



# Returning to the Workplace-- Resiliency Toolkit for Employees

**fseap** Now we're  
talking.

Parlons-en. **paesf**

1.844.720.1212

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## About the Toolkit

The Resiliency Toolkit provides resources to help you develop awareness, skills and strategies to build and maintain your resiliency. In the toolkit, you will find information and resources on:

- 5 Factors of Resilience
- Managing Stress
- Coping with Uncertainty and Change
- Recognizing and Challenging Negative Thinking
- Coping with Burnout
- Building a Social Support Network
- Improving Sleep
- Practicing Gratitude
- EFAP Services and Supports for Individuals

For additional resources and further support, visit [myfseap.ca](http://myfseap.ca).

## About FSEAP

FSEAP supports Canadians' well-being and resilience by designing and delivering Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP), workplace support services, wellness programs, and leadership support services. As the largest and the only not-for-profit, community-based EFAP provider in Canada, our mission is healthy workplaces and strong communities.



# Mental and Behavioural Impact of COVID-19

The pandemic has been shaping our lives for more than a year, with unprecedented upheaval to our personal and professional lives. Social isolation, health anxiety, grief and loss, economic downturn, and workplace stress have contributed to new levels of mental health concerns for Canadians. Mental Health Research Canada's (MHRC) latest snapshot of Canadian mental health<sup>1</sup> shows that both self-reported and diagnosed anxiety and depression continue to rise. Now, 1 in 4 Canadians reports experiencing a mental health problem either personally or within their family. This is up from 1 in 5 Canadians before the pandemic. In MHRC's latest poll, two-thirds of Canadians report moderate to high levels of anxiety and/or depression, the other third report experiencing mental stress symptoms (such as feeling anxious, restless, uneasy, lonely, sad, depressed or hopeless, or finding little or no interest/pleasure in things they normally enjoy) on a nearly daily basis. One-third of Canadians who previously reported they were handling stress well now report they are not able to do so any longer.

For the Canadian workforce, long work hours, shift work, trauma exposure, limited control, workplace conflicts, and low social support contribute to workplace stress. In addition, there are significant impacts on the health and well-being of employees due to the pandemic. The most common are burnout, compassion fatigue, moral injury, and comparative suffering.

- **Burnout:** Emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion resulting from work stress or frustration that does not end and can lead to disengagement, loss of motivation, and detachment. Burnout occurs when there is a lack of balance between the job's demands and the employee's coping resources.
- **Compassion fatigue:** Chronic physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people that can lead to feelings of overwhelm, helplessness, hopelessness and reduced empathy. Also described as secondary traumatic stress, symptoms mirror those of Post-Traumatic Stress.
- **Moral injury:** Strong cognitive and emotional responses that result from when a person's actions conflict with one's core values or moral code. It is a normal human response to an abnormal traumatic event.
- **Comparative suffering:** Feeling the need to see one's suffering in light of other's pain.

## The best way to address these negative impacts is by developing

**resilience.** Resilience is a key element in well-being. It helps protect us from various mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, and helps protect our physical health by improving our immune system functioning. For

<sup>1</sup> Mental Health in Crisis: How COVID-19 is impacting Canadians—Findings of Poll #5.

<https://www.mhrc.ca/national-poll-covid/findings-of-poll-5>

<sup>2</sup> Center for Disease Control. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/mental-health-non-healthcare.html>

## The most significant stressors from the pandemic?<sup>1</sup>

- Social isolation
- Fear about family member contracting COVID-19
- Economic downturn, job loss, or fear of job loss (self or family member), or losing work hours
- Challenges of working from home
- Not being able to pay household bills in full
- Fear about personally contracting COVID-19

## The most common work-related factors that can add stress during a pandemic?<sup>2</sup>

- Worry about being exposed to the virus at work
- Balancing personal and family needs while working
- Managing workload
- Uncertainty about future of employment or workplace
- Adapting to changing workspace and/or schedule
- Lack of access to tools or equipment needed to perform effectively

a workforce to be strong, they need resilience. Resilience is a key strategy to help employees at all levels of the organization manage change, tackle stress, increase harmony by reducing workplace conflicts, and overcome job challenges.

## Resilience: Managing in the “New Normal”

Change is a part of life – there is no escaping it. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the frequency and spread of change in our modern-day life. The constancy of change, together with the upheaval and uncertainty it generates, has become a way of life or what may be described as the “new normal.”

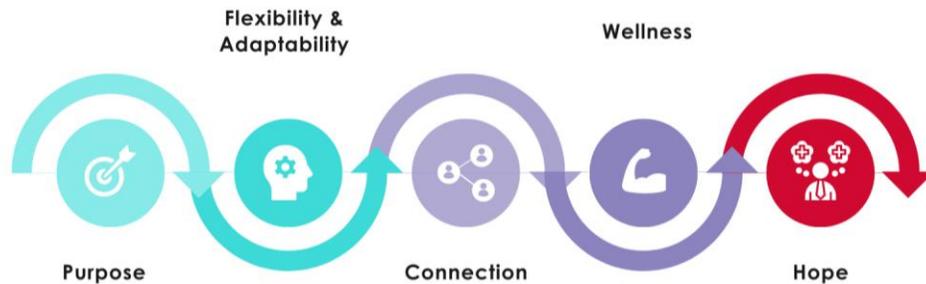
What is the impact of this “new normal?” Fear of getting sick with COVID-19, changes to our work role or routine, childcare challenges, and loss of colleagues through staffing reductions challenge our ability to adapt and manage effectively. Ongoing change can drain our coping reserves and cause us to feel overwhelmed and depleted. For many, this “new normal” impact is exhaustion, feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. At these times, we may experience a “sink or swim” feeling. Critical to keeping our heads above water is *resilience*.

### What Is Resilience?

Resilience is the quality or capacity within oneself to cope, recover, or grow after a “life quake” of any dimension. It is the factor that sustains us, enabling us to flourish and experience a sense of well-being amidst ever-increasing expectations, workplace stress, and life challenges. Resilience does not imply that one is less impacted by change. It does mean, however, that one can respond differently. While resilience is something that each of us holds inside, we can develop and heighten this capacity to thrive during times of uncertainty and challenge. Psychologist Beth Miller says, “Resilience is like a muscle – the harder we work it, the stronger it gets.” When fully developed, resilience can enable us to turn adversity into an advantage.

## 5 Factors of Resiliency

Research indicates that those who bounce back in the face of multiple life demands display specific attributes that others do not. These attributes, or resilience factors, are the conditions that help a person to survive and recover during times of extreme stress and trauma. Research shows that five factors of resiliency promote resilience at both the individual and organizational levels. These include **purpose, flexibility and adaptability, connection to others, wellness and hope.**



**Purpose:** Purpose in life is a long-term, forward-looking intention to accomplish aims meaningful to the self and the world beyond the self. People who have a clear sense of purpose and direction in life find it easier to bounce back in the face of challenge. Having purpose (and a shared sense of purpose within an organization) provides perspective, confidence, and determination. Feeling a sense of purpose and meaning in one's life contributes to more healthful and adaptive regulation of negative emotional responses—meaning one is better prepared to respond to emotional challenges more quickly and efficiently. A sense of purpose is linked to higher levels of employee engagement, fulfillment, organizational commitment, and an increased sense of well-being.

**Flexibility and adaptability:** Flexibility and adaptability represent the mindset, skills, and abilities we need to learn so we can move forward in the face of challenges. This factor involves possessing problem-solving skills, balanced and healthy thinking, and managing our emotions. When we possess this factor, we have advantages that nurture greater work and life success, including a greater sense of mastery and growth. For example, we can identify when stress is turning harmful or toxic and can take action to manage it effectively.

**Connection:** Humans are inherently social beings. We are better positioned to bounce back when we have a social support network with whom we can both give and receive support during times of stress. Research studies show that social support is essential for maintaining our physical and mental well-being. It can enhance our resilience and help lower feelings of distress and reduce the impact of traumatic stress.

**Wellness:** Attending to our physical well-being is a critical factor in resiliency. Sleep, nutrition and exercise are vital in maintaining physical well-being and recovery from injuries or illness. They are also instrumental in protecting against mental health problems and in mitigating potential consequences of stressful events.

**Hope:** Hope is desire or wishes accompanied by an expectation or belief that what we desire will come to be.<sup>2</sup> It is a positive cognitive state that enables us to see and create a path towards a goal.<sup>3</sup> In essence, it gives us the drive to develop strategies to reach our goals and motivates us to act on those strategies. During challenging times, hope fosters an orientation to life that allows for a positive, optimistic outlook.

