

We are living through a time of fear and disruption of daily life that most of us have never experienced. When we are facing threats to our health, our safety, and financial security, and also dealing with the impact of social isolation and a massive disruption of normal routines of daily life, our minds and bodies respond in powerful ways.

When so much in our current external world is out of our control, it is especially important to find ways to better manage responses to the danger and fear we may be experiencing. We can begin to take greater control of our own distress/anxiety--and help those we care about — when we learn to recognize and understand what is actually occurring in our minds and bodies when we are afraid. When we can observe and understand our own versions of the shared human experience of fear and uncertainty, we are better able to make choices that can turn down the volume of our distress and increase our feelings of well-being.

Under normal circumstances there is regular communication between two important parts of our brain: the *pre-frontal cortex* and the *amygdala*. The pre-frontal cortex helps us organize information, think in an organized way and make decisions about our actions. The amygdala is the emotion center of the brain and plays a central role in responding to fear and threat by triggering the fight-flight response.

However, when we feel threatened, or when there are major disruptions to the ways we live, the communication between the pre-frontal cortex and the amygdala is disrupted. At these times, our brains literally may not work the same way. The production of stress hormones and neurotransmitters may become amplified and lead to symptoms of anxiety/distress that we experience in our bodies as well as our minds.

In normal times, we are able to find ways to order our thinking in efforts to calm our feelings of distress. For example, we may make lists of the things we need to do, or we may try to think through and identify current reasons for our distress or distract ourselves from troubling thoughts---all in an attempt to turn down the volume on uncomfortable feelings.

Higher levels of physical reactions to distress can interfere with our ability to think in clear, organized ways that ordinarily help us to feel calm. As a result, we may be caught up in repetitive, vicious cycles of distressing thoughts and distressing physical reactions that magnify our sense of loss of control and helplessness. When this happens, not only does the world around us seem out of control, but our own reactions feel out of control as well.

When we no longer feel in control and in charge of ourselves, on top of our limited control of the world around us, we become more prone to changes in mood. These changes in mood contribute to our suffering and to the accumulating experience of helplessness and loss of control.

Understanding & Coping with Reactions in a Pandemic



During these challenging times, we are all vulnerable to changes in how we think, feel and act, and these changes themselves can contribute to the high levels of stress we experience. Those who have struggled with emotional difficulties in the past may be especially vulnerable, but may also be able to draw on coping strategies that they have already been practicing to reduce those levels of distress.

While we may need to be physically distant from each other, it is important to remember that we are not alone. When we reach out and help each other as part of our efforts to turn down the volume of our shared distress in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are at our best.

Understanding our stress reactions and using strategies to decrease overwhelmed feelings is the first step in taking greater control of ourselves, even when the world around us feels so unfamiliar, uncertain and scary.

The following table will help you to:

- Recognize common stress reactions
- Understand how we experience these reactions in our bodies, thoughts, feelings and behaviors
- Identify coping strategies for “turning down the volume” of these reactions.
- Understand why these coping strategies work to lower these reactions
- Connect to useful resources

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at the Yale Child Study Center

