



Emotional Stress in the Time of COVID-19

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You are not crazy – this experience is maddening in its near total consumption of every aspect of our lives. Nor are you alone in this experience. While you may be separated from some of the important individuals in your life, individuals who help you balance and renew, in truth, you likely are not ever alone with your thoughts during family/roommate isolation at home. Routines have become anything but routine. The perceived loss of control can be distracting, and once distracted, we essentially are not in control and the backlog of purposes feels enormous. It all takes a toll.

Because your body cannot defend itself against the damage that emotional stress quietly creates over time, your body pays a heavy physiological price for every moment that you feel anxious, tense, frustrated, and angry. No other factor has as much influence over your health.

Anxiety, tension, frustration, and anger all serve important purposes when they first arise. The danger is in experiencing these emotions on a *chronic* basis.

Emotional Stress Sets Off a Series of Reactions in your Body

Emotional stress sets off a series of reactions in your body that involve the portion of your nervous system that would increase your chance of surviving if you were to run into a bear during a hike. In such a situation, your *sympathetic nervous system* would [well] sympathize:

- Speed up and intensify your heart and breathing rates, so that

you could have more oxygen and nutrients available to your muscles to run or fight.

- Divert the bulk of your blood supply to your large muscles groups to run or fight.

- Slow or even shut down your digestive system so as to not waste blood, nutrients, and oxygen that could be used to run or fight.

- Stimulate the release of extra glucose into your blood to give you a burst of energy (like a cheetah's spleen that gushes extra blood into its circulation when it needs a burst of acceleration – free fun fact).

- Cause your adrenal glands to release epinephrine and norepinephrine into your system to increase cardiac output and increase blood sugar.

- Stimulate the release of cortisol from your adrenal glands to increase blood sugar and energy.

- Increase the diameter of your pupils to allow for more light to enter your eyes and more acute vision for fighting and running quickly on any type of terrain.

Clearly, it is to our advantage to have a healthy sympathetic nervous system, one that is able to provide all of the functions listed above during physical emergencies. What we don't want is for our body to experience all of the above on a continuous, low-grade level because of emotional stress. And this is exactly what many of us are suffering from in today's unusual pandemic experience.

Emotional stress is immensely harmful to your health, because your body reacts to it in the same way that it would react if you came upon a wild bear or a mugger on a

walk. Not always to the same degree, of course, but there's no question that your sympathetic nervous system increases its output whenever you feel anxious, tense, frustrated, or angry. In other words, whenever you feel stressed. And emotional stress *always* equals increased output by the sympathetic nervous system, which *always* equals accelerated aging and breakdown of tissues.

So please, with intention, work in some time to work on effectively managing emotional stressors in your life and prevent them from creating health problems. Practice with colleagues, family, the dog – because if they aren't practicing with you, they may be distracting to you.

- **Deep Breathing.** Doing so can actually increase the tone of the portion of your nervous system that promotes relaxation and good digestion (parasympathetic), while decreasing the other portion of your nervous system that wreak havoc.

- **Prayer, meditation, or a purposeful relaxation session.** All three facilitate a relaxation response in your body that can decrease blood pressure, decrease pulse rate, and improve blood circulation. Meditation and relaxation sessions can be greatly enhanced by listening to an audio component designed to facilitate relaxation and mental clarity. Kennel the dog with a good chew toy, and put on some quiet music with the family.

- **Practice visualization.** Many athletes practice some form of

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visualization. As author Wayne Dyer says, “you’ll see it when you believe it.” Spend some time each day visualizing yourself going about your day in a balanced and emotionally poised manner. You can include visualization in your prayer/meditation/relaxation session.

■ **Eat for a healthy nervous system.** Your nutritional status can make a difference between being able to handle a certain amount of stress without breaking down vs. quickly suffering health problems when faced with stress. While it’s important to your overall health that you eat a well-balanced and nutrient-dense diet, for emotional health specifically, it is important to ensure adequate intake of B vitamins, Vitamin D, and two long chain omega-3 fatty acids, DHA and EPA.

■ **Be honest about your feelings.** “Know thyself” is encouraged in virtually every culture. Seeking to know what you are feeling is important to preventing unpleasant but genuine emotions from becoming chronic states. Anger, frustration, and anxiousness can help fuel personal growth and character development if you are honest with yourself and seek to discover their root causes. Starting with awareness (we all have emotions) and keeping a quick journal helps. Try to avoid censorship, and share with others to promote an honest flow of your thoughts.

■ **Move around.** Regular exercise is one of the best habits you can adopt that will help you avoid depression and stay emotionally balanced. It doesn’t matter what kind. What’s important is to be active on a regular basis.

Stay safe is more than a platitude, it is a genuine sentiment to you

from your professional Association. Sincerely, we can do this together. ▲

References

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IAEM Webinar Recordings

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- [IAEM Awards & Recognition 2020 Nominations Webinar](#) (June 3, 2020).
- [CDHS-IAEM Webinar: The Battle to Regain Cyber Territory](#) (June 1, 2020).
- [IAEM and Witt O’Brien’s Webinar: Accessing the \\$2 Trillion Dollar Recovery Fund for COVID-19: Navigating Federal Funding Streams and Preparing for Federal Reimbursement](#) (May 28, 2020).
- [CDHS Webinar: Public Policy and Legal Issues During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (May 8, 2020).
- [IAEM-USA Disaster Cost Recovery & Finance Caucus: “COVID-](#)

[19 Cost Recovery](#) (series of three webinars) The Apr. 28, May 12, May 26, and June 9 webinar recordings are posted here.

- [CDHS, NEMA, and IAEM Webinar, Part 2: “Personal, Organizational, and Community Resilience”](#) (Apr. 29, 2020).
- [CDHS, NEMA, and IAEM Webinar, Part 1: “Lessons and Observations from Frontline Resilience Professionals”](#) (Apr. 22, 2020).
- [IAEM-USA Region 1 Webinar Series: “COVID-19 Best Practice Sharing: Virtual Joint Information Center”](#) (Apr. 21, 2020).

- [IAEM-USA Disaster Cost Recovery & Finance Caucus: COVID-19 Cost Recovery](#) (series of three webinars) The Mar. 30, Apr. 1, and Apr. 3 webinar recordings are posted at this link.
- [IAEM-USA Region 1: Threat Management Fundamentals](#) (Mar. 26, 2020).
- [IAEM-Canada Webinar on Pandemic Risk Communication and Business Continuity Planning](#) (Mar. 19, 2020).
- [IAEM-USA Region 1: Building Emergency Preparedness in the Corporate Culture](#) (Feb. 19, 2020).

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