

# The Psychology of COVID-19

## How to manage your mental health and take back control

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“The emotional brain responds more quickly to an event than the thinking brain.”

— Daniel Goleman

We are facing challenges today professionally and personally that we never even dreamed about. Though we read books and watched movies about pandemics that entertained us, knowing that after we finished the book and the movie was over, we were relieved and comforted that it was just a book or a movie and we would go on with our normal life. Little did we ever think that we all would be the main cast of characters living every day in the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reality is people are freaked out right now. We fear and worry about our own health and the health of our loved ones as we go to work and as our duty calls. Many of us are suppressing our emotions and fear while others are more verbal and sometimes even physical. When things are stressful and uncertain, we tend to react emotionally and assume the worst possible scenarios in our minds — *My whole family is going to get sick. The economy will never recover. My world is coming to an end.* Folks are fearful and we are writing the playbook as events unfold. It’s a time of uncertainty and we don’t like it. We do not like it because uncertainty creates anxiety by letting the rational part of our brain be hijacked. Our brains are hardwired to react with fear and anxiety when it comes to dealing with uncertainty. A million years ago, that was a good thing. When we saw a stick, we thought snake. It helped us survive in a world filled with danger and uncertainty. But as the rational part of our brain developed, we learned to manage the stress of uncertainty and stop seeing every stick as a snake. Today, we find the emotional part of our brain reacting to COVID-19 uncertainties just as we would react to our fear of a poisonous snake and it’s knocking our rational brain off track. We are in a crisis and psychology tells us without certainties to help us predict what is probable, we feel out of control. The world is being attacked by a silent, invisible enemy.

## The stress of uncertainty

As first responders to the COVID-19 crisis, it can certainly take an emotional toll on you. It’s not that you or I will never fear the unknown, it is part of being human. But it’s what we do with that fear and how we

handle it that matters. There are things we can do to reduce traumatic stress reactions. Always remember you are not alone. We can get back on track and manage the stress of uncertainty, maintain good mental health, and get back a sense of control in our lives. We start by understanding that feeling anxiety about COVID-19 is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. We start by recognizing we are not powerless, and we are in control of how we choose to respond. “It’s totally normal to be struggling with the fear of the unknown,” says Vaile Wright, director of clinical research at the American Psychological Association. “But we don’t have to get stuck there.” If we know the right things to do, we can override our brain’s irrational tendencies and manage the stress of uncertainty. We can fuel hope! Here are the top 10 things you can do to better manage your mental health and take back control.

### #1 Limit media exposure and access reliable sources

It is essential that you obtain important information on COVID-19, but too much exposure to media can lead to increased stress and anxiety and in some cases make their way into your dreams. Even in your sleep you can’t escape

“What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know. It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.”

— Mark Twain



Photo courtesy Tennessee Department of Correction

pressures you may be feeling about the pandemic. “We use our dreams to resolve emotional tension and particularly emotional uncertainty,” said Dr. Ian Wallace, a psychologist who specializes in sleep and dream research, “... because human beings are not very good at dealing with uncertainty.”

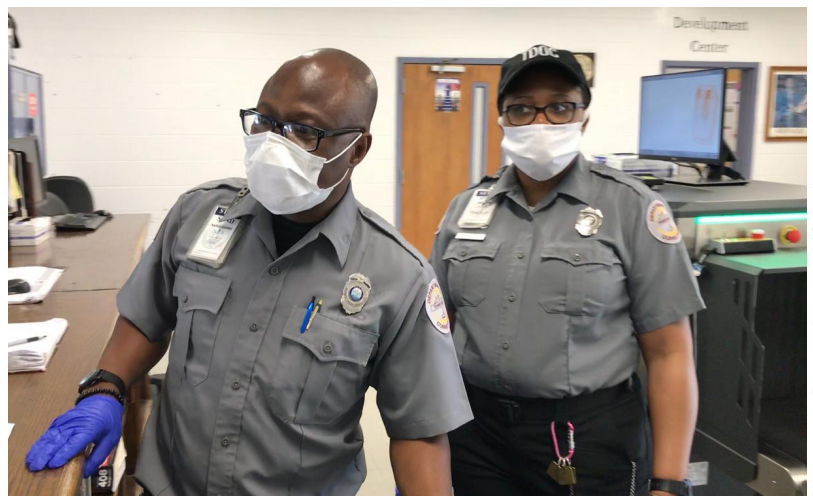
Why is this important? Psychology tells us fear and panic flare up when we allow our brains to respond to uncertainty with irrational thoughts and excessive anxiety. Watching television or listening to radio programs that repeatedly emphasize the turbulent spread of COVID-19, or absence of effective treatment, just fuels the freaked-out factory and exacerbates anxiety. In fact, the World Health Organization encouraged that people should check the news once or twice a day and only from reliable sources. While it is fine to have a general idea of what is happening, especially if you live near an area with a high concentration of cases, it’s important to limit media exposure, particularly from undocumented or unreliable sources. Learn to be invisible to fear. Stay rational.