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<p>ANXIETY/STRESS</p> <p>Anxiety symptoms occur because stress hormones lead the body's stress response system to become dysregulated.</p> <p>So many unknowns and worries, including possibly getting sick and having difficulty meeting basic needs, can increase our feelings of not being in our control</p> <p>Frequently checking the news about COVID-19 is an attempt to regain a sense of control, but it can backfire by keeping the body's stress response system activated.</p>	<p>BODY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muscle tension • Aches and pains • Headaches • Stomachaches • Increased sweating • Changes in breathing (with no illness) <p>THOUGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent worries (What if...?) • Self-critical thoughts • Constant thinking about COVID-19 and related topics <p>FEELINGS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervous • Periods of panic • Overwhelmed • Helpless <p>BEHAVIORS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant checking for symptoms of COVID-19 • Constant checking the news and social media for COVID-19 updates • Constant talking about COVID-19 and related topics 	<p>Maintain or create daily routines. Set realistic goals.</p> <p>Focus on what can be controlled. Remember that physical distancing and other recommended precautions are active ways of protecting yourself and others.</p> <p>Stay engaged in activities that have goals you can complete and feel successful about (hobbies and projects, household chores, and other work activities).</p> <p>Limit exposure to COVID-19 related news (try to check no more than twice per day for necessary updates).</p> <p>Seek pleasant distractions (music, books, movies, games, walking).</p> <p>Practice relaxation techniques, including focused breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, listening to music, exercising and guided visual imagery.</p>	<p>Establishing routines increases feelings of predictability and control.</p> <p>Taking recommended actions to protect yourself, family, and friends is a very real way of being in control.</p> <p>Accomplishing tasks can help you feel more in control, remind you of your capabilities, and help interrupt the unhelpful cycle of stress reactions.</p> <p>Having facts can help us feel in greater control, but constantly checking the news about COVID-19 can repeatedly activate stress reactions. Limiting news-checking allows the body's stress response system to reset.</p> <p>Entertainment can help interrupt the cycle of stress reactions and can provide relief from distressing feelings.</p> <p>Relaxation techniques can directly interrupt physical symptoms of arousal and help us feel more in control.</p>

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<p>TROUBLE SLEEPING</p> <p>In addition to changes in the body's stress response system, normal sleep patterns are disrupted when we are stressed because:</p> <p>1) When we turn the lights off, lie down and close our eyes to go to sleep, there are fewer distractions from upsetting thoughts feelings.</p> <p>2) With fewer distractions, upsetting thoughts and feelings can, in fact, increase and become more repetitive and intense.</p>	<p>BODY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical symptoms of anxiety (see above) <p>THOUGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repetitive, troubling, or racing thoughts at night Bad dreams or nightmares <p>FEELINGS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxious Exhausted/Fatigue Frustrated Helpless <p>BEHAVIORS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restlessness Inability to fall asleep Waking up during the night Getting out of bed, walking around, being on "screens" 	<p>Try to get plenty of exercise, outside if possible.</p> <p>Try to stick to a routine, including consistent bedtime and wake up times.</p> <p>Avoid checking the news before bed. Instead, watch or read something enjoyable and distracting.</p> <p>If waking up during the night, try to stay in bed and rest; try to avoid using screens; if possible, read printed materials; or listen to music to fall back to sleep.</p> <p>Practice relaxation techniques, such as focused breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or guided visual imagery.</p> <p>Avoid excessive use of caffeine and alcohol.</p>	<p>Exercise and sunlight help regulate the body's sleep/wake cycle.</p> <p>Sticking to a sleep schedule helps reset the body's clock and supports falling and staying asleep. Consistent bedtime routines increase predictability and control.</p> <p>Actively focusing on positive/calming things at bedtime helps the brain and body prepare for sleep.</p> <p>Relaxation techniques slow down our breathing and heart rate and turn down the volume on our thoughts, sending signals to the brain that we can relax and fall asleep to get the rest we need.</p> <p>Caffeine is a stimulant that may interfere with sleep for up to 12 hours. While many think of alcohol as a relaxant, it can also contribute to interrupted sleep.</p>

