

Lockdown got you down? Experts offer tips to de-stress

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Though the physical health risks posed by COVID-19 are at the top of

everyone's mind, experts warn the pandemic is also exacting a massive toll on mental health.

So finds new research emerging on the mental health effects in China, where infection peaks and lockdowns have preceded the American experience by several months.

For example, one recent study in the journal *Psychiatry Research* surveyed more than 7,200 Chinese men and women during the country's February lockdown. More than a third were found to be suffering from COVID-related "generalized anxiety disorder," while about a fifth struggled with signs of depression. Just over 18% reported sleeping difficulties.

The good news? Experts say there are effective coping strategies for those who feel they're sinking under the weight of the coronavirus crisis.

"First I think it is important that we acknowledge for ourselves that feeling overwhelmed, fearful or stressed in the current circumstance is quite understandable," said Danielle King, assistant professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Rice University in Houston.

"Rather than avoiding having those feelings, I believe it is beneficial for us to acknowledge them, give ourselves grace, and find ways to also experience some [positive emotions](#) in the midst of these difficulties," she said.

Consciously doing that, said King, helps people accept that there are some things "that are not within our control." And it also frees the mind to refocus on those things that *are* a matter of choice.

"For example," she noted, "in a stressful time we could find a moment of joy in exercising; create fun in spending time playing games with our

children; feel accomplished in painting a picture; experience calm and manage our thoughts through meditating; or bring happiness to others by cooking a new recipe for our family."

The goal: to create "moments of positive emotion" as way to boost hope and courage "in the midst of so much understandable stress," King said.

That advice was seconded by Neda Gould, associate director of the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore. And that goal, she said, can be furthered by taking time to embrace meditative moments of calm and relaxation.

"Any form of relaxation or mindfulness can turn off the [stress response](#)," Gould said, "and allow us to think more clearly and effectively, and help us return to the present moment. Pausing and taking a few deep breaths is one option. Taking some time to listen to guided meditations before bed, or in the early morning, can be useful."

King agreed. "I think working to stay in the 'now' as much as possible is helpful when so many things are changing and are unpredictable in our lives," she said.

So King advocates embracing a "one day at a time" perspective that redirects focus towards the silver linings of an otherwise difficult time. For some, that could mean celebrating the unforeseen opportunity "to 'pause,' to stay home, [and] spend time in solitude and/or with our families," she said. These are opportunities "which we may not experience again, to this extent, in our lifetime," she pointed out.

Gould warned against giving in to the pessimistic seduction of worst-case scenarios. "Remember that the mind can fixate on catastrophic outcomes," she noted. "And we need to bring it back to the facts of a situation, as opposed to the stories we get caught in about what could

happen."

That leads both Gould and King to suggest yet another way to tamp down anxiety: Stop watching the news.

"Anxiety can easily become impairing with the barrage of information in the news," Gould cautioned. She suggested only tuning in to a few reliable news sources for limited periods of time. "Avoid checking the news constantly, but rather limit to once a day, for example," she said.

"It is important to stay informed," King acknowledged. "But we must also prioritize our [mental health](#). [So] if news, like any other activity, is causing overwhelming anxiety, take a break, go for a walk, and then try out a new method to reach your goal."

And remember that identifying which anti-anxiety methods work best may take some trial and error, she added.

"What we each 'need' may be unique to us," King explained. "We are all learning about ourselves in this new experience. And we must listen to our bodies and emotions."

More information: There's more about the COVID-19 and mental health at the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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