

7 Ingredients for Resiliently Weathering Adversity

Effectively charting a course through challenge is more important now than ever.

from the Disaster, Trauma and Global Health Committee of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry

The current Covid-19 pandemic presents a never-before-encountered challenge. More dangerous than many common illnesses, the virus is nevertheless not so lethal to everyone who catches it. It is also a “sleeper”, passing from person-to-person without causing symptoms which would make people more careful.

Covid-19 is a test of our systems, a [fire drill for the apocalypse](#). It provides critical data needed to prepare for any future onslaught. The world was caught flat-footed on this one and Covid-19 is a bracing wake up call.

Individuals and families face new and unprecedented challenges as the world emerges from denial and grapples with hysteria in efforts to mount a rational collective response. For many citizens, trust in government is deeply strained.

Further, an ever-changing wave of psychological realization is infecting different geographical areas depending on its own rising infected count. With awareness comes fear and anxiety, interfering with clear-thinking, allowing emotional reactions to take over, and adding more fuel to the fire.

Joining Together

Current best practices to contain infection leave people more vulnerable, emotionally and physiologically. Social distancing can “flatten the curve”—reducing the intensity of transmission, lowering the peak effect, and potentially drawing out the time Covid-19 will take to run its course. Each person who does not transmit the virus prevents hundreds or even thousands.

Yet, while gathering resources is a natural instinct during times of crisis, evolution also tells us to gather together physically to provide support and problem-solve. This social instinct usually would be advantageous, but here the instinct can make things worse.

Thriving in Virtual Community

In times like these, the following guidelines may be helpful:

1. Social distancing does not mean emotional distancing

Use technology to connect widely. Isolation has [negative effects](#) on psychological and physical well-being. When in survival mode, we think mainly of our immediate needs, and those closest to us. Our thoughts of the future narrow down to basic needs—hence people hoarding supplies. However, we don't necessarily think of the bigger picture. A hiding mindset is the opposite of what is needed during a crisis.

Instead, telephone and virtual meeting technology can offset the negative effects. We don't need to be emotionally or psychologically distant to be physically distant in social interactions. Making a daily routine of speaking with close others not only maintains social connection, but for many is an opportunity to become more connected if they've drifted apart.

In addition to talking with your regulars, make a list of people you haven't heard from in a while, and reach out. Use social media to connect more personally to people with whom you have a good vibe but haven't interacted with individually. Don't feel obligated to over-connect either. We all need some alone time, so make sure especially if you are cooped up, to take time away from others to recharge and reflect.

2. Keep reasonable routines and schedule activities

A balance of structure and flexibility is key. Schedule a regular framework for each day, while avoiding pinning your time down minute-to-minute. Identify projects to work on, and pick things which are purposeful. Take the chance to pursue goals you have neglected or overlooked--reading more, starting a regular meditation practice, organizing that basement, and so on. Keep a calendar and follow it, 7 days a week. Resist the urge to enter into a timeless void.

Plan projects out so you don't finish them too fast, pacing the purpose they create. If you are working from home, follow good work from home principles, and don't let work invade your personal life. Keep clear boundaries, take breaks, and turn your newly liberated commute time into "me" time.

3. Take care of your body

Exercise daily, if you can, and be flexible with your routine. If your gym is closed, look for alternatives: online classes, exercise at home, go out for a jog or walk, and avoid becoming a couch potato. Even if only a few minutes a day, develop a little habit and build on it.

Maintain a regular sleep schedule, avoiding excessive daytime napping. If you are stocking up on food, make healthy, sustainable choices. Leave room for treats, but make the staple of your diet nutritious—include vegetables, fresh frozen if possible, whole grains, and healthy fats and proteins while avoiding excessive carbs. It's also a good time to limit unhealthy habits. Rather than drinking or smoking more, take this opportunity to reduce or eliminate.

Bathe daily and maintain grooming and hygiene. Whether working from home or not, keeping up basic practices of self-care has been proven to sustain resilience, providing a sense of self-efficacy, reinforcing self-respect, and serving as a good role model for others.

4. Learning and intellectual engagement—books, reading, limited internet

Your mind also needs daily exercise. Avoid too much time on the internet or binge watching shows. Follow the news and credible public health authorities without overdosing on distressing material. Focus on flourishing, but don't pressure yourself.

5. Make the most out of family time

If you are bivouacked with family, include constructive time in your routine together. Bake, do puzzles, play games, make art, go outside together with safe practices, and grow closer. It is a time for couples to grow together, facing adversity, and using some of that extra time for the relationship.

Parents plan their approach together before speaking with kids to make sure they have a unified voice. Look up and integrate useful resources (e.g the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)), focusing on [self-efficacy and specific paths to overcome adversity](#). Plan and deliver accurate and targeted messaging, sharing quality information without excessively activating anxiety. Address emotions in an age-appropriate way.

6. Relax, turn off your mind, and float downstream

Meditation has been shown to have numerous mental, emotional and physical benefits, fundamentally [improving brain function](#). Whether you are self-directed, work with a

group or teacher, or follow a digital app, set aside a consistent time and place for your daily practice.

Mindfulness-based approaches, and in particular [compassion-based practice](#), can be especially helpful in learning to quell strong emotions without suppressing them too much, and self-compassion will help motivate to strengthen self-care during a time when many find it easy to let it fall by the wayside.

7. Remember the following to avoid common pitfalls:

- Don't make mountains out of molehills. Psychologists call this "catastrophizing". Pay attention to what is important, but use common sense in keeping things in perspective. The media highlights negative information, and under-reports positives. Look for positive stories to offset the false perception that people are all bad. The rule of thumb is to have at least three positives for every negative.
- People are resilient, often more than we realize. Make it your business to remember how you've gotten through past adversity, apply lessons learned here, and research what works. Make it your goal to bring your "A" game with this one.
- Laughter is the best medicine. While too much dark humor can have a corrosive effect, a bit of gallows humor is healthy. Humor has been shown to be [good for your health](#), and laughter is good physically and emotionally. Watch shows which make you laugh, listen to comedy, play games together which amuse. You can even consider trying out [laughter yoga](#).
- Remind yourself that obsessing is a symptom related to anxiety. Direct yourself toward best practices, for example washing your hands for 20 seconds as recommended—not out of excess anxiety. Resist the urge to wash your hands too much, and consider substituting hand-washing, if unnecessary, for another activity.
- Focus on day-to-day, planning for the future and living in the moment. Thinking too much about the future takes us away from things we can have control over, and can worsen anxiety by increasing uncertainty.
- Keep up your healthcare. If you see a therapist or need medical care, don't let that slide. Clinicians and hospitals are offering telemedicine services. Reach out to your current care team to find out what is available before an issue arises. Of course, if you feel ill or are experiencing an emergency, seek help immediately.