## #2 Practice good hygiene and physical distancing

*“If the body requires hygiene, then hygiene is compulsory for the mind and soul.”*

— Dmitry Pisarev

Indecision is not the same as uncertainty, and there are a lot of decisions you can make to protect yourself and loved ones. For example, wash your hands frequently and thoroughly, sanitize high-touch surfaces, avoid contact with sick people, make sure you have a decent supply of nonperishable food and other supplies, and stay home as much as possible. Physical distancing goes against our need for human contact, but we need to stay apart now to come together later. And take your own advice. Ask yourself: “If my friends came to me with this worry, what would I tell them?”



Photos courtesy Tennessee Department of Correction

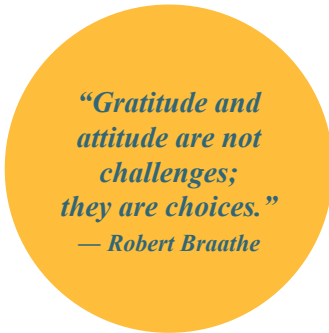
## #3 Protect Yourself and Your Community by Helping Others

*“When you are kind to others, it not only changes you, it changes the world.” — Harold Kushner*

Many of our colleagues are our friends and neighbors. Whether it means helping a vulnerable neighbor get groceries or donating blood, you have an important part to play in helping your community. Think outside of yourself. Understand the stress of uncertainty affects all of us in different ways. Appreciate what you do is important. Realize your acts of kindness are protecting your community and you. In fact, chemicals released in our brains during acts of kindness reduce stress and anxiety, improve mood, decrease blood pressure, protect our hearts, and strengthen our immune system. Remember, when you succeed, we all succeed.

#### #4 Be positive and focus on gratitude

Amid uncertainty, many people immediately imagine worst-case scenarios. Rather than ruminating on the negative, focus on what you value and for that which you are grateful. Rather than stewing in worries, make a daily “gratitude list” to bolster your psychological resiliency. The name we give something shapes our attitude toward it, so start each day with a conscious choice to have an attitude of gratitude. Research shows that having a positive attitude and practicing gratitude boosts the immune system.



#### #5 Identify resources

*“Life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it.” — John Maxwell*

According to a recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, about a third of the Americans said the COVID-19 pandemic has caused mental problems. Avoid rumors during this crisis, many are spreading like a wildfire. It is important that you have accurate information. As you identify resources you may need to access, psychologists and other mental health professionals around the country are shifting their practices online to increase accessibility. Many have established virtual therapy or counseling via telehealth, and some are even holding free online group therapy sessions. De-stressing apps can help more immediately and cost less, too. There are mindfulness apps and an app that helps you track your mood and daily activity so you can keep a healthy mental health schedule. I call these *“The People Helping People”* who can be our lighthouse as we navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic.

#### #6 Take control with behavioral medicine

*“As you ought not attempt to cure the eyes without the head, or the head without the body, so neither ought you attempt to cure the body without the mind; for the part can never be well unless the whole is well.” — Plato*

Pills aren’t the only medicine available to us. In fact, psychology has a wide array of behavioral medicine techniques science has proven to be effective in managing our stress and anxiety. It can be as simple as breathing. One method you can use is called the “4-7-8 Breathing” technique. This behavioral medicine involves breathing in through your nose for 4 seconds, holding it for 7 and exhaling through your mouth for 8 seconds. Research has clearly shown it can instill a sense of calm when you feel out of control. Try it. Congratulations, you have just lowered your blood pressure and heart rate, improved your body’s circulation, and re-energized your brain with an oxygen boost. Unlike those warnings in commercials, “You can try this at home!”

