

Webinar Tip Sheet: Taking Care of Yourself During COVID

Hosted by the Senior Nutrition Program, Administration for Community Living

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COVID-19 forced unplanned pivots to senior nutrition programs, creating change in all areas of service. Almost overnight, rapid shifts occurred like never before. Along with these changes came unprecedented stress on staff and volunteers.

One of the most significant contributors to stress in an emergency is a lack of organization. Without organization and structure, a crisis can force reactive responses instead of proactive responses. COVID-19 was just such a crisis. However, planning and organization can turn obstacles into opportunities.

The first step to any comprehensive crisis response is to define both the problem and the goal clearly. Don't suffer from lack of focus and overreacting. Define problems clearly and develop workaround approaches. If the situation is permanent, adopt a long-term plan. Temporary solutions may actually inspire permanent changes that improve program efficiency. Whether temporary or long-term, look for positivity. Make an emergency work for you, not against you. Use the situation to make things better.

Work towards individualized, tailored solutions to meet your needs. Seek the advice and opinion of others. Choose the solution that is right for you and realize one size doesn't fit all. Write goals in stone but draw maps in sand. Some ideas just don't pan out. Don't measure your failure by someone else's success; that causes unnecessary stress.

Managing the stress of an emergency requires self-care. You must maintain balance. Don't try to try to handle everything on your own. Don't hold yourself to impossible standards. Be kind to yourself. Other ideas to manage through the process include:

- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Recognize the cost of inefficiency and prioritize.
- Set realistic expectations for yourself and others.
- Know your limitations and schedule downtime.
- Remember to take care of those who support you.
- Thank others publicly and often.

Self-care has an active and proactive role in overall health and wellness. Self-care is a framework for managing stress, life challenges, professional burnout, and compassion fatigue. It is an empowerment process that creates balance across our personal, social, and work lives. Self-care is any activity you do deliberately to take care of your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Self-care is not selfish.

Stress is simply the body's response to changes that create taxing demands. There are two types of stress – eustress and distress. Eustress, or beneficial stress, is short-term, feels exciting, motivates, and focuses energy. Distress, or negative stress, feels unpleasant, decreases performance, and can lead to mental or physical problems.

Stress is the most significant health threat of our time, and 75%-90% of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related problems. The long-term activation of the stress response system and the over-exposure to cortisol and other stress hormones can disrupt almost all our body's processes and ultimately lead to disease. Common health problems can include anxiety, depression, headaches, muscle tension and pain, heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, and stroke, just to name a few.

When you realize that you are regularly experiencing one or more symptoms of stress, it's time to act and break the cycle. The following strategies and activities are just a few ideas to reduce stress:

- Journaling.
- Volunteering.
- Enjoying nature.
- Exercising.
- Bonding with your pet.
- Spending time with family.
- Getting good sleep.
- Listening to music.

Strategies for self-care management in the workplace include deep breathing, meditation, and guided imagery.

- Deep Breathing - Focuses and concentrates on deepening the breath to calm the body's stress response and restore balance in the body
- Meditation - Provides mental clarity and focus by training your mind and developing your concentration during deep breathing
- Guided Imagery - Visualizes and focuses on positive imagery or life experience to calm the body's stress response and restore balance.

Some helpful apps you can use include Calm, Headspace, Breathe+, and Pause.

A self-care action plan is a valuable tool to help you manage stressors in your life. A plan is a proactive approach to setting goals and limits. Without a plan, you will probably not incorporate an actionable activity into your daily life.

- What are you going to do? Maybe you've chosen to add meditation to your daily life.
- How much are you going to do? Determine how much time you are willing to commit.
- When are you going to do it? Will you practice meditation at home or work?
- How often or how many days a week will you do it? Define the days and times.
- Confidence level? How confident are you that you can achieve your goal?

We can't take the stress out of life, but we *can* choose how we respond to it.

More resources to help manage stress

- ["Chronic Stress Puts Your Health at Risk"](#) Mayo Clinic, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 8 July 2021
- Lorig, Kate. "Becoming an Active Self-Manager." *Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions: Self-Management Skills for Heart Disease, Arthritis, Diabetes, Depression, Asthma, Bronchitis, Emphysema, and Other Physical and Mental Health Conditions*, Bull Publishing Company, Boulder, CO, 2020, pp. 26–26
- ["Stress Effects."](#) The American Institute of Stress, 16 June 2020