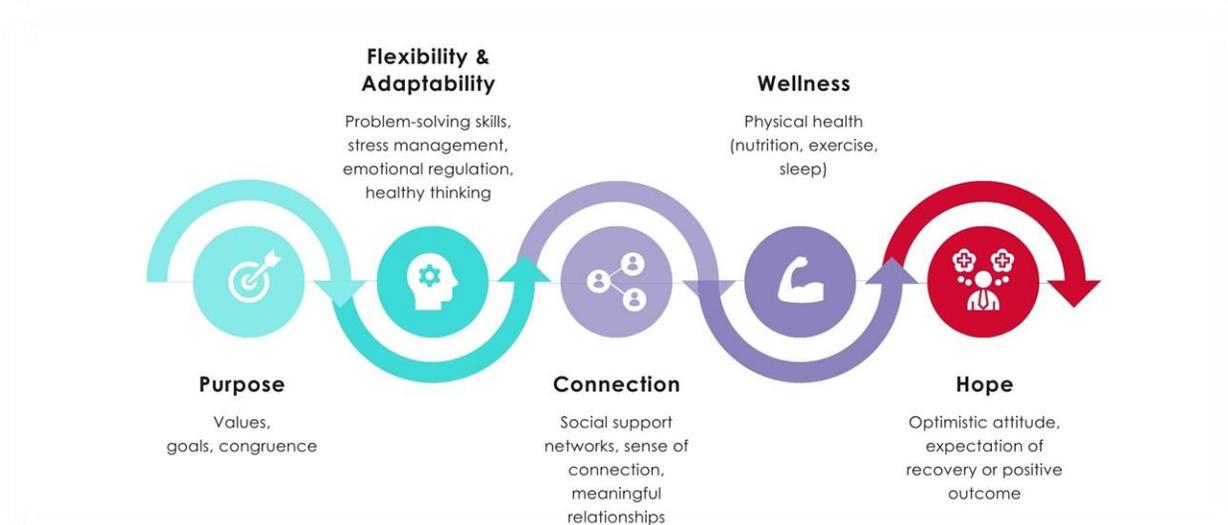
### Building Your Resilience

Building or developing your resilience involves enhancing each of the 5 factors or characteristics within yourself. For each of the 5 factors, there are specific area actions that research shows, if taken, strengthen one's resiliency.

<sup>2</sup> Merriam Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hope>

<sup>3</sup> PositivePsychology.com. <https://positivepsychology.com/hope-therapy/>

The graphic below explains:



### Resilient individuals:

- **Have a strong sense of purpose and direction in life**—They know what is most important to them. Knowing their core values provide clarity and enhance their ability to make tough decisions during stressful times. They experience a sense of calm from living and working in congruence with their values.
- **Are flexible and adaptable in the face of adversity**—They are effective problem-solvers and manage their emotions to stay calm during times of distress. They also practice balanced healthy thinking—meaning they look at the entire situation—considering the positive, negative, and neutral aspects before concluding. They view change and challenges as opportunities rather than threats.
- **Have a strong social support network and a sense of connection to others**—They reach out and receive social supports when needed and give support to others in need.
- **Attend to their wellness**—They attend to their physical well-being by practicing healthy eating, good sleep hygiene practices, and regular exercise.
- **Have a positive outlook and hope for the future**—They spend time thinking about the potential for positive outcomes, not just the negative.
- **Have strategies and a plan to support self-care when feeling high stress**—They engage in self-care to reduce stress as soon as possible.

# Clarifying Your Values

Values are your fundamental beliefs about what matters most to you. They help clarify what you can't live without and help guide your behaviour, life, and work and are fundamental to living a life with meaning and purpose.

When you know what's most important to you, you can more easily zero in on your priorities and determine where your boundaries lie. Furthermore, your values can help you decide how you want to live your life and help you assess if your life is heading in the direction you want. They can also help you make the right decision when faced with a tough choice. For example, if spending time with family is a core value for you, you might decide to turn down a job requiring overtime or a lot of travel.

Examining and clarifying your values, and pinpointing why they are important to you, can help you be better prepared to meet life's challenges. They help you distinguish between what's important and not and guide you on what's right and wrong. Having a strong sense of your values is like having a road map to guide you through life.

## The importance of living your values

Living your values means being the truest version of yourself in all areas of your life that matter to you. However, not living in congruence with your values can have a negative impact on our resilience and emotional well-being. This misalignment between your core values and actions can:

- leave you feeling stressed, uncomfortable and out of alignment with your true self.
- result in anxiety, anger, feeling stuck, overwhelmed, or other negative feelings.

The misalignment between values and actions is often the time when you feel conflict. These experiences of conflict can be due to external forces, such as when life or work demands overwhelm your system, and you act or behave in ways that are inconsistent with what you value. For example, I may value kindness and compassion but not treat others with kindness and compassion when I am stressed or overwhelmed.

When you know what values drive you and consistently behave in ways that align with your values, you experience greater clarity, fulfillment and self-awareness. This self-awareness can help you better understand what leading a meaningful life looks like and is key to discovering a life of meaning and purpose. Values fuel the sense of purpose, gives you drive, energy and optimism to live your best life and guide you on what matters most during times of adversity and challenge.

## The importance of rediscovery

Our priorities and values tend to change over time. Therefore, becoming more conscious of your true, current values is important because they are the best guide for living a better, more authentic life.

## Steps to clarify your values

**Step 1:** Reflect on your life and experiences to identify when you felt happiness or joy, proud and most fulfilled or satisfied. What contributed to these feelings? Try to find examples from both work and personal life.

Identify times when you were happiest or experienced the most joy.

- What were you doing?
- Were you with other people? Who were they?
- What other factors contributed to your happiness?

*“A highly developed values system is like a compass. It serves as a guide to point you in the right direction when you are lost.”*

— Idowu Koyenikan,

Identify times when you felt proud.

- What were you proud of?
- Did other's share in your pride? Who were they?
- What other aspects contributed to your sense of pride?

Identify the times when you felt most fulfilled and content.

- What need or desire was fulfilled?
- What was it about the experience that gave your life meaning?
- What other factors contributed to your feelings of fulfillment?

**Step 2: Reflect on times or situations when you felt out of alignment with your values.** It might also be a time when you felt conflict or a sense of disappointment. What were you doing? What did that situation look like or feel like for you? Don't judge yourself for these moments. They are opportunities to learn from, and they can help you get back to your authentic self.

**Step 3: Review the list of examples of core values on the next page and check every value that resonates with you.** Write in others that you think of that are not on the list as well. Then, select the values that most accurately describe your feelings or behaviours.

**Step 4: Categorize values into related groups.** Review the list and see if you can group values into categories. For example, honesty, transparency, and integrity are related and could be put into one group.

**Step 5: Identify a theme for each group.** Once you've categorized your identified values into groups, choose a word that best describes that group. Next, list the core value and, in parentheses, list the corresponding or similar values for context. For example, honesty, transparency, and integrity might be categorized as (truth).

**Step 6: Rank the values in order of importance.** In this step, it may be helpful to ask yourself which values are essential to life? Or select the first two values and reflect on them. Then ask yourself, if you had to act on only one of these values, which would I choose? Keep working until you have your list in the correct order. Then, set them aside for a day or two. When you come back to them, do they still reflect your core values?

**Step 7: Reaffirm your values.** Do they fit with your life and your vision for yourself?

- Do you feel good about yourself when you see your top three values?
- Do you feel proud if you think of sharing your values with others you look up to?
- Do these values represent things you support, even if the choice to do so isn't popular?

**Additional Resource:** Clarifying Your Values (PDF)--Adapted from Tobias Lundgren's: The 'Bulls Eye' Worksheet (The Happiness Trap (Russ Harris): [Link to PDF](#)

## Core Values

Review the list of examples of core values below and check every value that resonates with you. Add any others that you think of that are not on the list as well. Select the values that most accurately describe your feelings or behaviors.

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accountability         | <input type="checkbox"/> Happiness            | <input type="checkbox"/> Recognition     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Achievement            | <input type="checkbox"/> Hard work            | <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adventurousness        | <input type="checkbox"/> Health               | <input type="checkbox"/> Reliability     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Altruism               | <input type="checkbox"/> Honesty              | <input type="checkbox"/> Resilience      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ambition               | <input type="checkbox"/> Humility             | <input type="checkbox"/> Resourcefulness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Balance                | <input type="checkbox"/> Humour               | <input type="checkbox"/> Restraint       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Belonging              | <input type="checkbox"/> Independence         | <input type="checkbox"/> Risk-taking     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boldness               | <input type="checkbox"/> Ingenuity            | <input type="checkbox"/> Safety          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caring                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Individuality        | <input type="checkbox"/> Security        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Charity                | <input type="checkbox"/> Inner harmony        | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-control    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration          | <input type="checkbox"/> Innovation           | <input type="checkbox"/> Selflessness    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment             | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrity            | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-reliance   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community              | <input type="checkbox"/> Intelligence         | <input type="checkbox"/> Service         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Continuous improvement | <input type="checkbox"/> Intuition            | <input type="checkbox"/> Simplicity      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperation            | <input type="checkbox"/> Joy                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Speed           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courage                | <input type="checkbox"/> Justice              | <input type="checkbox"/> Spirituality    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creativity             | <input type="checkbox"/> Kindness             | <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneity     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Curiosity              | <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge            | <input type="checkbox"/> Stability       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decisiveness           | <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership           | <input type="checkbox"/> Strength        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dependability          | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning             | <input type="checkbox"/> Success         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline             | <input type="checkbox"/> Love                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diversity              | <input type="checkbox"/> Loyalty              | <input type="checkbox"/> Thankfulness    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Empathy                | <input type="checkbox"/> Making a difference  | <input type="checkbox"/> Thoughtfulness  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Encouragement          | <input type="checkbox"/> Mastery              | <input type="checkbox"/> Thoroughness    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Equality               | <input type="checkbox"/> Motivation           | <input type="checkbox"/> Tolerance       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Enthusiasm             | <input type="checkbox"/> Optimism             | <input type="checkbox"/> Traditionalism  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ethics                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Open-mindedness      | <input type="checkbox"/> Transparency    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excellence             | <input type="checkbox"/> Order                | <input type="checkbox"/> Truth           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fairness               | <input type="checkbox"/> Originality          | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Faith                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Passion              | <input type="checkbox"/> Unity           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Perfection           | <input type="checkbox"/> Usefulness      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fitness                | <input type="checkbox"/> Performance          | <input type="checkbox"/> Wealth          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friendships            | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal development | <input type="checkbox"/> Well-being      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flexibility            | <input type="checkbox"/> Popularity           | <input type="checkbox"/> Wisdom          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freedom                | <input type="checkbox"/> Power                | <input type="checkbox"/> Vitality        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fun                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Preparedness         | <input type="checkbox"/> _____           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Generosity             | <input type="checkbox"/> Professionalism      | <input type="checkbox"/> _____           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Goodness               | <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuality          | <input type="checkbox"/> _____           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grace                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality              | <input type="checkbox"/> _____           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Growth                 |   | <input type="checkbox"/> _____           |