#### #7 Get organized and maintain a routine

*“Routine is ground to stand on, a wall to retreat to; we cannot draw on our boots without bracing ourselves against it.” — Henry David Thoreau*

If you had kids at home, you would probably be trying to maintain a routine for them, with a lot of scheduled activities. You would try to create as much normalcy as possible for them. Psychology advises that strategy is important for adults, too. The key is to focus on the things that are within your control, even if it’s as simple as weekly meal planning, going for a walk, or going to bed and getting up at regularly scheduled times. Fill in vacant time with activities. A friend of mine started gardening. “My garden gives me hope,” she said. “It helps structure my day and gives me a sense of control.” Get organized and establish routines. It will give your days and weeks some healthy psychological structure. *Personally, I do Bonsai.*

#### #8 Eat healthy, exercise and don’t forget how to laugh

*“I never could have made it if I could not have laughed. It lifted me momentarily out of this horrible situation, just enough to make it livable.” — Victor Frankl*

Eighty percent of visits to a doctor’s office are for medical problems resulting from our lifestyle choices. This is a good opportunity to make good lifestyle choices to help you fight your stress. A healthy diet and sufficient sleep will help your immune system to function properly,



and movement is good for both body and mind. Get at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day and, if you are working at home, get up for a short break every 30 minutes. And don't forget to laugh. Watch a funny movie. Share a good joke. Humor allows us to step away from the drama, if only for a few minutes. There is a lot of evidence in the scientific literature of how laughter and humor increase our immune system's response to stress.

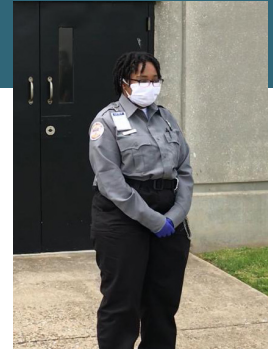
## #9 Stay connected

Loss of social support can contribute to anxiety and feeling alone. Psychology warns social isolation can fuel anxiety and depression and, over the long term, is even linked to a shorter life span. But just because you may be physically distant from other people, you can, and should, stay connected to them. We have to remind ourselves that family, friends, our colleagues at work and others may be dealing with feelings of isolation as they practice social distancing or quarantine. We can help others which helps us by staying connected. In his book, *The Courage to Be*, distinguished theologian Paul Tillich reminds us that catastrophic events like COVID-19 take us beneath the busyness and distractions of life and provide us with an opportunity to better understand ourselves and encourage others. If you are a person of faith, for example, you can join a prayer group and comfort each other. We're all in this together and you don't have to be alone with your worries. By being proactive and reaching out to others, you'll boost your mental health and reduce your stress. For men, it's not a sign of weakness to reach out to others. It takes courage to recognize our basic human need for connection with others, and it takes strength to reach out. That's something worth modeling for our children.

*"Connection gives purpose and meaning to life."  
— Brené Brown*

## #10 Let your values guide your actions and find the possibilities in uncertainty

*"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."  
— Winston Churchill*



Photos courtesy Tennessee Department of Correction

Committed action should be guided by our core values. What do you want to stand for in the face of this crisis? What sort of person do you want to be, as you go through this? How do you want to treat yourself and others?

As a first responder, you make substantial personal sacrifices and when that crisis arises, you are committed to whatever the mission is. Every day, you place safety first on the line for our community's benefit. We are in a dangerous situation with the COVID-19 pandemic and in uncharted waters and you are on the front lines risking your lives for your core values, but it can take its toll on you — if you let it.

Sometimes our need for certainty, and the fear of uncertainty, become so strong we miss out on opportunities to find the meaningfulness which uncertainty can provide in our lives. You may not see it now, but you will be stronger when this pandemic ends because each time you overcome uncertainty, it is a psychological vaccination against the next uncertainty you will face. Dr. Victor Frankl tells us in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, having a meaning to live for is as important as having a means to live. He counsels, "The quest for meaning is the key to mental health ..."

