

Office of Continuous Professional Development and Strategic Affairs
University of South Carolina School of Medicine Columbia – Prisma Health

Dear Colleagues:

These are unprecedented times, especially on the frontlines of healthcare. The threat of COVID-19 looms in hallways, on door handles, and in patient encounters. Acute or chronic, the COVID-19 threat is real and can lead us to feel overwhelmed by stress, fear, or anxiety. The uncertainty facing the general public is challenging enough, but for those of us in healthcare it can be staggering.

In these circumstances, our “fight or flight” system frequently triggers fear and anxiety as we confront threats we can and cannot see. Our stress alarm fires constantly as we struggle to reconcile caring for patients while keeping ourselves and our loved-ones safe and well.

The good news is that we can manage our stress, even in these difficult times. So what are the steps that we can take to mediate our stress and anxiety regardless of how this pandemic progresses?

In the coming weeks, we will be providing you with actions you can take right away as well as other information and resources to assist you to manage the mental-emotional stress and strain you might experience at work and home. This is the first installment.

Actions in the Moment

When we experience an overload of stress 1) our breathing can become shallow, rapid, and erratic and 2) it can be more difficult to focus on the task at-hand. Fortunately, there are techniques that can help us counteract both negative effects by controlling our breathing and refocusing our attention. Below are deliberate steps that can deepen and slow your breathing and untangle you from distracting thoughts and sensations. Use one or all of them. Try each out to see which works best for you.

Key tip: Once you find the technique that appeals to you, practice it regularly during times of the day when you are less stressed, so that it's easier to do when you need it most.

Tune into Your Breath # 1 – Deep breathing is like filling a glass with water, we start filling it at the bottom and empty it from the top. This technique enables us to ensure that we pull air down into our lower lungs – essential to taking a full breath. Put your hand just below your navel if it helps you feel your abdomen rise and fall. It is common to feel a lot of tension in the rib cage area on the first breath each time you do this (a sign of feeling stressed). You should start to notice less tension after a few breaths. Don't worry if it feels awkward or uncoordinated at first.

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable position with both feet on the floor and your back upright but not too tight.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose.
3. Fill your abdomen up with air like a balloon.
4. Fill your chest with as much air as you comfortably can.
5. Breathe out slowly. Let your stomach fall back as you release the air through your nose or mouth, whichever feels more natural.
6. Repeat slowly an additional 2-3 times.

Key Tip: Feel the calm in your body. If you don't feel calmer, breathe normally for a few breaths and then start the exercise again.

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Tune into Your Breath # 2 – Once you feel like you have the hang of deep breathing, try adding a focus on a word or a phrase. Here’s how:

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable position with both feet on the floor and your back upright but not too tight.
2. Take a slow, deep breath.
3. Say to yourself "I am" as you breathe in.
4. And “calm”, “at peace”, or “relaxed” as you breathe out.
5. Repeat slowly an additional 2-3 times.

Key Tip: Feel the calm in your body. If you don’t feel calmer, breathe normally for a few breaths and then start the exercise again.

Tune into Your Body – By concentrating our attention on our bodies, we can anchor ourselves in the present moment – disengage from unwanted thoughts and emotions. You can be sitting, standing or lying down for this exercise. Here’s how to do it:

1. Focus your attention on your body.
2. Notice where you are feeling tension or anxiety and you are feeling more relaxed.
3. Concentrate on a part of your body where you are feeling less tension, more relaxed. The big toe or a finger would be a common choice.
4. Don’t look at or touch your toe or finger. Simply notice what it feels like as if you are inside it. Whether it feels warm or cool; whether it’s touching anything, whether it’s flexed, anything else that you notice about it.
5. Concentrate intently on the different sensations coming from that part of your body for 1-2 minutes.
6. Your mind may wander. It’s okay, that’s normal. Just say to yourself: “Thinking.” Gently bring your attention back to your toe or finger.

Key Tip: If this hasn’t reduced the distraction(s), repeat the exercise.

Tune into Your Surroundings – Sometimes our thoughts and feelings can be so “loud” that it’s difficult to focus on our breath or body. For this exercise, you will engage three of your senses – sight, sound, and touch/feel. Spend about 1-2 minutes on each sense. You can be sitting, standing, or lying down for this exercise.

1. Concentrate your attention on your environment.
2. Pick out 3 things you can see that you don’t usually notice. Name them quietly to yourself as you spot them. It can be anything, such as a mark on the floor, the details in a picture on the wall, or a crooked ceiling tile.
3. Pick out 2 things you can hear that you don’t usually notice, such as the hum in the ceiling lights or the sound of an appliance.
4. Pick out 2 things you can feel, such as the texture of your clothing on your skin, the breeze from the wind or air vent, or the warmth from the sun coming through the window. You don’t need to touch anything with your hands, but you can if the conditions allow it.

Key Tip: If you don’t feel calmer or more focused, repeat the exercise, this time concentrating on a particular detail of each object, sound, and texture.