How faculty members can best cope with the stresses of COVID-19 (opinion)

Submitted by Mindi Thompson on March 19, 2020 - 3:00am

Dear Mentors,

How do I make sense of all of the information regarding the COVID-19 virus and its impact? This is causing major disruptions to my schedule, and I am being asked to do a lot of work to transition to online instruction in a short time while also feeling anxious about my family and community. What are some best practices to stay calm and maintain any sense of routine during this time?

Sincerely,

Concerned

Dear Concerned,

As a licensed psychologist and associate professor of counseling psychology, I want to start by saying it is normal to experience a range of emotional reactions. There is a lot going on as we find ourselves in this surreal and unprecedented moment. The news updates are incessant and ever-changing. Our emails are flooded with announcements about canceled regional and national conferences, suspended grant-supported fieldwork, movements to online instruction, and closures of K-12 schools and businesses.

Things will continue to shift and change, and by the time you read this, some of the suggestions below may already feel irrelevant. But in this fluid and rapidly changing landscape, we need to remember now, more than ever, to prioritize strategies to protect our physical and mental health and that allow us to take care of ourselves and our loved ones. In that spirit, I outline some strategies below that will assist us focusing on health and wellness.
Create boundaries around your consumption of media, social media, email and text messages. During moments when new information, guidance and instructions are coming at us from multiple angles (e.g., news, Twitter, campus communications, calls and texts from friends and family), we can easily find ourselves feeling the urge to stay on top of all information at all hours of the day and night. We can get sucked into continuous reading, tweeting and texting.

But while staying informed, aware and connected to others is important, wasting away hours at a time engaging in these behaviors often leaves us feeling even more overwhelmed and anxious. Being depleted emotionally isn’t helpful as we try to take care of ourselves or others who need us. To this end:

- Keep your consumption of information contained by scheduled blocks of time each day to read the news, engage in social media and respond to emails or text messages related to the pandemic. If this seems impossible, try putting your devices in another room or under a pile of clothes and setting a timer. Start small (say, 30 minutes) and work your way up from there.
- Be intentional and thoughtful about the information sources you follow and trust. Fear-mongering and the spread of information that is racist, inaccurate or unsubstantiated isn’t helpful for anyone.

Stay active and prioritize your physical and mental health. Keeping up your physical activity and other health-related habits may be particularly challenging during this time, especially if you are living within an area in which you are asked to self-quarantine or where a major outbreak has occurred. Running, attending your typical fitness class in person or heading to the gym may not be available to you at this time, so consider some other potential options:

- This can be a great time to explore online resources for physical activity. A large variety of apps and online streaming content are accessible at little to no cost. Possibilities range from short to longer guided workouts and are available via YouTube channels and online subscriptions. If you have a paid membership to a local gym or studio, ask about virtual access to classes or other resources during this time.
- Unless otherwise restricted in your area, seek opportunities to spend time outdoors that allow you to maintain an appropriate distance (six feet is recommended by experts) between yourself and others. Walking, sitting in the sunshine or doing a few jumping jacks or push-ups can provide a helpful change of pace to being indoors.
- Stretch your body.
- Sleep.
- Limit or avoid alcohol and other drug intake.
- Crank up your favorite jams and host a mini dance party with yourself or your family.
- Explore or revisit leisure activities that contribute to your relaxation, joy and balance. Lists of suggestions have been popping up online that include everything from reading a novel, cooking a new recipe, drawing or painting, and learning a new craft or hobby.
- Keep in mind that completing small tasks can be useful in maintaining some small sense of control. Identify those you can complete each day when you are stuck indoors, such as organizing your files (electronic or hard copy), cleaning out your junk drawer, or rearranging your closet.
- Remember that it is only when we are healthy that we are able to support others.

**Maintain connections with others.** The overwhelming advice from most public health experts and epidemiologists is that social distancing measures are needed to protect the larger community. Even if you believe your immune system is strong and you are out of the range of those who appear to be most impacted by COVID-19, remember these guidelines are in place to protect the larger community -- especially those who are immunocompromised and our health-care workers on the front lines of response to the pandemic. At the same time, social connections and social contacts are essential to our survival, so it's also important during social distancing to:

- Schedule time to connect with others virtually via video chat and phone.
- Engage in online community conversations with others around particular topics.
- Check in with others and ask how they are doing. A simple text message or sharing a funny meme can help to stave off feelings of loneliness and maintain bonds.

**Exercise patience, kindness and compassion toward yourself and others.** Many of us are feeling the impacts of COVID-19 and the stressors introduced with this developing situation. A lot of misinformation is being communicated, which adds to our collective confusion and stress. We must be compassionate with ourselves and one another as we experience the effects of the pandemic and should develop some strategies, including some of the following:

- Remember your strengths and coping resources that have helped you get through other challenging situations. Those internal resources are available for you to tap into and to share with others. If you are feeling
particularly anxious, ask yourself, “How did I get through the last stressful situation I faced? What strategies did I use? What behaviors were helpful?” and make a list. Asking yourself such questions and creating a list of the techniques that surface provide useful reminders that you already possess a wealth of internal resources that you can summon to help you navigate current stressors.

