

Coping Strategies in Uncertain Times: Calming Your Nervous System During the Coronavirus Outbreak

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I have a confession to make. I am writing this blog as much for you as I am for me. These are challenging times. I find it especially hard to hear such difficult news on a daily basis — news that is not balanced with much good news. We don't get an alert on our phones every time someone recovers from Coronavirus, and we hear more about the hoarding and shortage of supplies than we do about the acts of kindness and care taking place each day to help people through. In addition, it can be hard to escape the panic, anxiety and fear that is around us on a daily basis that feels contagious.

As we face uncertain, unprecedented and challenging times, a critical question becomes **what resources can we draw on to help us through this? How can we remain responsive to the challenges at hand without letting fear, panic or anxiety overtake us?** I have been asking myself this question daily lately, and again and again reminding myself to open my toolbox and use the things that I teach.

[Rick Hanson writes](#) that as human beings we have three basic needs — for safety, satisfaction and connection. When we perceive that these needs are met, we are able to remain in what he refers to as the “green zone,” where we can meet challenges in a responsive and helpful way. When we perceive that any of these needs are unmet, it is easier to slip into what he calls the “red zone,” where our fight-or-flight response and stress, fear and negativity can take over. For many people during this uncertain time of the Coronavirus outbreak, all three needs feel threatened in very real ways. In particular, many people feel a heightened sense of a lack of safety. Having tools to help calm the body and mind, to bring us back to some felt sense of safety in this moment — as much as is available — can be immensely important.

Tools to help meet safety needs:

Understand your evolutionary wiring. As a species, our nervous system was wired through millions of years of evolution to fight, flee, or in some cases freeze, in response to threats to our safety, such as saber tooth tigers. This adaptive response helped our ancestors survive the physical threats they faced, and they ultimately passed along their genes to us. While this response is there to protect us, the problem is that it doesn't always serve us in modern times. While some aspects of my stress response can be protective and mobilize me to take appropriate actions and precautions, if my alarm sounds too loudly and incessantly it can leave me in a chronic state of tension, stress and fear which is simply not helpful or protective.

So how do we work with this habitual response?

1. One thing I have found helpful is to thank this part of me, this inner alarm, for trying to protect me. It is doing the best it can, operating from a very old template. But as an evolved human, I can step back and **remind myself that I have other ways to help myself feel safe that involve calming my nervous system to think most clearly.** Like a loving parent who knows best, I can remind the more primitive part of my brain that when I am not trying to fight or flee, I can actually do more to protect myself (by seeing more clearly what is needed from a place of calm).

2. Focus on what is in your control. While there is a lot that we may not be able to control, it is helpful to focus our attention on the things we *can* do. I have been much more vigilant about keeping my hands away from my face, washing them frequently when in public, wiping down common surfaces, and reducing my time in public places. I am also focusing on taking care of myself through healthy eating and exercise. When we have a sense of perceived control, this can help reduce our stress.

3. Don't focus on getting rid of fear; instead focus on inviting something else in.

Practice some ways to bring ease to your nervous system, even for brief moments.

What I have been finding increasingly is that I don't have to focus on getting rid of fear. It may still be there, but I can choose how I respond to it. Instead, of focusing on pushing it away, I find it helpful to invite something else in that can sit side by side with the fear, to soothe, comfort or bring ease to whatever I am experiencing.

Having ways of calming my body through meditation, finding some comfort even in the steady rhythm of my breath and the deep inner stillness at my core, despite the waves and storms thrashing wildly at the surface, has been very helpful for me. Practicing meditation has helped me to observe what is happening from a place of spacious awareness, rather than being hijacked by every passing thought and emotion (though at times I certainly get hijacked!). Some metaphors and images that I have found especially helpful include: sitting on the bank of a river watching the ships float by (representing my thoughts and emotions) without getting swept away by each one; imagining that I am the vast, expansive ocean that holds all of the waves rather than being swept away by any one wave of intense emotion.

Inviting in self-compassion at times of heightened fear has also been very helpful to me. One way to do this is to think about how you might comfort someone you care about and offer yourself those same sentiments.

There is no single right way to invite calm into the body. For some it might be a warm bath, spending time with a beloved pet, or listening to inspiring music. Don't worry about getting rid of fear, just focus on also inviting in a felt sense of calm in whatever way it might be available to you.