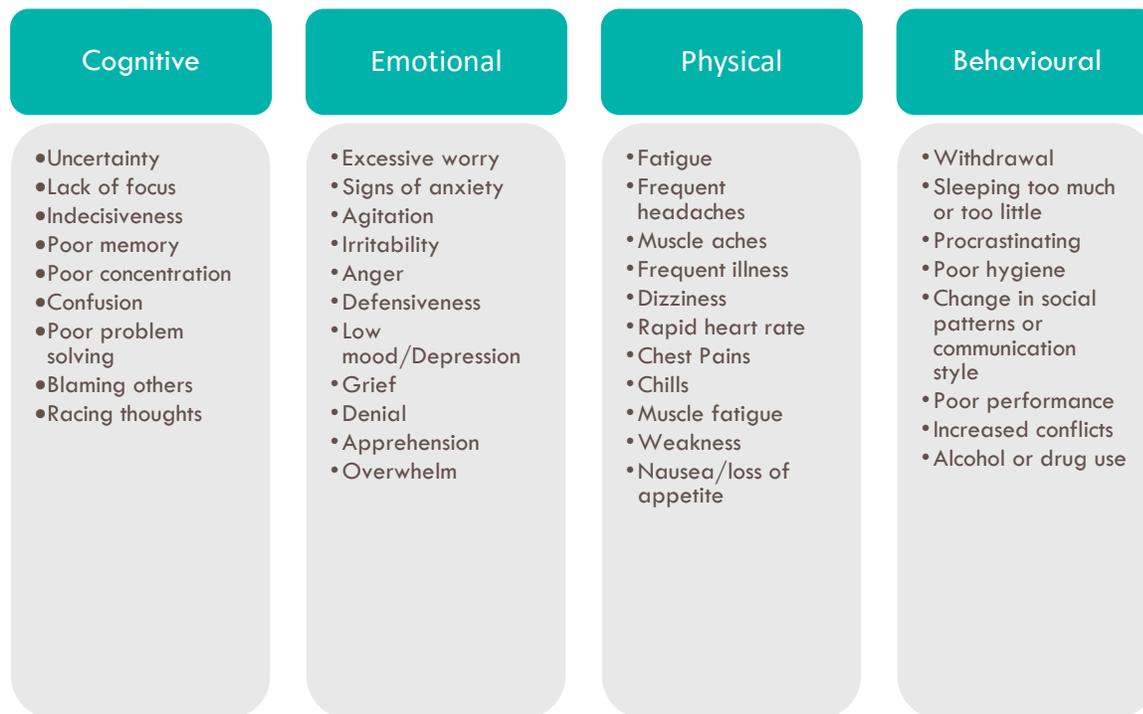
# Stress and Stress Response

While a certain amount of stress can be motivating and kick us into high gear, too much stress can impact our ability to cope both emotionally and physically. When stress levels stay too high for too long, the risk of burnout goes up. Burnout can lead to feeling numb, emotionally exhausted, and unable to focus or cope with the demands of life and work.

Because stress is a part of everyday life, especially in high-stress, high-risk jobs—it can be easy to not recognize when it’s creeping up and becoming destructive and overwhelming our ability to stay grounded, focused, and healthy.

It is important to recognize when things are becoming unmanageable and prioritize actions you can take to manage and reduce the negative impact of life and job-related stress.

## Common signs and symptoms of stress overload:



## Strategies for Managing Stress

**Pay attention.** Know your personal signs of stress and be aware of when things become distressing or unmanageable. Include co-workers or others in your stress management plan, so others can help you recognize when you may be struggling to cope.

**Create a team culture.** Utilize a buddy system to check in with one another and ensure everyone has social support available to them. Supporting others during a difficult time can have a positive impact on your mood and level of stress.

**Take time to yourself.** When needed, create space to mentally disconnect as much as possible during downtime. Set appropriate boundaries and communicate with others to allow yourself some space to de-stress.

**Create balance.** Participate in positive activities that provide a sense of pleasure, a sense of achievement, and a sense of closeness—they are vital to feeling a sense of happiness and reducing your level of stress.

**Embrace stress-relieving activities.** Select and practice constructive ways to release stress, including safe physical activity, reading, listening to music, practicing mindfulness, and connecting with others, as examples. In addition, take some time to reflect on ways that you have successfully managed stress in the past.

**Get your sleep.** Practice healthy sleep behaviours, including building a sleep routine, avoiding caffeine before bed, and practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing. Regular sleep increases calm, improves mood, and plays a crucial role in memory and learning.

**Get support.** Connecting and talking with supportive people in your life is key to stress management. If connecting with family, friends or co-workers isn't enough, seeking assistance from a professional can help.

# Assessing Your Stress and Mental Health

Stress is the mental and physical tension that can result from adapting to any number of changes. Stress can result from a variety of situations, such as traffic, noise, deadlines, financial difficulties, illness, or interactions, such as family or workplace conflicts, etc. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, health concerns, job and financial uncertainty, excessive stress is all too common. When you are chronically in a stressful environment, it can be easy to miss the toll prolonged stress is taking on your mental health. Because too much stress can be harmful to us, it is essential to manage it effectively. But, to manage it, we need to recognize when it is impacting us negatively.

## Tools to Help You Assess Your Stress and Mental Health

Learning how stress affects you and recognizing early warning signs of distress are essential tools for preventing physical and mental health problems.

Here are a couple of tools to help you check in with yourself to evaluate your stress level and reflect on your mental health:

1. **"What's Your Stress Index?"** created by the Canadian Mental Health Association. By answering yes or no to the 25 questions listed, you can calculate your stress index score. Complete the test [online here](#).
2. **"Mental Health Continuum Self-Check,"** adapted from the Mental Health Commission of Canada's Mental Health Continuum.<sup>4</sup> The Mental Health Continuum Self-Check chart (on the next page) displays general emotional, physical and behavioural signs and indicators of mental health on a continuum from healthy to ill. It also identifies actions to take depending on where you are land on the continuum.

## Make Stress and Mental Health Check-in's a Regular Part of Your Routine

Have a look at your Stress Index and the Mental Health Continuum to gain some clarity on where you are today and look at some actions you can take to help you stay healthy. **But don't make it a one-time exercise.** Stress levels and our mental health fluctuate depending on what's going on around us. These tools become more effective the more you use them. Make a habit of reflecting on how you're doing. Build the topic of mental health into conversations with those in your support network. These practices can go a long way to increasing your awareness and attention on the actions you can take to maintain your mental and physical well-being.

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<sup>4</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada. <https://theworkingmind.ca/continuum-self-check>

## MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM SELF-CHECK

	← HEALTHY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL →
	SELF-CARE & SOCIAL SUPPORT		PROFESSIONAL CARE	
	Normal Functioning	Common & Reversible Distress	Significant Functional Impairment	Clinical Disorder, Severe & Persistent Functional Impairment
MOOD	Normal fluctuations in moods Calm Confident	Nervousness Irritability Impatience Sadness	Anxious Angry Sadness, tearfulness	Excessive anxiety/panic Easily enraged or aggression Feeling overwhelmed Depression or suicidal thoughts/intent
THINKING & ATTITUDE	Good sense of humour Present/ability to focus on tasks Takes things in stride	Displaced sarcasm Intrusive thoughts Some distraction or loss of ability to focus	Negative attitude Recurrent intrusive thoughts Preoccupied or distracted Cannot focus on tasks	Excessive insubordination Noncompliant Inability to concentrate Loss of memory or cognitive abilities
SLEEP	Normal sleep patterns	Trouble sleeping	Restlessness or disturbed sleep	Unable to fall or stay asleep (sleeping too much or too little)
PHYSICAL HEALTH	Physically feeling well Good energy level Good appetite Maintaining stable weight	Tired or low energy Muscle tension Changes in eating patterns Headaches Some weight gain or loss	Tiredness or fatigue Aches and pains Loss of appetite Fluctuations or changes in weight	Exhaustion, prolonged fatigue Physical illness No appetite Extreme weight gain or loss
BEHAVIOUR	Physically and social active Usual self-confidence Comfortable with others	Decreased activity or socializing Present but distracted Procrastination	Social avoidance, withdrawal Tardiness Decreased work performance	Absent from work Unable to perform duties Isolation, avoiding social connections
HABITS	Limited or no alcohol use or gambling Limited or no addictive behaviours	Regular but controlled alcohol use or gambling	Increased alcohol use or hard-to-control gambling	Regular to frequent binge drinking Addiction Significant negative consequences due to substance use
ACTIONS TO TAKE AT EACH PHASE OF THE CONTINUUM				
	Focus on task at hand Break problems into manageable chunks Identify and nurture support systems Maintain healthy lifestyle	Recognize limits, take breaks Get adequate rest, food, and exercise Engage in healthy coping strategies Identify and minimize stressors	Identify and understand own signs of distress Make self-care a priority Talk with someone Seek social support instead of withdrawing Ask for help	Seek professional care Follow recommendations of health care professional Regain physical and mental health

Adapted from the Mental Health Commission of Canada

# Building Your Self-Care Plan

We all have different strengths, needs, limitations, and areas where we need support. When it comes to building a self-care plan, what works well for one person may not work for the next. Here are 5 steps to help you build a personalized self-care plan that works for you.