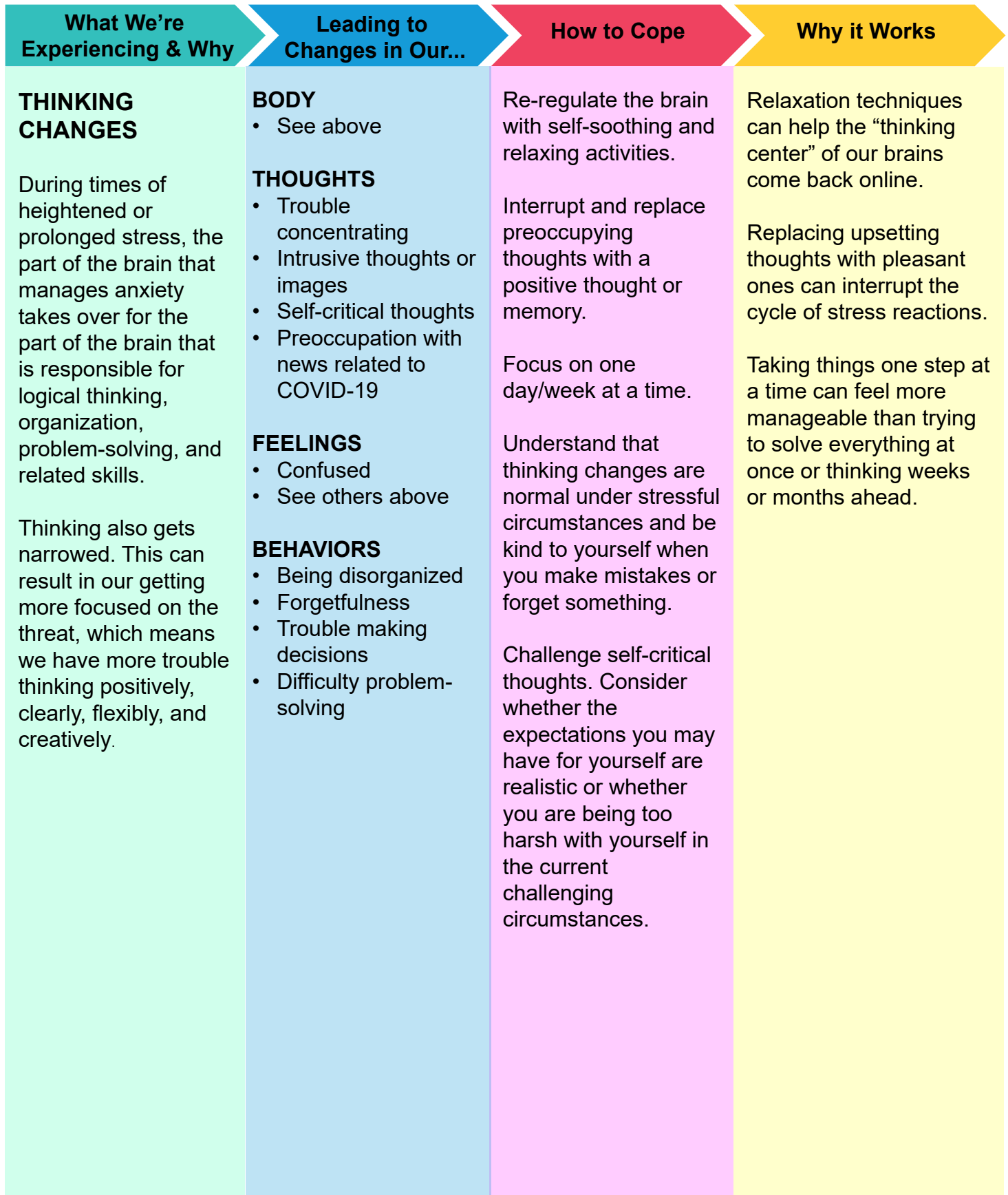
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<p>CHANGES IN MOOD</p> <p>Changes in the body's stress response system and trouble sleeping can negatively affect our mood.</p> <p>In addition, increased pressure from worries about health, financial stress, job loss, difficulty meeting basic needs, and/or working remotely while supporting children in distance learning can also negatively affect our mood.</p> <p>Postponing or canceling important events and milestones such as graduations, weddings, vacations, or funerals can make us sad, disappointed, and angry.</p>	<p>BODY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of energy • Change in appetite (wanting to eat more or less than usual) • Physical anxiety symptoms (see above) <p>THOUGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pessimistic thoughts and outlook • Self-critical thoughts • Pre-occupation with worries about health and/or death <p>FEELINGS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability/Anger • Impatience • Sadness • Fear • Rapid shifts in mood • Numbness • Disinterest • Loss of pleasure in physical intimacy <p>BEHAVIORS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neglecting personal hygiene • Fighting with others • Angry outbursts • Staying in bed • Avoiding contact with others (including virtual/telephone) • Not eating regularly or eating more • Stopping or limiting physical activity and routines of daily life 	<p>Try to get enough sleep, eat well, and exercise regularly.</p> <p>If possible, be outside, while maintaining physical distancing.</p> <p>Limit use of mood altering substances (alcohol/other drugs).</p> <p>Stay connected to others (talk on the phone, video chat, connect through technology/social media, exchange cards/letters).</p> <p>If you can, help others (check on neighbors, participate in community activities that support others, make a donation).</p> <p>Be kind to yourself. Challenge self-critical thoughts. You are likely doing the best you can under difficult circumstances.</p> <p>Reassure yourself by focusing on helpers working to support the community (medical professionals, grocery store clerks, delivery workers).</p>	<p>Sleep, nutrition, and exercise are vital to regulating mood.</p> <p>In addition to well-known risks connected with overuse of alcohol and other substances, they can also significantly increase negative or depressed feelings once the "high" wears off.</p> <p>Social connectedness releases hormones that can increase positive feelings.</p> <p>Helping others can make us feel effective rather than passive.</p> <p>Our brains are biased to notice the negative, particularly when we are under stress. Shifting our focus to the positive can help change our mindset and improve mood.</p>

