone

In preparation for the time the child is to be home alone, parents should:

- Have emergency numbers of friends, family members and neighbors in an easily visible location
- Post a schedule with location information for parents during the time away from home
- Be sure emergency supplies such as flashlights are accessible
- Have a stocked first-aid kit and make the child is aware of its location

- Have a well-stocked cupboard and refrigerator so the child has easy access to snacks and/or meals
- Lock up any items children should not access such as liquor, medications, car keys and cigarettes
- Have an extra house key made and store it in a secure location outside so the child can access it if he or she is locked out

Communication

As cell phones are more widely used as the primary method of contact, landlines are becoming rarer. If your house does not have a landline and your child does not have his or her own cell phone, parents need to consider how their child will be able to communicate in case of an emergency.

If you have reliable internet access at home, an iPod, iPad, other tablet, or computer are additional options to consider as means of communication. These often have features such as FaceTime, Messaging, Skype, or similar apps and may allow you to communicate with your child. However, these applications cannot make emergency phone calls to 9-1-1. Another option is to get your child an inexpensive mobile phone to use while they are alone. Many retail outlets offer inexpensive phones with limited features, sometimes called a “dumb phone,” that could be a good fit for this purpose. Your choice will differ depending on your circumstances, but the importance of having reliable communication cannot be overstated.

Tech Help

Thanks to current technology, including video doorbells and video monitoring systems, it can be easier and safer to allow children to be home alone. Many companies now offer versions of the video doorbell, which alerts users when someone has approached the front door and/or rang the doorbell and allows them to see who it is via a cell phone. This can help parents alert children to any visitors and decide whether it is safe for the children to answer the door. In the same way, video monitoring systems can alert parents should someone enter or leave the house. Keep in mind that these systems are merely backups. As a working parent, you can't always be sure that you will be able to monitor a doorbell or video alert. Equipping your children with the tools and knowledge to keep themselves safe while you are away is the best solution.

Parents should also note that even mature and responsible children should not be left alone too often or for too long. It can become a strain and put them in a situation where they become lonely. Consider other options, such as after-school programs, community centers or the option to stay with friends to help keep the child involved, if those options are available in your area.

Resources

- Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS): www.state.il.us/dcfs
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children, Youth and Families Children's Bureau: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/homealone.pdf

Preparing Your Children to be Home Alone

Once you have determined that your children are ready to stay home alone, the following suggestions may help you to prepare your child and to feel more comfortable about leaving him or her home alone:

- **Have a trial period.** Leave the child home alone for a short time while staying close to home. This is a good way to see how he or she will manage.
- **Role play.** Act out possible situations to help your child learn what to do, such as how to manage visitors who come to the door or how to answer phone calls in a way that doesn't reveal that a parent is not at home.
- **Establish rules.** Make sure your child knows what is (and is not) allowed when you are not home. Set clear limits on the use of television, computers and other electronic devices, and the Internet. Some experts suggest making a list of chores or other tasks to keep children busy while you are gone.
- **Discuss emergencies.** What does the child consider an emergency? What does the parent consider an emergency? Have a code word that the parent and child can use in the event of any emergency.
- **Check in.** Call your child while you are away to see how it's going, or let them know they'll have a trusted neighbor or friend check in on them.
- **Talk about it.** Encourage your child to share his or her feelings with you about staying home alone. Have this conversation before leaving your child and then, when you return, talk with your child about his or her experiences and feelings while you were away. This is particularly important when your child is first beginning to stay home alone, but a quick check-in is always helpful after being away.
- **Don't overdo it.** Even a mature, responsible child shouldn't be home alone too much. Consider other options, such as programs offered by schools, community centers, youth organizations, or faith-based organizations, to help keep your child connected and involved.
- **Follow up.** After a child is left home alone, talk about his or her experience. How did he or she feel about it? Was your child nervous? Did anything unexpected come up? If the child was watching a younger sibling, ask how he or she felt about doing so.

How can I nurture my child's mental health?

Mental health determines how we look at ourselves, our lives and the people we know and care about. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, evaluate our options and make choices. Given the trauma we have all faced recently with the COVID-19 outbreak, this is a good time to assess whether you are supporting your child's mental health.