## Step 1: Fine-Tune Your Understanding of Self-Care

Self-care is any activity that we intentionally do to take care of our mental, emotional and physical well-being. Self-care are those activities that refuel us, nourishes us, and give us energy—they are the self-initiated, proactive actions we take to promote good health and well-being in our lives. Research suggests that self-care fosters resilience and equips us to better manage stress. Self-care is for everyone.

## Step 2: Determine Your Stress Level

It is important to recognize stress and how it impacts you. While some stress can be positive and motivating, many people don't recognize the toll that stress can take on their relationships, work and health. A quick way to assess your stress level is to review the signs of stress below. Or, go back and try the tools provided in [Assessing Your Stress and Mental Health](#).

Physical Effects	Psychological/Emotional Effects	Behavioural Effects
<b>Increased frequency of</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> nausea or dizziness</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> diarrhea or constipation</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> fatigue</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> headaches</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> sleeplessness</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> problems concentrating</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> muscle tension</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> hypertension</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of sex drive</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> frequent colds</li></ul>	<b>Feeling</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> moodiness</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> general uneasiness</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> depressed or general unhappiness</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> negative, cynical</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> nervous, anxious</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> agitation, inability to relax</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> helpless, not good enough</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> overworked, out of control</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> underappreciated</li></ul>	<b>Showing signs of</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> eating more or less</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> sleeping too much or too little</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> procrastination or neglecting responsibilities</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> low productivity, taking work home</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> isolating or avoiding others</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> complaining frequently about work</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> using alcohol or drugs to relax</li></ul>

### Step 3: Identify Your Current Stressors

Reflect on the specific situations, events, things, or people that cause you stress in your work and personal life. Keep in mind, that stressors can also be general (such as having too much to do, having too many demands or responsibilities, or inadequate rewards). Stressors can also be internal or external.

- **Common Internal Stressors:** negative self-talk, pessimism, unrealistic expectations, rigid thinking, lack of flexibility, perfectionism, chronic worry
- **Common External Stressors:** work, significant life changes (such as getting married, moving, having a baby), school, relationship or family problems, financial problems, pressure to perform without resources, unrealistic workloads or demands, community conflicts, health concerns or illness

**Optional exercise:** For a list of external stressors or life events that typically cause stress, see the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory. <https://www.stress.org/holmes-rahe-stress-inventory>

After identifying your list of stressors, list your five significant stressors in *the Current Major Stressors* column in the table in Step 5.

### Step 4: Identify How You Usually Cope with Stress

Healthy (Positive) Strategies	Unhealthy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Deep breathing</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Meditation</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Healthy eating</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Listening to music</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Journaling</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Exercising</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Reading</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Going for a walk</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Taking a bath</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Socializing with friends</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Sitting outside and relaxing</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Engaging in a hobby</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> See a counsellor</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Follow faith or spiritual beliefs</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Lashing out</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Becoming sedentary</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Try to do it all</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Acting aggressively</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Overeating</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Skipping meals</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Smoking or over drinking</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Pacing</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Biting your fingernails</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Taking drugs</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawing or isolating from family and friends</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Dangerous or reckless driving</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li></ul>

## Step 5. Create Your Self-Care Plan

Stress can be managed by implementing both direct and indirect self-care coping strategies.

**Direct strategies** are approaches that create space between a person and stressful situations. They include:

- **Reframing:** taking steps to change your perception or attitude towards the stressor (R)
- **Limiting:** limiting your contact or exposure to the stressor (L)
- **Eliminating:** (E)
  - removing yourself from the source of the stress
  - removing the stressor

**Indirect self-care strategies** (SCS) are approaches that help minimize the impact of stressful situations by helping a person cope or refuel. Some examples include:

### Physical Self-Care

- Eat healthy food to maintain energy
- Exercise regularly—go for walks, hikes, do yoga
- Attend to health issues when they arise
- Take meal breaks at work
- Take holidays/vacations
- Get good quality sleep
- Get outside in nature
- Get a massage
- Dance

### Mental Self-Care

- Turn off electronic devices
- Journal your thoughts and feelings
- Meditate
- Listen to guided meditations
- Listen to calm music
- Read inspiring quotes or stories
- Colour or paint
- Find a creative DIY project
- Listen to inspirational podcasts
- Ask for help when you need it

### Emotional Self-Care

- Spend time with loved ones
- Engage in activities that bring comfort, such as taking a hot bath
- Read light-hearted books
- Slow your breathing
- Take a 10-minute break
- Watch a favourite show
- Make a gratitude list
- Join a support group

### Relationship Self-Care

- Take recreational time with a partner or spouse
- Take recreational time with children
- Take recreational time with friends
- Spend time with your or a friend's pet
- Going to a social group
- Connect with older relatives
- Seek out support from family and friends
- Accept nurturing from others

Use the chart below to list your current major stressors, your current self-care strategies, and additional self-care/coping (direct or indirect) strategies you can integrate into your life (on a daily or weekly basis).

Current Major Stressors (from Step 3)	Current Self-Care Strategies (from Step 4)	Additional Self-Care/Coping Strategies (Direct* and Indirect Strategies) (from Step 5)

\*R-Reframe L-Limit Exposure E-Eliminate

Adapted from: Jeffries, C. Behring, S.T.; SUN Program—How to Create an Individualized Self-Care Plan. March 2015.

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

- Mayo Clinic Stress Management--Relaxation Techniques: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045368>
- Mayo Clinic Mindfulness Exercises: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/mindfulness-exercises/art-20046356>
- Calm--Daily Calm--10 Minute Mindfulness Meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZToicYcHIOU>
- Self-Care Resources for Health Care Workers during COVID-19 (CAMH): <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19/information-for-professionals/self-care>

## Manage Stress Right

Stress can escalate until your neck is sore, your heart is racing, and you feel overwhelmed. On an average day, more than half of the workforce leaves work with neck pain, tired eyes, or sore hands. Many take the stress home, vent with family or friends, and then have trouble sleeping. Stop the stress cycle with these nine quick, easy tips.



**1. Deep Breaths.** Slow racing thoughts and relax knotted muscles by breathing deeply and slowly, at least ten times. Put one hand on your stomach. Make sure it rises with each breath. Avoid fast, shallow chest breaths that increase tension. Breathe in through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

**2. Visualization.** Picture your favourite place to relax. Beach? Woods? Hiking trail? Keep a picture in your office or on your refrigerator. Pause to feel, hear, and smell your special place. Be there, and the next time you visit your place of contentment, anchor more vivid images to access when your stress cycle begins to escalate.

**3. Prioritize.** Write down your top three priorities for the day. Put the rest aside. If possible, stop answering your phone or e-mail for thirty minutes. Collect yourself. Focus. When priorities change, pitch that note and write another with only three points. Don't think too far ahead. Stay in the moment. Work on what's in front of you.

**4. Relaxing Music.** If your workplace allows music, opt for calm classical or acoustic pieces. Slow your mind and even try to walk in that cadence. Move and swing your arms slightly, doing subtle shoulder rolls to loosen up before you take up the next project.

**5. Positive Self-Talk.** Don't buy into "calamity conversations" and absorb the stress of others. Instead, run positive messages through your mind. Use your voice. Say, "Of course I can handle this, all in good time." Walk outside if work continues as the main topic at lunch. Think of something besides work as you walk: dinner with your spouse or your daughter's soccer game. "I'm really looking forward to this evening."

**6. Set Boundaries and Detach.** Make taking care of yourself your first emotional priority. You can't make people you don't like disappear, but you can make them a smaller part of your emotional life by responding differently to their emotionality, behaviour, and crises. This means knowing what your hot buttons are and practicing different responses, getting better each time you try.

**7. Laugh at Yourself.** It's impossible to smile and stay stressed. If you smile when you're talking with a co-worker or smile when you answer the phone, your stress will unwind. Download and keep on hand your favourite comedy podcasts. Keep a list of funny situations you've been involved in or scenes from a movie with your favourite comedian. Recall and laugh.

**8. Select Stress-free Snacks.** Sugar can make you feel great during stressful times, but when your blood sugar crashes, you end up more strung out than before. Choose high-protein snacks such as yogurt or nuts or fibrous vegetables and fruits such as carrots or apples. Decaffeinated teas can be soothing, but avoid coffee, tea, or pop with caffeine, which heighten anxiety.

**9. Change What You Watch.** Bringing the tension home? Break away from your stress by tuning into a comedy or inspirational show on Netflix, TV, or at the theatre—enjoy a storyline where everything ends on a happy note. Leave your own drama by enjoying someone else's story. No news, no high-adrenaline adventure flicks.