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<p>LONELINESS & SOCIAL ISOLATION</p> <p>To protect ourselves and each other and help “flatten the curve” of the spread of COVID-19, we must practice physical distancing.</p> <p>As a result, we may have greater feelings of loneliness and isolation. While physical distancing is a way of taking protective action, it doesn't require disconnecting from others. What these times call for is <i>remote connecting</i>.</p>	<p>BODY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See above <p>THOUGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See above <p>FEELINGS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lonely • Missing friends and loved ones • Disconnected • Helpless • Hopeless <p>BEHAVIORS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See above 	<p>Connect/reconnect with family and friends using technology.</p> <p>Schedule regular virtual social activities (e.g., calls, video chats, virtual coffees, virtual movies).</p> <p>Play multiplayer online games.</p> <p>Sign up for online classes in areas of interest.</p> <p>Join a virtual book club.</p> <p>Participate in organizational activities that work toward a common purpose and connect you with others.</p>	<p><u>Physical</u> distancing doesn't require social or psychological distancing. Taking advantage of technology can bring us together and reduce loneliness and isolation.</p> <p>Feeling part of a larger community can combat isolation.</p>

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Resources

Relaxation Techniques:

Focused Breathing (Relaxation Tip card):

https://nyulangone.org/files/Relaxation_Tip_Card--landscape-format.pdf

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~media/CCI/Mental%20Health%20Professionals/Panic/Panic%20-%20Information%20Sheets/Panic%20Information%20Sheet%20-%2005%20-%20Progressive%20Muscle%20Relaxation.pdf>

Mindfulness/Meditation apps:

Stop, Breathe, and Think (adult and kid versions of the app)

Headspace

Calm

Trouble Sleeping:

Sleep Hygiene Fact Sheet

<https://restedlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Sleep-Hygiene-Fact-Sheet-Rested-Life.pdf>

Ten Tips to Better Sleep

<https://worldsleepday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/10-Tips-for-Better-Sleep-Graphic.jpg>

General Information regarding COVID-19 related Stress:

Managing Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/COVID_managing_stress.asp

Stress and Coping

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

For Family and Friends of Families Experiencing Violence at Home during this Pandemic:

https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/Futures-Without-Violence-Family-and-Friends-Tips_Final-EN.pdf

Check your local domestic violence organizations for additional resources and assistance.

Should you need additional mental health support during these difficult times, please contact your primary health care provider or local mental health agencies.

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, contact your local emergency room, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), or call 911.