4. Work with mental rumination. In addition to our built-in fight or flight alarm system, we also are wired for our minds to wander. In particular, they tend to wander to the past and to the future, to what ifs and worries of things not in the present moment. This may have had some evolutionary survival value for our ancestors, but it is not always so helpful in our modern lives. Planning for the future, anticipating potential dangers and taking actions to prepare, is of course important and helpful. But incessant worry and mental rumination about things we can't do anything about can be very wearing. Yet it is sometimes very hard to step out of. And we don't always even recognize we are doing this.

One thing I have found helpful is to **imagine two boxes**. In the first box put everything that has to do with the present moment. This could include specific actions you need to take in the coming days or week, as well as what is actually happening right now. In the second box, which I call the future box, put all of your future worries and what ifs, that may or may not happen, and that you can do nothing about right now. Put all of the unhelpful places your mind wanders to in that box. For many people, that second box can be quite large.

Now imagine taking the present moment box and the future box and dumping out all the contents in the middle of the room. Trying to deal with all of that at once would be

overwhelming. Instead, imagine putting the lid on the future box and gently setting it aside. Open the present moment box and choose to focus only on the contents in that box. As it becomes necessary, and only when and if it becomes necessary, move what is appropriate from your future box into your present moment box.

I find that most of my mental suffering is caused by living from my future box, mentally rehearsing future what ifs and trying to cope these unknowns on top of what is actually here. When I am able to remind myself of this exercise it lessens that suffering.

5. Having Anchors and Refuges

When emotions are very intense it can be helpful to have ways of anchoring ourselves in something right here and now. What is effective can vary from person to person, and different things may be helpful at different times. For me, sometimes focusing on “just this breath coming in, just this breath going out” can be helpful in the midst of high anxiety, but at other times I need something more active.

I find that when my fears are particularly heightened about something, focusing on a task that does not take a lot of mental effort, such as folding laundry or cleaning my house, can be helpful to bring me back to presence, fully immersed in the activity at hand. This offers relief from mental rumination and anchors me back in the present moment. For some people focusing on walking and feeling the sensation of their feet making contact with the ground, doing a puzzle, knitting, drawing or cooking might be helpful. Being in nature and taking in one’s surroundings with any or all of the five senses can be both a helpful refuge and anchor for many people.

When we can rest in something in this moment, even if just for short periods at a time, it can offer relief and refuge from the heightened anxiety in our bodies and the mental worries in our minds.

6. Focus on resources you already have. Think about some of the most challenging things you have faced in your lifetime and identify what helped you through. What inner strengths, mental mindsets, beneficial actions did you use to help you manage these challenges? Know that those inner resources are there for you to draw on as you need. You are more resilient than you may realize.

A word about meeting our needs for satisfaction:

Many peoples’ lives have changed in dramatic ways in a very short period of time. Students are home from schools, many people are working from home or perhaps may not even have jobs to go to at present. What we normally have done for entertainment may no longer be available in the ways we are used to. It is helpful to acknowledge our needs for satisfaction and to rethink how we might find sources of satisfaction in new ways.

I know some people who are viewing times of self-quarantine or extended time at home as an opportunity to do things they normally don’t have time to do — learning something new, reading, taking up a hobby, taking care of unfinished projects, or spending more time with their children. Others are taking advantage of more things happening online, such as the Metropolitan Opera streaming performances, taking online workshops, or taking virtual museum tours. We may need to be creative about finding ways to meet our satisfaction needs as our routines are disrupted but having an open mind and willingness to think outside of the box is one place to start.

A word about meeting our needs for connection:

More than ever, in times of crisis we need connection with others, yet this very connection is being challenged in ways we have never before experienced. Similar to our need for satisfaction, it is important to acknowledge and prioritize this need and come up with creative ways of remaining connected. Fortunately, we have technology on our side for this one! Many of my family members just had our first virtual get together. My local meditation community just announced they are offering all of its workshops and gatherings online. The nice weather where I live enabled me to get together and go running with friends at a local state park. Teens that I know have been riding their bikes together. Phone calls and FaceTime can allow family members and friends to remain connected. Finding ways of remaining connected to others is a crucial way that we can take care of ourselves and each other during these stressful times. While these uncertain times may challenge us as our core, it is possible to take steps to help ourselves feel a bit safer, more satisfied and more connected than we would if we let our panic and anxiety go unchecked. As we move toward the “green zone”, we can be more responsive and less reactive to the challenges at hand, and face each day with resilience, inner strength and courage to guide us through this uncharted territory.

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