# Guidelines for Low-Stress Living

## Personal Matters/Relationships

1. Make time your friend, not your master—practice effective time management.
2. Associate with gentle, kind people who affirm your personhood.
3. Take actions to maintain or regain balance between each of the areas of your life (family/relationships, health, career, spiritual, intellectual, community, etc.).
4. Engage in meaningful, satisfying work.
5. Don't let work (and ambition) dominate your entire life. Instead, compartmentalize your life into clearly defined work and non-work segments.
6. Do not drift along in troublesome and stressful situations:
  - Let go of unhealthy relationships
  - Take action to settle matters that are troubling you
  - Do not leave upsetting situations unresolved for so long that they make you worry needlessly.
7. Open yourself up to new experiences:
  - Try things you've never done before
  - Sample foods you've never eaten
  - Go places you've never been to
  - Find self-renewing opportunities.
8. Read interesting books and articles to freshen your ideas and broaden your points of view. Keep an open mind. Reduce TV watching or scrolling your social media feeds on your phone.
9. Form at least one or two high-quality relationships with people you can trust and be yourself.
10. Set priorities in your life—review your core values and "obligations" regularly and make sure they are aligned and bring rewards for you. Divest yourself of those not good for you.
11. Maintain positive thoughts, a positive image of yourself, and a positive attitude towards life.
12. Have realistic expectations and goals for yourself and others.
13. Maintain a sense of humour about life and yourself.

## Relaxation

1. Find time every day for unplugging, detachment and relaxation.
2. Learn and practice mindfulness—body awareness/monitoring, focused breathing, and deep relaxation.
3. Find some time every day—even if only ten minutes—for complete privacy, alone with your thoughts, free from pressures and responsibilities.
4. Have one or more pastimes (hobbies, recreational sports) that give you a chance to do something relaxing without having to show something for it.
5. Get seven-eight hours of sleep a night.

## Nutrition/Diet

*Note: if you have a medical condition or have been prescribed medications or supplements and are considering making a significant shift in your diet, check in and follow the guidance of a medical professional.*

1. Eat more whole plant foods, such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and legumes.
2. Eat more healthy fats, such as those found in olives, olive oil, avocados, nuts, soybeans, tofu, and fatty fish (salmon, tuna, trout).
3. Stay away from unhealthy fats (trans fats), such as packaged snack foods (crackers, microwave popcorn, chips), stick margarine, vegetable shortening, fried foods, and commercially baked pastries, cookies, donuts, muffins, and cakes.
4. Decrease consumption of meat: turn to poultry and fish.
5. Form and keep sensible eating habits:
  - Eat sweets rarely (reduce sugar consumption)
  - Minimize your intake of "junk" foods
  - Emphasize foods you like that are good for you
  - Minimize the use of caffeine—coffee, tea, cola drinks, cocoa
  - Eat moderate quantities, not until "stuffed."
6. Reduce salt consumption.
7. Chew your food thoroughly and eat slowly. Because digestion begins in the mouth, don't wash food down with fluids.

8. If you smoke, QUIT.
9. Use alcohol or cannabis only for occasional social functions, if at all. Don't let it use you.
10. Eliminate the use of recreational drugs.

## Exercise

1. If you haven't exercised in some time, or have health concerns, talk with your doctor before beginning a new exercise program.
2. If you're new to exercising—build up your fitness gradually.
3. Pick an activity that you enjoy. Almost any form of exercise can increase your fitness level and reduce stress—walking, gardening, dancing, jogging, stair climbing, hiking, yoga, bicycling, weightlifting or swimming.
4. According to the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines, adults aged 18-64 years should accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week in bouts of 10 minutes or more.
5. Develop and engage in a regular exercise program at least 3 times a week.
6. Decrease your body weight to your healthy weight range and keep it there.
7. Use aerobic exercise to build your health to a high level of conditioning.

## Additional Resources:

- HealthLine—9 Ways to Boost Your Body's Natural Defense: <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/how-to-boost-immune-health>
- Government of Canada—Physical Activity types: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/physical-activity-tips-adults-18-64-years.html>
- Mayo Clinic Stress Management—Exercise and Stress: Get Moving to Manage Stress: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469>

# Tips for Coping with Uncertainty

If you are feeling more anxious because of the uncertainty surrounding us, you are not alone. Loss of control and our old, familiar lives has made most of us feel sad, worried, stressed, and powerless. But, no matter how helpless you may feel, there are coping mechanisms to better deal with uncertainty and decrease your anxiety. Here are 8 tips that you can try out:

## 1. Practice self-compassion

It can be easy to compare how you react to these uncertain times with other people in your life. People have different reactions to the stress of unknowns. And some people are better at coping with change and uncertainty than others. Don't beat yourself up if you're feeling more shaken or impacted.

Self-compassion is a skill that can be learned and strengthened. To foster self-compassion, ask yourself these questions:<sup>5</sup>

- Am I being kind and understanding to myself?
- Do I acknowledge shortcomings and failure as experiences shared by everyone?
- Am I keeping my negative thoughts and emotions in perspective?

## 2. Focus on what you can control

No matter what situation you are in, you usually have some things that you can control. It might be helpful to pause and write down a list of things that you can do. For example, you may be concerned about getting COVID-19. You can follow the health authority guidelines and do your best to wash your hands, avoid crowds, wear a mask, and physically distance to prevent catching the virus. When you focus on things you can do and actively problem-solve instead of aimlessly worrying, you will feel more in control.

## 3. Be present

A surefire way to avoid worrying about the uncertain future is to stay focused on the present. Don't try to predict what may happen, and don't let yourself think of everything that could go wrong. Instead, connect to and appreciate the present moment. What do you see and hear around you?

You can learn to focus on the present moment by practicing mindfulness. If you feel especially anxious, you can try this grounding technique to get back to the present situation. Take a few deep breaths and say out loud:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel (your feet against the floor etc.)
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste (you can leave your spot to find something to savour)

## 4. Take time for self-care

You can better deal with what life throws at you when you consistently manage your stress and anxiety levels. Self-care is always important, but now it is essential.

- Exercise - try to move a little bit every day.
- Get enough sleep.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Avoid sugary and processed foods.

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<sup>5</sup> Neff K.D., Dahm K.A. (2015) Self-Compassion: What It Is, What It Does, and How It Relates to Mindfulness. In: Ostafin B., Robinson M., Meier B. (eds) Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation. Springer, New York, NY.

- Spend time outdoors.
- Do activities you enjoy and help you relax.

Explore [Building a Self-Care Plan](#) to create a plan that's personal to you.

## 5. Eliminate your triggers

Take some time to think about those things that make you emotionally charged. Do you know what your triggers are? Are you able to avoid or reduce those triggers so that you can worry less? For example, you may feel better and more optimistic about the future if you don't pay attention to conspiracy theories, rumours, and incorrect stories about COVID-19.

## 6. Reflect on your coping strategies and your need for certainty

We can never control absolutely everything. Unexpected events are a part of life. No matter how much we plan and prepare, in reality, anything could happen.

Unexpected turns aren't always a bad thing. Good things can happen out of the blue, too. Have you ever met a new friend or a partner unexpectedly? Have you stumbled upon a memorable experience when you least expected it?

Even unexpected, negative life events can have something positive. They can build your resiliency and help you grow as a person.

You can answer these questions to challenge your need for certainty and reflect on the coping mechanisms you already use to deal with uncertainty.

- What are some good things about uncertainty?
- Did things turn out fine even though you were not sure about what would happen?
- If things did not turn out okay, what did you do to cope?
- Can you use those coping strategies again?

## 7. Learn to tolerate uncertainty

If you feel ready, you can try to build your tolerance for uncertainty slowly. Start with something that gives you just a little bit of anxiety.

For example, you always bring a thorough list when you go grocery shopping. If the thought of going without a list gives you just a little bit of anxiety, you can challenge yourself to go shopping without a list. Afterward, reflect on your experience.

- How did you feel?
- What happened? Did everything turn out fine?
- What did you do if things didn't go as you expected?

When you keep practicing, you may, in time, notice that things that once caused you anxiety have become much easier to handle, and your tolerance for the unexpected has grown.

**Additional Resource:** PsychologyTools.com offers [Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty](#) (PDF), a guide to assist individuals in developing the skills to manage to worry and anxiety better.

## 8. Do not hesitate to seek professional help

We all feel anxious from time to time – especially now. But, if anxiety is more than just a passing feeling for you, EFAP counsellors can help to identify coping mechanisms for you.

# Managing Change

COVID-19 has impacted us on an individual, social and global level. Naturally, people will have varying reactions to change; however, it would be reasonable to say that this time, in particular, is an especially emotionally unsettling time. The following strategies will assist you during this difficult time.

## The Cycle of Change

William Bridges, a change management consultant and author, developed a model which focuses on transition, not change. The distinction is this: change is something that happens TO people and can happen very quickly, whereas transition is INTERNAL to the person and can take longer for the person to adjust depending on a number of variables. Bridges Transition Model identifies the stages an individual experiences during change: stage 1 - "Endings," stage 2 - "Neutral Zone," and stage 3 - "New Beginnings."

### Ending, Losing and Letting Go

Ending, Losing and Letting Go are where we disengage from the old. It involves **loss, grief, shock, numbness, denial, anger, hurt, unease, resistance, blaming, complaining, feeling sick, doubt, and stress.**

#### During this phase, consider:

- Giving yourself the time and space to come to terms with the situation and its repercussions.
- Identify what you are losing what you need to do to manage the loss. This involves determining what is over, what's being left behind, and what you will keep and carry forward with you.

