PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP
HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?
Stress management is a valuable skill. Life often brings us new challenges. We should seek various strategies for managing stress and expand our options.

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WHAT IS STRESS AND WHEN IS IT HARMFUL?

Stress can be defined as the physiological response of the body (nervous and hormonal) to various types of stimuli. In a dangerous situation, the autonomic nervous system is activated in humans. It begins to secrete stress hormones, such as cortisol as well as adrenaline. The breathing increases, the pulse accelerates, the blood pressure increases, and more blood flows into the skeletal muscles. The body is preparing for a fight or flight response. This stops the body’s energy-consuming processes, which are not needed at this time: digestion and sexual function are inhibited, the intestinal muscles are relaxed, and the activity of the immune system and the production of antibodies are reduced. Short-term stress is adaptive and mobilizes us. Long-lasting stress, however, weakens the body's immune capabilities.

STRESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The rapidly spreading coronavirus epidemic has caused a new reality for everyone. It can be stressful for many people. The daily life of people around the world has completely changed. The spreading plague, sudden changes and threat to life are an objective reason for stress. It is important, however, that it does not become chronic and does not continuously weaken us. So how can we cope with this new, challenging situation?

SELECTED STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Here are some important strategies for managing stress in the face of a pandemic. It is important that we constantly look for new ways to reduce stress. The details of the following methods can be found below:

• Take breaks in following the news on the pandemic
• Try to maintain your daily routine
• Try different relaxation techniques. Test a few of them and choose the best strategy for yourself
• Engage in enjoyable activities
• Seek professional help if you develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD)
• Seek support and don't be afraid to ask for help if you experience mourning
• Get support from others and stay in touch with your loved ones
• Find the best way for you to reduce stress

Take breaks in following the news on the pandemic. In an emergency it is understandable to seek information. It helps to better prepare us for difficult situations. However, this can become a secondary stress management method. Something that is supposed to help us can harm us when done in excess. We live in constant tension expecting the worst. Chronic stress will destroy us. Despite the understandable temptation to check the news over and over again, we should take breaks from viewing, reading or listening to new information about the pandemic through various media. If you feel you're experiencing information overload that stresses you, make it a point to only watch or read the news at specific times of the day. Do not exceed the time limit despite feeling compelled to seek information. Remember that breaks are very important in regenerating your nervous system.
Try to maintain your daily routine. Routine is important because fixed times restore order and harmony, and numerous changes can bring about stress. If you are forced to make many changes at work and at home during the pandemic, try to establish new, permanent rules as quickly as possible. Stick to the new routine and don't make too many changes creating chaos. Also remember to assertively set boundaries. If you are urged to engage in stressful situations for which you are not ready, try to refuse assertively. Take care of yourself and do not cross your boundaries. Remember that especially during this time you need regeneration. To do this, create an optimal new day plan, which includes both responsibilities and leisure time.

Try different relaxation techniques. Test a few of them and choose the best strategy for yourself. The most common relaxation techniques include breathing exercises, stretching, relieving neck tension, Schultz autogenic training, Jacobson’s progressive training, meditation, visualisations such as "Safe place", "Flying carpet", "Gentle wave", "River", and a day plan that includes both responsibilities and leisure time.

1. **Breathing exercises** are about regulating the breath - this relaxation technique involves getting in your most comfortable position and fully focusing on the breath. To help you concentrate, you can close your eyes and breathe in and out. It is important to keep your breath steady and calm. You can silently count from 3 to 5 seconds. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Repeat this exercise for about 5 minutes.

2. **Relaxing the muscles in your neck** can be done in either standing or lying position. Move your neck in a figure eight motion. Repeat this exercise 10 times in one direction and 10 in the other. You should clearly feel the stretch in your neck muscles, which helps you relax and breathe better.

3. **Relaxing visualisations**. Visualisation is another effective relaxation technique. It involves taking a comfortable position and visualising places where we would like to be at this moment. Visualisations can be combined with listening to your favourite and relaxing music. In my therapeutic work I most often use the visualisation "Safe place".