- Freewrite or journal for a few minutes to clear your mind.
- Take deep breaths, listen to calming music or listen to a guided meditation to promote relaxation.
- Be patient and kind in your interactions with others. Keep in mind that everyone is managing stressful situations, including families with sick members, students who remain in relative isolation in college dorms because they have no homes to return to or cannot enter their countries, and health service providers with growing clinical responsibilities to clients and patients. We all are learning as we go, and it is especially important to remind ourselves to give others with whom we are working and interacting the benefit of the doubt, as they too are coping with their own stressful circumstances.
- Be gracious in sharing your time, resources and expertise with others. College campuses are filled with brilliant, hardworking and creative individuals who have a range of expertise. This is a wonderful time to remember that we are a part of a community of individuals who are strongest when we work together. For example, if you have expertise in online teaching, take a few minutes to share some tips and resources with colleagues who have never taught an online class. If you are a senior faculty member, take time to support junior colleagues who more likely to be impacted by the negative consequences of lost productivity as they reconfigure syllabi, manage student anxiety and pause data collection. Also, seek out ways to support individuals who are in precarious work and living situations and who may not have access to basic needs like shelter, food and medical care.

**Pay attention to your feelings and thoughts, and know when to reach out for help.** During stressful times and transition periods, it is not uncommon to find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, depleted, anxious, nervous, helpless and afraid. When it comes to our mental health, it’s important to pay attention to how we are feeling and to know when we need to ask for help.

- If you find that you are having difficulty coping with stress and managing your daily life, consider connecting with a psychotherapist. Web resources to help you get started in your search include the National Register of Health Service Psychologists’ Find a Psychologist,[1] Psychology Today’s Find a Therapist [2] and Therapy for Black Girls’ Find Therapists in Your Area [3].
- If you are experiencing emotional distress related to the COVID-19 pandemic and in need of immediate crisis counseling, contact the 24-hour Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s
Create structures to allow you to focus on select responsibilities and goals. With all the distractions, it can be difficult to maintain our typical habits (e.g., writing, fitness, mental health and wellness). Yet if it is in your capacity, maintaining some semblance of a routine to your day-to-day life can serve as a protective factor for mental health.

Contrary to popular belief, a transition to “working from home” is challenging. This has become increasingly clear in the past couple of days as we’ve settled into the realities of distance teaching while caregiving, telecommuting and dealing with continuous uncertainty. Regardless of your particular circumstances, developing small and realistic goals can serve as a protective factor for your health and wellness. The following questions may provide a useful starting point:

- What would I like to accomplish today, tomorrow, or over the next week? Begin by listing responsibilities on your plate at the moment. Start small and be super basic! Things as simple as “get out of bed,” “take a shower,” “feed the kids breakfast” and “check on a friend” are critical foundations that will allow us to keep moving forward with a focus on health and wellness during this uncertain time.

Only after those are in place and you begin to adapt to whatever might be the new normal can we move to include other work-related goals. Again, start small and be super basic! If you need to transition to online teaching before your next class, make a list of everything that has to happen to accomplish this goal.

- What is actually realistic for me to accomplish given _____ [insert unique aspects of your personal and professional situation]? Most likely, your answers to the first question are overly ambitious. Use this as an opportunity to go back to your list, simplify and adjust accordingly.
- Which expectations for myself and my work do I need to adjust during this time? For example, your definitions of your child’s playtime activities may need to become more flexible, your standards of excellence in the classroom may need to be adjusted to a new reality of teaching online and your research and writing goals in your semester plan may need to
be drastically reduced. Release yourself from the expectations you held for yourself at the beginning of the semester, or just last week, and allow yourself to experiment with lowering your standards. 

- What structure and supports do I need to help me accomplish my revised personal and work goals? As I mentioned, maintaining some semblance of routine can be helpful as we manage the day-to-day uncertainties. In order to do so, we often need to create supportive structures.

I share one example -- daily writing - as an exemplar of a habit that we can develop, maintain and create supports around to contribute to our overall health and wellness during this time. (Many of these steps are outlined in more detail in this National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity webinar and can be applied to the development and maintenance of other personal habits and routines).

Designate particular blocks of time in your day (even if it is just 15 minutes) for writing. Doing so offers an opportunity to set up boundaries around certain tasks and can prevent large blocks of time from vanishing. Close your email, click off news and social media, and set a timer. Whether you have 15 minutes or two hours, using a timer can help you to focus and eliminate distractions. Now is a wonderful time to experiment with an accountability buddy, to initiate a virtual Write-on-Site or engage in virtual communities of support. The added bonus of each these is that you also will be tapping in to some social community in the process.

Most important, be compassionate toward yourself (see above) and know that very real external realities will impact your productivity during this time. So many of us are concerned about our children's or parents' health, which can make it hard to even think about writing -- you might feel that completing the most minor of goals is impossible. But spending focused time on a task can augment our health and wellness much more than spending an extra two hours reading about COVID-19 on Twitter. It can contribute to our health and our ability to care for others who need our support.

With all my best wishes for health and wellness for all,

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