### Neutral Zone

The Neutral Zone is where we have come to terms with the notion that change is occurring, but we have yet to connect fully, or understand the new normal. It involves feelings of **indecision, chaos, unknown, anxiety, fear, confusion and distress.**

#### During this phase, consider:

- Keeping in mind, this is when the old is gone, yet the new isn't fully apparent or operating. New identifies or new process are yet to be fully formulated.
- Keeping focused on short-term objectives and goals, while at the same time look for the bigger picture.

## New Beginnings

New Beginnings is where we begin to understand and connect to the new. It involves **energy, creativeness, renewed purpose, renewed direction, growth, and cooperation.**

### During this phase, consider:

- Reflecting on new understandings, values and attitudes.
- Reviewing and reflecting on strengths and skills you've gained through the change process.
- Analyzing the change process and highlighting strategies for further change, growth, or development.
- Identifying a new understanding of your sense of purpose and how to contribute or participate effectively.

### Dealing Effectively with Change

- Create a positive vision of what change may look like at the onset.
- Acknowledge the feelings that come with going through change.
- Remember that experiencing a range of emotions in the change process is normal and to be expected. Listen and understand the emotion presented in the moment (as the presented emotion is not always what the true emotion is at a deeper internal level). Journaling or talking about true feelings and what might be triggering them can be helpful.
- Be gentle with yourself. Don't expect yourself to snap out of it. Denying your feelings may only drive them deeper into negative feelings.
- Check your thinking patterns. How balanced are your thoughts—are you able to see the positive and neutral aspects to change or only the negative? Getting trapped in the pattern of negative thinking can keep you stuck in a negative emotional state.
- Focus on self-care. Change is stressful and can take a toll on your physical and mental well-being.
- Engage in proactive stress management techniques, such as connecting with a supportive friend or colleague to share your feelings, practicing deep breathing techniques, and getting outside for a walk.
- If you find that you're feeling stuck and distressed, consider reaching out to your EFAP for counselling support.

## Recognizing Unhelpful Thinking

Negative or unhelpful thinking can trigger depression, anxiety or self-doubt, relationship challenges, and interfere with our ability to stay balanced and resilient in times of stress. How we think about events, other people, and ourselves can have a significant impact on our moods and behaviours. Here are ten negative thinking styles (Cognitive Distortions) to watch out for:

All-or-Nothing Thinking	Also known as Black-and-White Thinking—Seeing situations or experiences as being either all good or all bad. Whereas most situations are usually somewhere in the middle.
Overgeneralization	Seeing a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. Common words such as “always” or “never” are used to describe situations or events.
Mental Filter	Focusing all attention on the negative aspect of a situation and disregarding the positive or good that occurred.
Discounting the Positive	Overlooking personal achievements and disregarding positive attributes. For example, you think you got the promotion because of luck, rather than skill or work performance.
Jumping to Conclusions	Interpreting things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion. (This type of thinking is often also referred to as Mind-reading or Fortune-Telling).
Catastrophizing	Blowing things out of proportion. This type of thinking leads people to assume the worst when facing unknowns.
Emotional Reasoning	Assuming that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. It is the false belief that how you feel is an indicator of reality.
Should Statements	Thinking in terms of what “should” or “ought” to be said or done. When things don’t turn out that way, you blame yourself or take on a negative view of your life.
Labeling	Reducing yourself or someone else to a negative characteristic or descriptor. Instead of thinking negatively about the situation you attach a negative label to yourself. “I’m a failure.”
Personalization	Holding yourself responsible for events or situations out of your control or taking things personally when they may not be connected or caused by you.

## 5 Steps to Change Your Thinking

Distorted thinking or beliefs can make us more vulnerable to mistakenly seeing situations as catastrophic, labelling things as all good or all bad, or that believing that an event we didn't have control over was all our fault.

Our thoughts create our feelings. Changing our thoughts changes how we feel. This simple and yet challenging formula is what will turn these Cognitive Distortions around. Try the strategies outlined below to challenge each one so that you can begin to think more effectively and realistically. As you practice these, you'll find yourself feeling better – about yourself and others.

### Step 1: Identify Your Distortions

Keep a journal. As you become familiar with the 10 Cognitive Distortions, notice which ones you seem to favour. Writing down your thoughts and the corresponding distortions in your journal help you keep track of what you're thinking about and how you're feeling.

### Step 2: Challenge Your Thinking

It's important to challenge your thoughts because not all of our thoughts are true. As you are working to change your thinking to improve how you are feeling, focus on creating a balanced thought. A balanced thought is a thought or belief that considers all the facts, objective information and evidence (good, bad and neutral), and viewpoints. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to open up your thinking:

- *Have I had other experiences that show that this thought is not entirely true all of the time?*
- *Is there any information that contradicts my thought that I might be ignoring or discounting?*
- *Is this the only way to think about this situation? Are there other's ways I can think about it?*
- *Do I know this thought to be accurate, or do I feel it's true?*
- *If this thought was true, what is the worst thing that could happen? What are some ways I could cope with that?*
- *What would a friend or family member think in the same situation?*

Then, take a step back and assess the situation again. What evidence supports the thought? What evidence does not support the thought? Can you revise your initial thought to take into consideration all of the facts or available evidence? Finally, combine the supporting and non-supporting statements into a complete thought. This becomes your new balanced thought.

### Step 3: Be Compassionate in Your Self-talk

We are often extremely hard on ourselves. Our self-talk is harsh, negative, and sometimes abusive. When you think about how you would speak to a good friend, chances are you'd never say the things you say to yourself to your friend.

For each distortion you've identified, write down how you would respond to a good friend. Then, practice using this more compassionate self-talk with yourself.

#### **Step 4: Seek Support**

Find a friend or someone you trust to help you challenge your assumptions and distortions. The right questions can help you shift your perspective from black or white to shades of grey! Creating some flexibility in your thinking can help you lower your stress, feel less anxious and shift away from depression.

#### **Step 5: Positive/Negative Outcomes**

Self-assessment is key to finding the mental and emotional freedom you're looking for as you challenge your own cognitive distortions. By asking yourself to assess the positive and negative, short and long-term outcomes of sticking with your perspective, you're able to decide whether it's worth keeping or changing it.

Asking these questions will help:

- How will it help me or hurt me if I believe this distortion?
- Will it move me closer to being the person I want to be or farther away?
- If I dig my heels in and continue to believe this thought, how will it impact my relationship(s)?
- How do I feel about myself?
- Does believing this distortion help or harm my depression, confidence, self-worth, anxiety, etc.?

Challenging your cognitive distortions does take practice and patience, but research shows that your life will become so much better as you take control of your thoughts instead of allowing them to control you.

**If you or someone you know has trouble with negative thinking patterns, reach out to your EFAP for support. The EFAP offers personal counselling, which can help you identify automatic negative thinking that may impact your self-esteem or mental health.**

# Recognizing Burnout

Burnout can affect not only your work but also your relationships and your health. Therefore, it's important to know what burnout is and its symptoms so you can spot them quickly and take steps to intervene.

Burnout is the effect of chronic, long-term job-related stress. This stress leads to the inability to function well at work or in your personal life. Most people suffer physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, a loss of personal identity, and a reduced sense of accomplishment in their work. Even if you love your job, you can still be at risk for burnout.

According to the World Health Organization, "Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life."<sup>6</sup>

Understanding the symptoms of burnout gives you the ability to take care of yourself before things get worse. Daily tasks, such as getting exercise and fresh air and doing something outside of work that you enjoy, can help prevent burnout. For others, taking leave or going on vacation can help.

The best practice is to stop burnout before it starts.

## Here are the top 10 signs you're heading toward burnout.

1. **You get sick more often.** From colds to heart disease, your body starts wearing down under constant stress.
2. **Inability to sleep.** Stress leads to insomnia in many people.
3. **Physical fatigue.** You feel wiped out at the end of your workweek, or sometimes even before.
4. **Mental fatigue.** Constant stress leads to forgetfulness and the inability to concentrate. You may find that making decisions is difficult.
5. **Irritability.** You may feel irritable at work or in your personal life. For example, things that never used to bother you may now grate on your nerves.
6. **Feeling apathetic.** You're heading toward burnout if your attitude is "What's the point?" You may feel hopeless about your career, which can spill over into your personal life.
7. **You don't feel enjoyment at work.** Most people find that there's at least one thing they like about their job, but after a long period of extreme stress, you may find that you dread going to work, or you punch the snooze bar a couple of times more in the morning.
8. **Negativity.** Chronic stress leads to seeing the glass half empty. Feeling negative affects everyone around you, at work and at home.
9. **Anxiety.** Constant worry is a classic symptom of burnout. It also produces a steady stream of stress hormones that can be very hard on the body.
10. **Depression.** Prolonged stress leads to feeling sad, hopeless, and worthless. You may start to isolate yourself from others, even people you love.

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<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

## If you find yourself struggling with burnout, here are some tips that can help:

### Connect with Others:

- Reach out to others who care about you—such as your partner, family, friends, and co-workers.
- Let them know what's going on. They will be glad you reached out and trusted them enough to confide in them.
- Develop friendships with your co-workers and colleagues. Having positive social connections at work can remind you to take breaks and make work enjoyable.
- If you are working remotely, have as many video calls as you can.
- Cut out or limit contact with people who are negative, toxic or bring you down.
- Join a social, religious, community, or support group. It can be a place to connect with like-minded people and make new connections.