4. **Jacobson's training** developed by the psychiatrist Edmund Jacobson involves reducing muscle stress, which has a positive effect on the nervous system. It is done by tensing and relaxing specific muscle groups. As you breathe in, you tense the muscle and hold for about 5 seconds, then relax as you exhale. Take short breaks between muscle groups. It does not matter which muscles you start with, you can start from the hands, head, back, or abdomen, or from the feet, and then move up the body. You can tense each muscle group 2 or 3 times, but remember to take short breaks. This exercise is best done lying down, which helps you relax.

5. **Schultz autogenic training** involves getting into a hypnosis-like state using self-suggestion and internal meditation. It was first written about by a German psychiatrist and psychotherapist - Johannes Schultz. It consists of six phases or elements: feeling of weight, warmth, regulation of heart rate, regulation of breath, feeling of warmth in the solar plexus, and feeling of coldness on the forehead. All you have to do is set aside 30 minutes during the day, for example before bedtime, sit in a quiet place and do the subsequent elements or stages of autogenic training using self-suggestion (for example saying "I feel weight" or "I feel warm"). The basic premise of this training is to restore the balance between the subsystems of the autonomic nervous system, that is, between the parasympathetic nervous system and the sympathetic nervous system.
Engage in enjoyable activities. We should also try to engage in activities that relax us and give us pleasure. You can create your own list of fun activities: physical exercises at home, a break from duties to do muscle relaxation exercises, playing board games, taking an aroma bath, reading, listening to music, cuddling your cat, playing with the dog, having a cup of tea, etc. Pamper yourself and do something you really enjoy. These strategies may sound trivial but they make sense and have a specific purpose. They stimulate the parasympathetic system, thus silencing and inhibiting the sympathetic system. This helps alleviate constant stress and is another way to restore balance in the sympathetic and parasympathetic part of the nervous system.

Seek professional help if you develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD). Extremely stressful events that threaten our lives or physical health can trigger PTSD symptoms. Such events include catastrophes, natural disasters, and life-threatening diseases. Typical symptoms of PTSD are: anxiety, feeling exhausted, feeling helpless, experiencing recurrent involuntary memories of the traumatic event, flashbacks or nightmares related to the trauma, and avoiding situations associated with the trauma. People who are at the forefront of the fight against the epidemic, such as doctors, nurses, paramedics, police officers, and firefighters, are at a risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (STS). It has the same symptoms as PTSD, e.g. constant stress, as well as physical and mental exhaustion - anxiety, feelings of guilt, withdrawal, and nightmares. Strategies for combating post-traumatic stress are too complex to describe here. In this case, we should seek help from a psychologist specialising in treating post-traumatic stress disorder.

Seek support and don’t be afraid to ask for help if you experience mourning. Losing loved ones is a very difficult experience. Dealing with grief in a mourning situation should take priority over everything else. In society, we have helpful strategies and rituals, like burying the dead, that help us deal with the loss. However, this is not always enough. So don’t be afraid to ask for help from relatives or specialists.

Get support from others and stay in touch with your loved ones. We should talk to people we trust about our fears and emotions. In this case it is just as important to avoid people who drain or hurt us, and to choose those who really understand and listen to us. Relieving unpleasant feelings is an extremely important and helpful way to deal with stress. Studies show that in the face of life-threatening situations, people who are able to get support from others, reach out to people, and are able to confide in others, have significantly fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress. For many of us, home quarantine is a completely new and unusual situation during which fear, anxiety or frustration can build up. Stay in touch with others, even by phone. Don’t isolate yourself and actively seek support from others. A great initiative was started to help elderly and sick neighbours, who are in the high-risk group, with their shopping. This helps combat loneliness and gives a sense of meaning, allowing us to do something in this difficult situation where we feel very vulnerable.

Find the best way for you to reduce stress. If stress is significantly interfering with our daily activities and all previous strategies have failed, we must seek a different solution. You can also consult a psychologist to help you determine what is stopping you from relieving stress. It’s best to create a custom, personalised stress management programme. In this whole process of searching for solutions, taking steps and trying different things are important. There are many ways to fight stress and anxiety. We all need to find the one that works for us.