A child's mental health affects his or her daily life and future. Schoolwork, relationships and physical health can be affected by mental health. Like physical fitness, mental fitness is important at every stage of life. Caring for and protecting a child's mental health is a major part of helping that child grow to become the best he or she can be. The following tips can help you promote your child's physical safety and emotional well-being:

- Set clear and consistent expectations for your child. It is important that these expectations are understood and enforced by anyone who is responsible for your child's care.
- Do your best to provide a safe home and community for your child, as well as nutritious meals, regular health check-ups, immunizations and exercise.
- Be aware of stages in child development so you do not expect too much or too little from your child.
- Encourage your child to express his or her feelings; respect those feelings. Let your child know that everyone experiences pain, fear, anger and anxiety. Try to learn the source of these feelings. Help your child express anger positively, without resorting to violence.
- Promote mutual respect and trust. Keep your voice down—even when you do not agree. Keep communication channels open.
- Listen to your child. Use words and examples your child can understand. Encourage questions.
- Provide comfort and assurance. Be honest. Focus on the positives. Express your willingness to talk about any subject.
- Look at your own problem-solving and coping skills. Are you setting a good example? Seek help if you are overwhelmed by your child's feelings or behaviors or if you are unable to control your own frustration or anger.
- Encourage your child's talents and accept his or her limitations.
- Set goals based on your child's abilities and interests—not someone else's expectations. Do not compare your child's abilities to those of other children; appreciate the uniqueness of your child. Spend time regularly with your child.
- Foster your child's independence and self-worth.
- Help your child deal with life's ups and downs. Show confidence in your child's ability to handle problems and tackle new experiences.
- Discipline constructively, fairly and consistently. All children and families are different; learn what is effective for your child. Show approval for positive behaviors. Help your child learn from mistakes.
- Love unconditionally. Teach the value of apologies, cooperation, patience, forgiveness and consideration for others. Do not expect to be perfect; parenting is a difficult job.

Answering Children's Questions About Tragedy

Children often have numerous questions during times of crisis, and your return to work may prompt them. The information below explores some of the questions that parents and teachers frequently ask about ways to discuss violence and tragedies with children.

How do I deal with the different emotions that children may have about tragic issues?

It is natural and healthy for children to experience a wide range of emotions about any particular tragedy. Some children will be sad, anxious and even fearful for their own families' safety, others will be confused about how to make sense of the events and others will have little reaction. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation, while others will have a mix of emotions: fear, sorrow and worry, for example. Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings.

The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary-school children, it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older elementary- and middle-school children it will be issues of fairness and care for others. For adolescents, it will often involve the ethical dilemmas posed by the situation.

Listening closely and discerning what some underlying issues might be will help your responses be more productive. In some areas, such as concerns for personal safety, we can provide reassurance, while in other areas our role should be that of a listener. Listening in and of itself can be reassuring to children.

Bringing closure to discussions of feelings is sometimes difficult. Rather than trying to summarize or falsely reassure children, it is best to simply thank them for sharing so deeply and affirm how much they care about others and the world around them. You can express that it is this caring that makes you proud and gives you strength and hope.

After I have listened to my children's concerns, how do I respond?

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the particular situation, even after we have heard what is on their minds. Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make. Whatever our response, it is important that we provide reassurance to the children we care about.

First, we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation that they have picked up and helped them distinguish fantasy from reality. When we have listened to what they think and feel, we can gently correct their misinformation. If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent, such as underlying confusion or unexpressed anxiety, ask for an explanation of where the question came from and then listen carefully. Keep your responses brief and simple. Follow the lead of children's questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one's own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child's questions.

How can I talk with children if I feel that my own grasp of the facts and issues is inadequate?

Fortunately, we do not need to be experts in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated technical answers. When older children ask for information we do not have, it is fine to say something like, "That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together." The process of figuring out where to get the information and going through the steps to obtain it can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. If a child's questions do not lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is equally effective to say something like, "I don't know the answer to that, and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many good thinkers throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue."

How can I reassure and comfort children when I honestly do not feel hopeful myself?

On one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the state of the world. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to the children in your life, then you might seek out an adult support system for yourself. This might be a group of other adults with similar feelings who need to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group is not practical, then you might find a competent, caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes easier to offer genuine help to children.

What can I say that is both comforting and reassuring?

Just by listening to children you are providing reassurance. By your ability to hear calmly even their wildest concerns, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with. By trying to understand children, you communicate that their feelings are neither abnormal nor silly, and you communicate the reassurance that they do not have to be alone with their concerns.

You can also help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer and that the most effective antidote to anxiety, fear or powerlessness is action. Engage them in a conversation about the way in which their school is working to make it a more peaceful place and explore ways in which they might be an active part of the effort to create a peaceful community in their school, home and neighborhood.

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