### Attend to Your Needs:

- Practice good self-care by:
  - Getting good, restorative sleep
  - Getting outside and getting some physical activity every day
  - Eating healthy meals and staying hydrated
  - Staying away from using alcohol or substances to cope
  - Connecting with spiritual supports
  - Creating daily routines that reduce stress and promote happiness
  - Focusing on mindfulness by doing meditation, yoga, or focused breathing.

### Focus on Work-Life Balance:

- Be mindful of taking breaks during the weekday—block time on your calendar to get out for a walk or even just step away from your workspace
- Focus on leaving work at work
- Set boundaries where you need by communicating needs and delegating tasks
- Negotiate your workload, deadlines or work focus
- Set goals for what must get done and what can wait
- Take allotted vacation time and use it to refresh and re-energize
- Schedule workouts, time for journaling, coffee with a friend, or reading a book into your calendar.

### If you need more help, seek support:

If you are struggling with burnout, reach out to your EFAP for support. The EFAP offers personal counselling, which can help you identify strategies for coping and reducing burnout.

# Building a Positive Social Support Network

Social support is the help you receive from family, friends, groups and community. Social support is the emotional and physical comfort or assistance given by people who appreciate, value, and care about you. Social support networks are the people you turn to when you have great news to share, need advice or encouragement, or need help during times of crisis or stress.

## Benefits of a Social Support Network

- Improves physical and mental well-being<sup>7</sup>
- Reduces stress and stress-related illness
- Build resilience to stress
- Facilitates hope during challenging times<sup>8</sup>
- Enhances life satisfaction
- Increases self-esteem

## Types of Support Networks

There are two types of support networks, 1) **informal support network**—people who are there for you in various areas of your personal life when you need them. These can include family, friends, co-workers, or neighbours. And 2) **formal support networks**—people from organizations or agencies who can help you address problems or concerns that are too complex or difficult to resolve on your own. These can include doctors, counsellors, social workers, teachers, or clergy.

## Four Types of Social Support

- **Emotional support**—is the emotional or physical comfort you experience when someone listens to you, shows you empathy, compassion, or concern, or gives you a comforting hug or pat on the back.
- **Practical support**—is the tangible support someone might give you, such as giving you food or money or helping you with yard work or childcare. Practical support is the kind of help that assists you in completing the tasks of daily life.
- **Informational support**—is providing advice or factual information about a particular subject or situation. An example would be a friend who has been caring for an elderly parent sharing information with you on elder care resources in your community that might be helpful for you as you prepare to care for your elderly parent.
- **Esteem support**—is expressing confidence in you or expressing encouragement to you. This type of support can help involve someone reminding you of your skills and capabilities and enhance your ability to believe more strongly in yourself.

*Remember...supportive relationships are those in which you feel:*

- Heard and understood
- Valued or appreciated
- Useful
- Able to be open and feel comfortable being yourself
- Informed
- You have a clear role or place in the relationship

<sup>7</sup> Ozbay, Fatih et al. "Social support and resilience to stress: from neurobiology to clinical practice." *Psychiatry (Edgmont (Pa. : Township))* vol. 4,5 (2007): 35-40.

<sup>8</sup> Bareket-Bojmel, Liad et al. "Perceived social support, loneliness, and hope during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Testing a mediating model in the UK, USA, and Israel." *The British Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 10.1111/bjc.12285. 23 Feb. 2021, doi:10.1111/bjc.12285

## Strengthening and Building Your Social Supports

- **Connect with your network of supports when stress hits and ask for help.** Remember reaching out is a strength.
- **Nurture your existing relationships.** Reach out and keep in touch with family and friends. Make maintaining these important relationships a priority even during times when life or work gets busy. It demonstrates your care and commitment to those relationships.
- **Get to know your neighbours.** Go for walks in your neighbourhood, become a regular at your local coffee shop, grocery store, library, museum or park. Make a point of saying hello and introducing yourself.
- **Get more involved in your community.** Participate in hobby groups (such as a hiking club or a community gardening group), volunteer or religious groups. Consider taking a class through a local community centre, night school, or community college.
- **Get a pet.** Many people find it helpful to get a pet. Pets can be tremendous sources of warmth, affection and companionship. Pets, particularly dogs, are also great at getting you outside and creating opportunities to meet neighbours or other pet owners.
- **Seek specialized, formal support when needed.** Sometimes the support one needs is best from a trained professional who can provide objective guidance or specialized support, like a counsellor or a doctor. Make sure you are asking for help in the right places.
- **Let go of relationships that are no longer working for you.** Sometimes people grow apart, relationships can become transactional or one-sided, or a friend's partying lifestyle can get in the way of your journey to get healthy. When a relationship becomes a source of negative feelings or no longer feels like support, it may be time to spend less time together or let go completely.

### Tips for strengthening your relationships...

- Keep in touch
- Stay positive
- Communicate openly
- Listen attentively
- Be supportive
- Respect needs and limits

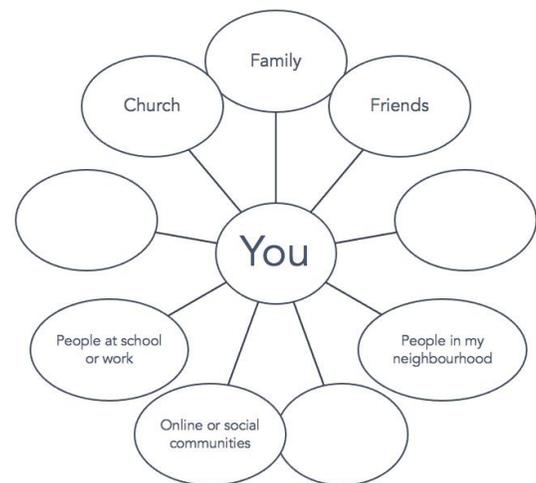
Supportive relationships are about being open to both receiving and giving support.

## Assessing Your Social Support Network

When assessing your social support network, consider:

- **The size or extent of your network**—How many supportive relationships do you have? In what areas of your life do you have supportive relationships? How many are within an hour of where you live? How often do you spend time with someone other than those with whom you live?
- **The quality of the relationships**—How satisfied are you with your relationships? Do you have a variety of supports? What kinds or types of support do you need from those in your network? Does your network provide support for most of your needs, or do you have gaps?

*Did you find areas that you need to work on developing?*



Next, take a closer look at your network and complete the exercise below to determine what steps you need to take to utilize your supports better to help you right now.

**List three people, groups or communities that provide you social support:**

Support #1:

Support #2:

Support #3:

**Describe how each of your social supports helps you or could help you with Emotional, Practical, Informational or Esteem support.**

Support #1:

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Support #2:

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Support #3:

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**List any barriers that get in the way of you utilizing each of your social supports.**

Support #1:

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Support #2:

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Support #3:

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**What specific steps could you take to utilize your supports more fully?**

Support #1:

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Support #2:

---

Support #3:

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**How could your supports help you with a current challenge or problem you're facing?**

Support #1:

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Support #2:

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Support #3:

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**Select Sources and Additional Resources:**

1. Ozbay, Fatih et al. "Social support and resilience to stress: from neurobiology to clinical practice." *Psychiatry (Edgmont (Pa. : Township))* vol. 4,5 (2007): 35-40.
1. Bareket-Bojmel, Liad et al. "Perceived social support, loneliness, and hope during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Testing a mediating model in the UK, USA, and Israel." *The British Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 10.1111/bjc.12285. 23 Feb. 2021, doi:10.1111/bjc.12285
3. Canadian Mental Health Association—Social Support. <https://cmha.ca/documents/social-support>

# Practicing Gratitude to Improve Your Mental and Physical Health

Showing gratitude is one of the golden rules that guide us on how to treat others. From a young age, we were taught to be thankful to people who do good deeds to us. Being grateful helps build good relationships with the people around us and positively impacts one's mental health.

Being thankful is not taxing, but the results can be significant if consistently practiced. Grateful people are more energetic and enthusiastic in what they do. In addition, studies have shown that people who often show gratitude are happier and less depressed. To know more about the psychological benefits of gratitude, let's dig deep.

## Neurotransmitters

Being grateful is a natural antidepressant. Most people who have depression are placed on medication to relieve the symptoms. But did you know that being grateful can have similar effects in relieving symptoms of depression as the medications? Showing gratitude to the people around us frequently can improve one's emotions.

Human emotions are influenced by neurotransmitters. The common neurotransmitters responsible for mood regulation are dopamine and serotonin. These are the neurotransmitters that make one feel happy when one shows gratitude. People who regularly show gratefulness have strong neural pathways.

## How Being Thankful Rewires Your Brain

**1. Releasing Toxic Emotions--** By practicing gratitude, we activate parts of our brain called the hippocampus and amygdala. These two sites work in tandem to generate emotions. When one shows appreciation, the brain releases hormones that improve the mood, cutting down on anxiety and stress-causing hormones.

**2. Pain Reduction--**It may sound unbelievable, but gratitude also reduces pain. People suffering from chronic pain may fail to heal because they see only the negative side of everything. Negativity impairs the healing process. Changing your perspective on how you see things and becoming positive-minded can cause a reduction in pain symptoms. People who are positive despite being in pain heal faster.

**3. Improvements in Sleep Quality--**The part in your brain called the hypothalamus also comes into play when one shows gratitude. The hypothalamus is responsible for many things, and among them is sleep cycles. Activating the hypothalamus by being grateful therefore makes one sleep better.