You can choose to find your best self during the COVID-19 crisis. You can choose to stand your ground and not surrender to fear and anxiety. You can choose to find purpose and meaning to strengthen your mental health. So, we encourage you, as we do with ourselves every day, to fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith.

The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word "crisis." One brush stroke stands for danger: the other for opportunity. In managing the stress of uncertainty with the COVID-19 crisis, the danger is if we do nothing to take care of ourselves and others, while allowing fear and anxiety to dominate our lives. The opportunity is to understand you are not powerless; you can manage your mental health successfully and you can take back control by choosing how you respond to your circumstances. We will get through this together because when you succeed, we all succeed.

## Postscript

*“I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the truth.”*

— *Abraham Lincoln*

### Trust and truth: the importance of crisis leadership

“Vitus et honos” was the personal code of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. It means “strength and honor” and was also the code by which the Roman army lived. Their life’s purpose was to serve, and their duty was to fight in every crisis situation with *vitus et honos*. It was a message from the leadership guiding the action of every soldier.

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**Truth and trust are inseparable.  
Crisis leadership needs to  
tell it like it is and not  
sugar-coat the situation.**

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As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the country, crisis leadership has never been more important for the health care workers and other essential personnel battling on the front lines of the crisis. The ability to provide leadership in crisis situations is not written in a genetic code. It is forged in crisis and shaped by the challenges, lessons learned, and application of leadership skills to new and unfamiliar situations. Today, we are in crisis management mode and look to our crisis leadership for guidance, understanding and the facts. Foundational to success is communication and poor messaging is a lethal enemy of effective crisis leadership. Trust and cooperation are early casualties in responding to the crisis if the messaging is not credible, factual and consistent. Dr. Arjen Boin, an expert in crisis leadership, identified five components of an effective message: “It offers a credible explanation of what happened, it offers guidance, it instills hope, shows empathy and suggests that leaders are in control. If you fail on any one of those, you will begin to lose the public’s confidence.”

Truth and trust are inseparable. Crisis leadership needs to tell it like it is and not sugar-coat the situation.

Psychology tells us people may long for a positive message, but they won’t believe the positive messages if the crisis leadership is not transparent about the uncertainty and negative parts. With competent communication, effective messaging from crisis leadership can help us unite around a common purpose, distinguish between what is necessary and unnecessary, know what to do when we are not sure, and give us hope, which is a good thing, perhaps the best of things.

As the Coronavirus outbreak continues, many aspects of our lives have changed and are continuing to change in ways we could not imagine. As essential personnel, you must report to work and with stay-at-home orders and other safety measures in place, it is important to stay focused on your physical and emotional health.

Please make time to follow these daily habits that can help you to stay healthy:

- **Take care of yourself:** Create, and stick to, a regular schedule. Try to eat healthy meals, exercise regularly and get plenty of sleep.
- **Connect with others:** Keep in contact by phone or video chat, maintain healthy relationships and build a strong support system. Talk about your joys and concerns, including how you are feeling.
- **Take breaks from the news:** Hearing about the outbreak repeatedly can be upsetting. Stay informed and then give yourself time away from the constant news updates, including social media.
- **Practice standard precautions, social distancing and wash your hands:** Simple steps — such as washing your hands often with soap and water, avoiding touching your face and maintaining social distancing — can help stop the spread of germs.

Just one last thought: remember you are not alone; we all will get through this together.

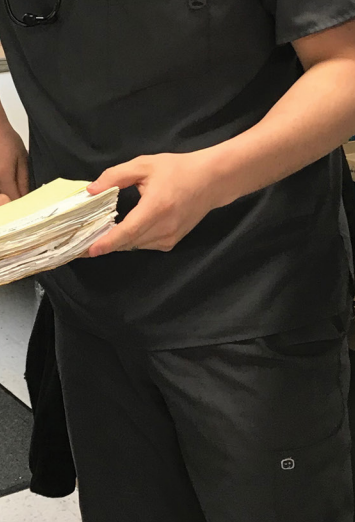
Be safe and stay healthy.

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