



# SOCIAL DISTANCING? HERE'S HOW TO PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE

*Resources and tips from Johns Hopkins mental health experts to help you maintain your physical and emotional well-being in the time of COVID-19*

**Katie Pearce** /  a day ago

The constant flow of news about COVID-19 can be unsettling, even destabilizing. It's critical to prioritize self-care—taking steps to maintain mental, emotional, and physical health and remain knitted to a sense of community.

"COVID-19 may leave us feeling out of control," says George Everly, a professor of international health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who specializes in disaster mental health. "Taking care of ourselves is the best way to take care of others, whether they be family, friends, patients, or co-workers."

With that in mind, the Hub collected self-care tips and resources from Johns Hopkins mental health experts, including resources for the Hopkins community.

## **Know that stress and anxiety are normal reactions**

Feeling scared, angry, sad, or helpless is understandable during a crisis. But learn to recognize when your thoughts are spinning on negative loops and try to interrupt them.

Laura Murphy, a senior scientist in Mental Health at the Bloomberg School, writes in a *Baltimore Sun* op-ed: "The thought patterns circulating through our minds are intricately connected to how we feel and act. Now is a good time to step back and consider what's trending with our internal narratives. For example, what if my constant thought is 'This is bad! What is this world coming to?' Not surprisingly, my emotions will more likely skew to significant anxiety."

Focus instead, she says, on "changing the thought channel to more helpful programming that includes thoughts like, 'There are many capable people working on this. We will get through this.'"

## **Direct energy toward diversions, hobbies, and creative outlets**

"Engage in activities or distractions that replace focusing on COVID," Everly says, such as art, music, writing, cooking, reading, or playing with kids.

Doing activities you enjoy has a positive impact on your neurochemistry and helps lessen stress, Murphy agrees.

## **Exercise**

It's scientifically proven to reduce anxiety and depression.

Despite the limitations of social distancing that COVID-19 necessitates, experts still encourage people to get outside in fresh air to take a stroll or a jog, walk the dog, or ride a bike—though it's still necessary to maintain a 6-foot distance from others.

At home, find a regimen. Set aside a certain amount of time to get up and move. Videos and apps can guide you, and many yoga studios now offer streaming services.

## **Maintain connections and routines**

Keep in close contact with your family and friends outside your home through technology, including calls, texts, and videoconferencing. Reach out to your connections to hash out feelings and fears. Everly suggests developing a mutual support plan—regular check-ins on mental health with one or two people with whom you remain in close contact.

Keep watching your favorite TV shows, keep listening to your favorite music and podcasts, and keep cooking your favorite foods if you can. If you have kids, try to maintain the normalcy of their routines as much as possible. "The familiar is comfortable," Everly says.

At the same time, it's important to be flexible and develop new routines for the new normal, which could include rituals like virtual game nights or book clubs. A recent *Washington Post*

op-ed points to studies showing that "planning and executing new routines that connect you to what really matters in life is the best recipe for good mental health."

## **Indulge a little**

Let yourself eat treats, kill time with video games or mindless apps, and catch up on your favorite TV shows. "Even binge-watching Netflix can be a healthy habit in these challenging times," Murray writes in *The Sun*.

"It's OK to treat yourself," Everly adds. "Just don't go overboard."

However, experts caution against using alcohol or drugs to cope with stress; your mental health will suffer more. That's particularly true for those with preexisting mental health or substance abuse disorders, says Calliope Hologue, a postdoctoral fellow in neuropsychology at the Bloomberg School. Some support groups are hosting online meetings and services, including Alcoholics Anonymous.

## **Take long breaks from news and social media**

Absorb enough news to stay informed, but don't overdo it with constant updates that feed into fear and anxiety.

"It's a human phenomenon that many of us can't stop constantly watching a disaster unfold—even though we may want to look away," Murray writes.

Experts recommend sticking with direct and reliable sources like the CDC rather than social media or TV channels. Johns Hopkins University and Health System provide several guides with coronavirus information and expertise, including:

- [coronavirus.jhu.edu](https://coronavirus.jhu.edu)
- [hub.jhu.edu/novel-coronavirus-information](https://hub.jhu.edu/novel-coronavirus-information)
- [hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus](https://hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus)
- [jhsphe.edu/covid-19/](https://jhsphe.edu/covid-19/)

## **Protect your sleep**

Quality, sufficient sleep not only helps support your immune system but also helps you better manage stress and regulate emotions, Hologue says.

## **Take advantage of available free resources**

For the Johns Hopkins community, these include free premium access to the Calm app, which offers guided meditations, sleep assistance, videos on mindful movement, and soothing music, among other features.

The myStrength app focuses on mental health, offering support for managing depression, anxiety, stress, and other conditions, as well as a tool for tracking your mood over time. Users can also join online communities to keep on pace with goals. The Hopkins community can access the app for free using the code "JHU" (university) or "JHHS" (health system).

For faculty and staff of both the university and health system, the mySupport employee assistance program offers free 24/7 access to confidential counseling and referral services for help with stress and other challenges. When you call mySupport, a clinician will listen and help identify resources and next steps. You can call 443-997-7000 or start online. mySupport also offers a helpful guide to coping with coronavirus fears.

For students, Wellness.jhu.edu serves as a centralized place to explore available health and wellness resources. It is maintained by the Office of Student Health and Well-Being to serve students from all nine academic divisions.

## Accept a lack of control

"Control what you can; accept and cope with those things outside of your control," Everly says. "Remember you may not always be able to control what happens, but you can always control how you react."

Adds Holingue: "Things are different right now and everyone is adjusting. Prioritize what's most important and know that it's okay to let some things go right now. Be kind to yourself and others."

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