**4. Stress Regulation--**Gratitude is also a tool for reducing stress. Showing appreciation leads to a reduction in cortisol release--a stress hormone. In addition, using appreciation to cope with stress leads to a reduction in symptoms of depression and anxiety. Therefore, practice showing appreciation if you want to live a less stressful life.

## How to Practice Gratitude

Gratitude is a skill. Therefore, to perfect it, you need to practice. Here are some ways to practice gratitude:

- Appreciate the deeds of your friends, colleagues, neighbours, or family members.
- Write a thank you letter or note and send it to someone to show you recognize what they did and its positive impact on you.
- Keep a gratitude journal—at the beginning or end of each day, write down 3-4 things you are grateful for and why.
- See the opportunity for growth in your mistakes.
- Meditate regularly—to help you connect with the small blessings in your everyday life. Learn more about gratitude meditations.
- Think positive things about yourself.
- Balance your complaints—at the end of each day, make a list of your complaints. Then, balance the negativity by making a list (equal to the number of complaints) of positive experiences you are grateful to have had that day.
- Volunteer for an organization to help others.



# Improving Your Sleep

When our sleep is good, we fall asleep quickly (usually within 15-20 minutes), enjoy 7 – 9 hours of continuous sleep in 24 hours, and wake up feeling refreshed. Research shows that:

- **Sleep is vital to our physical health and well-being.** For our physical health, sleep boosts immunity, restores energy, aids in tissue growth and repair, and helps us to physically recover from illness and injuries. Conversely, chronic insufficient sleep can increase the risk of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes.
- **Sleep enhances mood and improves mental health.** Psychologically, sleep helps to balance our moods, combat stress, depression and anxiety, and helps us get along with others. Frequent or regular experiences of poor sleep can lead to ongoing worries about being able to sleep.
- **Sleep helps brain functioning.** Getting enough quality sleep aids in restoring memory, focus and concentration. It also helps to reduce errors, impaired judgement and reaction time that can lead to injuries and accidents. In addition, sleep helps to improve our ability to solve problems and be creative.

## The relationship between stress, anxiety and sleep problems:

Under stress, the body releases hormones--adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine--that boost energy and alertness, raise heart rate and blood pressure – priming the body for fight or flight. These hormones keep us in a hyperaroused, awake state that interferes with our ability to feel mentally and physically calm and relaxed. As a result, stress can make it difficult to sleep.

When sleep problems such as difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, waking up too early, or waking up feeling tired last for longer than one month, they become an indicator of insomnia. Other symptoms of insomnia include:

- Not feeling well
- Feeling tired during the day
- Feeling irritable, depressed or anxious
- Struggling with maintaining attention or focus
- Increased errors and accidents
- Ongoing worries about sleep.

Insomnia may be due to a range of factors, including stress and pain. Often negative thoughts and certain behaviours play a part in keeping insomnia going.

## Tips to improve your sleep:

While there is little debate that the coronavirus pandemic is impacting people's sleep, your behaviours during the day, before and while in bed, can make a real difference in the quality of your sleep.

## Look after your physical well-being.

- Maintaining a healthy diet is essential, but also pay attention to when you are eating. Heavy meals before bed interfere with sleep. Also, being too hungry can be distracting and keep you up. If you need to eat before bed, have a light snack or a warm glass of milk.
- Regular exercise is an excellent stress reliever, and research shows that exercise helps you fall asleep more quickly and can help you have a more restful sleep. But try to avoid any strenuous exercise in the 2-4 hours before bedtime. Vigorous aerobic exercise triggers endorphins that stimulate brain activity and can keep some people awake.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeinated drinks, chocolate, nicotine, and some medications for 4-6 hours before bed. These substances can interfere with your ability to fall asleep.
- Some believe that alcohol can help you relax. However, it can interfere with your ability to stay asleep in the latter part of the night. Avoid alcohol for 4-6 hours before bed.

### Make your bedroom ready for sleeping.

External factors such as room temperature, noise, and how comfortable we are can directly impact sleep. To support a good night's sleep, keep your sleep space cool (not too hot or cold), dark and quiet. If you need, utilize a sound diffuser to minimize noise or a sleep mask or blackout drapes to block out light. Make sure your mattress and bedding are comfortable.

### Get sunlight (or full-spectrum light).

Try to get outside during the day. But if you aren't able to get outside, sit on the porch or balcony, or keep the drapes and blinds open during the day. Natural light can have a positive effect on your circadian rhythm—your internal sleep clock controlled by the hypothalamus. This sleep clock tells us when it's time to be awake and when it's time to be asleep—and we need light to set it.

### Watch your screen time before bed.

Too much blue light from electronic devices such as computers, cell phones, tablets and computers can stimulate our brains to think that it's daytime and time to be alert and awake. Also, if you are watching, playing or reading content that is stimulating or upsetting, it can interfere with your ability to wind down and relax.

### Focus on relaxation.

To relax the mind and body before bed, consider taking a warm bath, listening to quiet music, practice meditation or mindfulness exercises such as calm breathing or progressive relaxation.

### Get on a sleep schedule.

Our bodies react better when on a regular sleep schedule throughout the week and weekend. Keeping a regular sleep schedule will help train your body to know when it's time for sleep and when it's time to be awake. Try these guidelines:

- **Get out of bed at the same time every day (7 days a week) no matter how poorly you sleep.** It's best not to vary your wake-up times by more than 30 minutes. If you think this might be a challenge, try setting your alarm to maintain the same wake-up time every day, avoid hitting the snooze button, or plan an enjoyable activity for the first thing to motivate you to get out of bed.
- **Plan a routine of activities that help remind your body that it's time to wind down and get ready to sleep.** Consider adding a warm shower or bath, having a hot caffeine-free tea, or listening to quiet music to your daily wind-down routine.
- **Stick to a consistent lights-out time for going to bed, even when you think you want to catch up on your sleep.** Going to bed "early" can reduce your prior wakefulness and upset your sleep system making it more difficult to sleep. The longer you go without sleep, the higher the likelihood you will be able to fall asleep.
- **Limit any naps to less than 45 minutes and no later than 3:00 PM.** Research shows that naps as short as 10 minutes can boost mood and alertness. Naps longer than 45 minutes often consist of deep sleep and can make it more difficult to sleep later than night.

### Focus on stimulus control.

Research shows that the more we associate our bed with being awake and stimulating activities, the greater the likelihood that it will be difficult to fall asleep. Stimulus control techniques are designed to strengthen your brain's association between the bed and sleep by making the bed a stronger cue for sleep.

Follow these steps to reinforce your bed as a cue for sleep:

- **Use your bedroom for sleep and sexual activity only.** Don't use your bedroom for studying, working, watching TV, or talking on the phone.

- **Limit your awake time in bed to less than one-half hour both before lights out at night and your final awakening in the morning.**
- **Make sure you feel drowsy when you turn the lights off to go to sleep**—rely on cues such as your eyes closing or head nodding to tell you when you should turn out the lights.
- **Use the “½ hour- ½ hour” rule.** If you don’t fall asleep within ½ hour (30 minutes), get out of bed, go to another room, read or watch TV for ½ hour (30 minutes) or until you feel drowsy, then attempt to go back to sleep.

### Reflect on the positives.

It might not seem relevant to your sleep, but a positive, hopeful outlook can boost resilience and reduce stress. Take time to reflect on the positives and things you are grateful for. Focus on what you can accomplish and control, and practice letting go of those issues or concerns that you can’t control. Reflect on times when you overcame adversity to stay in touch with your strengths and abilities.

### Get support if you need it.

If you are struggling to cope with the stress of the pandemic or would like support for your sleep problems, your Employee and Family Assistance Program is here to help. Professional counsellors are available by phone 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. Contact EFAP. We’re here to help.

**Sources:** Morin, Charles M. Ph.D., *Insomnia: Prevalence, Burden, and Consequences*. Canadian Sleep Society, *Insomnia Rounds*, Vol 1, Issue 1, 2012.

## EFAP Supports and Services for Individuals

The EFAP is a 24/7/365, **confidential and voluntary** employee well-being support service that helps employees and their families find the right options and solutions to resolve personal, family, or work-related challenges. Whether you want to improve communication in your relationships, improve mental well-being, stop smoking, or find a better way to manage personal finances, the EFAP can help you and your family take steps towards better health and well-being. Services include:

### Counselling Services

- Crisis 24/7 telephone access to counsellors
- Personal counselling--Effective short-term, professional counselling for individuals, couples, and families. Available to address a broad range of personal, family, work and life concerns. Available as in-person, telephone, e-counselling, or video sessions.
- iCBT –therapist guided internet-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

### Work-Life Services

- Career counselling
- Child/elder-care consultation
- Financial coaching and credit counselling
- Health coaching
- Legal referral and consultation
- Life coaching
- Nutritional counselling
- Resource kits for family stages, life's stages, and mental health
- Smoking cessation support

### Online Health and Wellness Resources

(myfseap.ca)

24/7 access to myfseap.ca online health and wellness information, resources, and tools for personal change and development, such as:

- Resource Library (articles, self-assessment tools, videos, ...)
- COVID-19 Support Resources
- Online programs and self-guided learning modules
  - *Stress Strategies*
  - *Stronger Minds* by Mind Beacon
  - *Evolution Health* (for depression, anxiety, smoking cessation, healthy weight, and more)
- EFAP Solutions newsletters
- Information of EFAP services and benefits