

A Mental Health Prescription for Coping with the Coronavirus Pandemic

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1) *Take two 5-10 minute doses of Lovingkindness Meditation (LKM) in the am and in the pm.*

Lovingkindness meditation has been shown to help us recover from cardiac reactivity produced by stress. It has also been shown to increase oxytocin (sometimes called the love hormone) which suppresses inflammation, and reduces depression and hypertension. It also helps us experience social connectedness and a higher-than-self transcendent mind view. People report feeling more spirituality and more positive emotions, especially awe, gratitude, inspiration, and love.

2) *Engage socially a few times a week.*

Use social media to positively engage with others. Have a cyber party, watch Netflix together, join a virtual prayer circle, or connect and play board games together. Or, just virtually get together for a chat. Maybe have a good old fashion conference call with friends. Reach out to those who live alone and engage in some compassionate listening calls.

3) *Build your “core psychological strength” several times a week.*

Living through and experiencing our virtues or strengths helps us achieve gratification in life (something deeper than mere satisfaction). This contributes to our overall well-being and activates “flourishing.” Have you taken the time to assess your strengths? You can also build these up through a mental or behavioral exercise of these.

Check and consider what strengths apply to you, or which ones you want to build (from Handbook-Character Strengths and Virtues). Choose one a day to work on.

Strengths of Wisdom and Knowledge

Creativity (Originality, Ingenuity)

Curiosity (Interest, Novelty Seeking, Openness to Experience)

Open mindedness (Judgment, Critical Thinking)

Love of Learning

Perspective (Wisdom)

Strengths of Courage

Bravery (Valor)

Persistence (Perseverance, Industriousness)

Integrity (Authenticity, Honesty)

Vitality (Zest, Enthusiasm, Vigor, Energy)

Strengths of Humanity

Love

Kindness (Generosity, Nurturance, Care, Compassion, Altruistic Love, Niceness)

Social intelligence (Emotional Intelligence, Personal Intelligence)

Strengths of Justice

Citizenship (Social Responsibility, Loyalty, Teamwork)

Fairness

Leadership

Strengths of Temperance

Forgiveness and Mercy

Humility and Modesty

Prudence

Self-Regulation and Self-Control

Strengths of Transcendence

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (Awe, Wonder, Elevation)

Gratitude

Hope (Optimism, Future-Mindedness, Future-Orientation)

Humor (Playfulness)

Spirituality (Religiousness, Faith, Purpose)

4) *Interval training - create pockets of positivity “POP”s and moments of meaning (and purpose) “MOM”s in your daily routine.*

Strategically induce positive emotions - jumping for joy, feeling peace, expressing love, finding awe, engaging in what interests you, building hope goals and pathways, savoring serenity, allow excitement about an event or project, be curious, find things that invigorate you. Invigorating emotions such as enthusiasm, and great interest or passion create a positive surge of energy and have been shown to be associated with better physical health too!

Strategically induce meaning and purpose. These are those transcendent goals/events. Ask yourself what gives me and my life meaning and purpose? Go and find your passion!

Either induce all or any of these or catch them when they occur and savor them and let them accumulate in your memory. Let it be your daily prescription.

5) *Rest and Replenish*

Rest is so important to our mental, physical, and social health. Sleep deprivation increases anxiety and depression symptoms. It also reduces the ability to concentrate, solve problems, be creative and, as we all know, it increases irritability. It is generally agreed that 7.5 hours is the best amount of sleep to get. Some people need a little more and some a little less (but I do mean “a little”). Also, rest breaks are not “doing nothing,” but rather they help us replenish our reserves and energy.

Relaxation breathing is also a form of replenishment. When we deeply breathe in and slowly breathe out, slowly making the out breath long, we engage our vagus nerve (the cranial nerve that connects our brain and heart and other internal organs), it stimulates the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) that has been called our calming system (the “rest and digest” system). Just as the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) stimulates our Fight, Flight, or Freeze response and spends our reserves, the PNS creates a physical, calming response and puts

reserves back in. In essence, it replenishes us. Engaging our vagus nerve through the relaxation breath increases cardiac vagal tone (CVT) that has been associated with better regulation of the cardiovascular system, better regulation of inflammatory processes (reducing inflammatory cytokines), and better regulation of blood glucose levels. In fact, doctors often use CVT (higher is best) as a good predictor of a better prognosis after a heart attack. It has been found that CVT amplifies positive emotions when we are with other people and that positive emotions and purpose are associated with higher cardiac vagal tone. It seems we have a biopsychosocial reciprocal dynamic that can be boosted by relaxation/meditation practices and MOMs and POPs.

A prescription of positive emotions and meaning and purpose doesn't get rid of negative emotions, nor should it, because we need to experience all of our emotions. Instead, positive emotions help us adjust and adapt our response to negative events and emotions by building possibilities for pathways of growth mentally, physically, and socially. In essence, MOMs and POPs help build our psychological immune system.