

Caring for your Brain During Stressful Times

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"I can't think."

"Where did my day go?"

"What was I going to say?"

"I'm not getting anything done."

"I keep forgetting what I was going to do."

"I keep losing my temper."

"Why am I not being more productive?"

Many of us are noticing that we are having trouble concentrating, we keep forgetting things we were going to do, we're walking around in a "fog," or we're not tackling any of the projects we wanted to get done during our time social distancing during this coronavirus pandemic. What is going on?

How stress affects your brain

Stress, worry, fear, and anxiety can affect your **cognition**, meaning brain functions like attention, concentration, memory, language, reasoning, and problem-solving. You might find yourself distracted throughout the day thinking about the scary news you read this morning, wondering how your relatives are doing, planning your children's school projects, or worrying about the supplies you could not find at the store yesterday.

Our brain is also responsible for controlling our **emotions and behavior**. During times of stress, you might find yourself losing your temper more easily, saying and doing things that are out of character for you, or having more difficulty controlling how much you eat or drink.

Even when you are not actively thinking about the outbreak, it could still be affecting you: Think about the stress and worry related to the pandemic as a window on your computer or an app on your phone that is always running in the background, taking away mental resources from the things you are trying to focus on and get done.

Stress also affects your brain by disrupting sleep: Perhaps you are having difficulty falling asleep, you are waking up in the middle of the night, or your sleep is light or restless. Poor sleep can cause changes in your cognition, including slow thinking and lapses in attention. It also affects your mood (irritability is common) and your ability to control your behavior: for example, it is more difficult to make healthy food choices when sleep deprived.

There are things you can do to help yourself think more clearly and stay on track during these stressful times.

How you can help your brain function better under stress

1. **"Outsource" brain tasks.** Because your brain might be running the "coronavirus worry app" in the background, the goal is to reduce other demands on your brain: Write everything down, even if you don't think you need to. Keep a to-do list and check things off as you get them done. Do things (call the bank about that credit card charge!) as soon as you remember them, or add them to your to-do list immediately. Set alarms to remind you to take a medication, join that online meeting, or email your child's teacher. Put a post-it on your door to remind you that you need to stop by the pharmacy next time you leave the house.
2. **Give yourself plenty of time.** Getting things done might take you longer during this time of increased stress. Schedule more time than it usually takes you to read that weekly report from work. Give yourself more time than you think it will take to help your child with their book report tonight. Break larger projects (like reorganizing your home office) into smaller tasks that you tackle over several days.
3. **Double-check.** During times of stress, you might make mistakes that you don't typically make. Take time to proofread that memo you just finished, double-check the amount on that check you just wrote, and confirm that you got everything on your grocery list before heading home.

4. **Do not try to “multitask.”** While we might think we are good at “multitasking,” or doing more than one thing at a time, our brains are in fact not good at it. When we think we are multitasking, our brains are actually **shifting** attention and mental resources back and forth and back and forth between two or more things, like between following a recipe and answering your toddler’s questions, or between writing an email and listening to a conference call. This shifting is cognitively “expensive”—it takes considerable mental resources. As much as you can, work on one thing at a time. Get one thing done before moving on to the next.
5. **Avoid distractions.** Trying to ignore distractions while you focus on something takes mental resources away from the task at hand and makes it more likely that you will make mistakes. Even if you’re usually able to get work done while the kids watch TV, during this stressful time it might be harder to suppress distractions. Turn the phone ringer and music off and work in a separate room if you can. If you cannot avoid distractions, try to do tasks that require relatively little mental effort: It is easier to organize the pantry or file paperwork than review the household finances when *Daniel Tiger* or *Fortnite* are blasting on the background.
6. **Hit “Pause.”** If you find yourself getting distracted repeatedly or you start feeling stressed or frustrated, take a break: Get up and stretch, walk around for a few minutes, take a few deep breaths while looking out the window, or play a short, calming song. Don’t start working on something else or check the news! The point is to give your brain a break. (Think of your brain as a snow globe that has been shaken and you’re keeping it still so the snowflakes stop fluttering around.)
7. **Turn phone notifications off.** Just like reminders and alarms are your friends, notifications are the enemy. Notifications make our brains shift throughout the day, from whatever it is we are doing, to that text/email/tweet/post/comment, and back to what we were doing. Over and over. Turn off notifications that you do not absolutely need. Schedule times to check your email, social media accounts, and news sources, in between getting things done.
8. **Schedule worry time.** Choose a time and place when you will do nothing but worry, for example, every afternoon from 4 to 4:30PM on the living room couch. When you find yourself worrying during the day, write down that worry (“How will we take care of mom if she has to have that surgery?”) as a way of getting the thought out of your head and on paper. Similarly, because news can be stressful and scary, limit how much you consume: You might choose to watch the news for only 30 minutes every morning, or you might choose 3 pandemic-related articles that you will read on a given day. Do not have your worry time or watch/read news close to your bedtime or while in bed!
9. **Take care of your body.** What is good for your body is good for your brain. Follow the usual strategies to stay healthy: Exercise safely, however you can. Moderate your intake of sweets, fats, and alcohol. Practice relaxation methods like diaphragmatic breathing and mindfulness meditation. Protect your sleep as much as possible: Try to have a calming bedtime routine that signals to your body and mind that it is time to wind down, go to bed and wake up at regular times every day, and avoid staring at your phone or laptop in bed.
10. **Seek help for your mental health.** If you notice that your stress, worry, or sadness are becoming too hard to manage, you are having difficulty making it through your day, or your loved ones express concern about you, seek help. Many mental health professionals are offering therapy and counseling services using telehealth, over the phone or video. Therapists can help with depression, anxiety, sleep problems, substance use, and couples, family, and parenting difficulties. **Help is available.** To find a qualified therapist, ask your primary care physician, insurance company, or a trusted friend; look up online resources; or reach out to your local or state psychological association.

Finally, **give yourself a break.** These are not normal times, so be patient and have self-compassion if you are not your “normal” self (remember, you have extra apps running in the background). You will miss things. You will make mistakes. You will bounce back. Keep your expectations simple and your to-do list short. Take care of yourself and your loved ones.