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Managing Stress: Self-Care during the Coronavirus Crisis

While I'll be continuing the series of posts on sensory issues and a range of other educational topics in the coming months, it felt silly to be talking about classroom strategies when we are facing the prospect of a nationwide closure of schools and the curtailing of other businesses and recreational activities. Children will be at home and may not return to school until the end of the summer holidays. We may even reach a point where most adults will be advised to stay indoors as much as possible.

This week, I'm going to talk about stress. This is not a definitive post on the topic, nor will it be the only one. But as the media coverage about the coronavirus crisis continues, it's clear that there is going to be a fundamental change to our daily lives in the coming weeks and months. This will happen quicker for some people than others. This will impact some people far more harshly than others. But the common factor will be the significant increase in stress as we begin to learn about what the future holds.

All I want to talk about in this post is some very simple things we can do in response to the escalating stress. It's the simple things we tend to forget when we are asked to manage unforeseen and rapidly changing circumstances. I write this as someone who has not coped well with stress in recent times. I appreciate how easy it is to succumb to pressure and fall back into unhealthy habits even with the best of intentions. But this is the time to really focus on our well-being and the well-being of others.

Prioritise

It can be very easy to become paralysed when there is an overwhelming level of stress in our lives. We may feel that there are so many things to do that we end up procrastinating or even avoiding most of them. So it's important to take time to prioritise the most important things so that you have realistic goals to work towards. This helps us to break up the stress into smaller chunks.

Try making a list and numbering the items in terms of what needs to be done first, second, third, etc. Consider the timing of the items so that you can clearly see which need to be done sooner rather than later. If you feel confident and able to do so, try tackling the worst or most boring item first so that you can get it out of the way before it begins to fester in your

consciousness. You can even divide up the items on the list into “Must”, “Should” and “Could”. Keep in mind that the priorities will change as situations evolve. We have to forgive ourselves if we don’t manage to achieve certain things when we had hoped to.

Focus

Stress amplifies the attention we pay to negative thoughts. This only leads to further negative thinking as we become convinced that worst case scenarios will come true, that our solutions won’t work and that we can’t cope as well as we would like to. Stressful thoughts will grab hold of our attention repeatedly throughout the day, affecting our mood, appetite, sleep and many other factors which play a key role in our well-being. So how do we shift our attention away from stress?

Take a moment to be aware of what is happening in the present. If you’re walking outdoors, listen to the sound of the leaves rustling in the trees. Notice how the wind is rushing through your clothes. Think about how your feet are hitting the ground as you take each step. If you’re eating a meal, try to focus on the smell and texture of the food as it enters your mouth. Look at how the content of the plate is changing as you get towards the end of the meal. Ground yourself in the present for a few seconds, so that you disrupt the stressful thoughts which are tempting you to feel guilty about the past or worry about the future.

Routine

When stress starts to take hold, we can fall out of the normal routines that helps us to maintain a positive well-being and fall into more negative habits. I love running because of the way it clears my mind, but it’s often the first thing to fall by the wayside when I enter a stressful period. We need structure and predictability to minimise the impact of stress. Right now, we should keep doing the things that are familiar and meaningful to us. They might include reading a book, gardening, writing or drawing and chatting with friends or colleagues on social media.

When the coronavirus crisis forces us to keep our distance from others, we may have to become even more creative with daily routines. This might involve planning a different kind of meal, starting a new book or trying different genres to make movie nights more varied. New decorating projects or clear-outs can give us something to work on day-by-day, so that we have goals to achieve and feel a sense of progress over time. Making even the most mundane aspects of life more predictable will help us to tackle stress one day at a time.

Connect

When stress starts to permeate our lives, it can affect our ability to maintain relationships with others. We may withdraw when we feel scared or lash out when we're struggling to manage anger. Having a support network gives us a sense of belonging and safety. Relationships also allow us to express and regulate our emotions, so that our brains are freed up for more logical and realistic thinking.

At the current time, we can meet up with family and friends to check how they're doing, get things off our chest and even delegate responsibilities to others when we have a lot on our own plates. As so-called social distancing becomes more pronounced, we may have to rely on text, email, video chats or an old-fashioned letter to stay connected. Don't under-estimate the power of getting in touch with someone to ask how they are, laugh about the latest gossip or debate the most recent twist in a TV show. We also need to protect ourselves against negative news coverage. By all means, check in with official and trustworthy sources to keep up-to-date on the latest advice. But also tap into less emotionally-charged social media – there are lots of people on YouTube and Instagram who post funny memes and videos or deep-dives into your favourite books, films or history topics.

Breathe

This sounds pretty obvious, but breathing is quickly affected when we experience a sense of panic. When we start to breathe at a faster and deeper rate, this upsets the natural balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our bodies. We can accidentally kickstart the fight/flight response which is usually reserved for more dangerous or sudden threats. When less blood is reaching the brain and other parts of the body, we can feel dizzy, numb, tired, sore and confused.

There are lots of different approaches to more regulated breathing and it's important to find what works for you. Some may prefer breathing in through the nose for four seconds and out through the mouth for seven or eight seconds. Some may like to use their hands to feel their stomach moving as they take deep breaths, while their chest stays in the same position. The Breath-Body-Mind approach by Richard Brown and Patricia Gerbarg is nicely illustrated in a series of YouTube videos, where a range of movements, rhythms and vocalisations are applied to the breaths. These can be watched here:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGoap1BK6Aj1uQjnKMFwZjs4rH04an71n>

The key message is that we are in control of our breathing and we can learn to use this control to turn down the volume on negative thoughts and feelings.

Exercise

Increased activity levels not only benefit our physical health, but they have enormous implications for our stress and mental health. They lower our blood pressure, boost our mood through the release of hormones and give us more energy. Exercise is a powerful weapon in the fight against symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Ideally, stress would be managed through brisk walks, cycling, going to the gym and other physical activities. But as the coronavirus crisis develops, we may face the reality of increased time indoors and much more limited social contact. Therefore, we will have to get more creative with being active. It might be time to dust off the exercise bike or rowing machine that you have stowed away. If you have a back garden or patio, you could try some arts and crafts or yoga outdoors. When your favourite TV show is interrupted by adverts, get up to stretch or perform some star jumps, lunges or wall push-ups. YouTube is filled with plenty of dance routines to perform in your living room. The NHS website has a number of equipment-free exercises that can be completed at home and these could form part of your daily routine. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/10-minute-workouts/>

Gratitude

In times of stress, it's easy to lose sight of the pleasures in life. The things that make us think and feel good and enable us to be generous and helpful to others. Similar to the act of focusing on the moment, being grateful can anchor us in the present and reduce our tendency to brood about the past or fret about the future. This is not an easy process. When we become accustomed to expecting the worst and zeroing in on the most negative aspects of our day, it takes time to break out of this habit.

We can start by simply being more proactive in thanking others for what they say and do for us. Communicating this gratitude on a more regular basis will strengthen our relationships with those who support us. It will also help them to feel valued and empower them to continue being kind to others. Sometimes it's not easy to tell others how we feel, so we can express our gratitude in a letter or an email. We can also try to establish the habit of reflecting on our day in a more positive way. Try thinking of just three good things in the past 24 hours. These could include activities which we found enjoyable, conversations that went well, chores which were completed, etc.

There are many other simple things we can do to protect our mental health in times of increased stress. With so much confusion and mixed-messages in our media, this can feel like the worst time to start thinking about these things. But by reflecting on how we can better look after ourselves, we will be helping ourselves to manage the challenges which lie ahead.