

World Mental Health Leader: 7 Steps for Reducing Stress

There is no question that many of us are experiencing increased stress in this season as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. It could be for any number of reasons—losing our jobs, having our children confined to the house for hours each day, being concerned about becoming ill. The problem is that those who are suffering often fail to take action to alleviate the stress. We're very aggressive in our worrying, but we're passive in managing our stress. We can do better. As anxieties multiply in the wake of the first wave of the pandemic and hot spots continue to arise, we *must* do better if we're going to be sane and purposeful.

Let's look at a number of practical steps you can take to reduce your stress level, whatever the cause.

Moving Forward

In times of intense stress, we need clearly defined, attainable goals and steps to help us move forward. I'll offer a number of suggestions, but I encourage you to start small, and as you see success, build from there.

1. Connect. In normal times, stress often causes people to withdraw from others. Having regular conversations is just too hard, so it's easier to avoid them. But God has made us social creatures—we need each other like we need air and water.

I've been very encouraged to hear reports of families and friends finding creative ways to connect during the pandemic online using video platforms and neighbors coming out of their houses to stand on opposite sides of the street to see how others are coping. This, I'm convinced, is the most important step for us.

Whatever you do, stay connected. Make the call, send the text, see the faces and hear the voices on video calls and talk to neighbors. You need it, they need it, we all need it.

2. Deepen the connections. I've talked to parents of young children who have used the time during lockdowns to read to their kids far more than they used to. Some have had time to play games, take walks and show their children the wonders of nature. Couples have found more time to talk about what's important and make heart connections that were impossible with their busy schedules.

I've also heard from people who said they've cooked more than ever before. They may still get takeout from time to time, but many are calling their mothers or grandmothers to talk about recipes or their fathers and grandfathers to ask how to smoke the world's best ribs.

At this point most of us don't see as many people as we did before the coronavirus, but we can have deeper, richer, more meaningful connections with the ones who are still in our orbit.

3. Find something to make you smile and laugh. Yes, things are serious. Yes, people are sick and dying, the economy has taken a hit and we're all trying to find ways to cope with the stress. It's easy to be overwhelmed with worry, so we need even more to find things that amuse us, stimulate our creativity and make us say, "Wow!"

We need to be students of the people around us. What do they enjoy? What makes them laugh until they can hardly catch their breath? What makes them so excited that they can't wait to tell you about it? If we can identify those things, we can create moments with them that thrill them—which in turn brings us joy. We need to laugh, we need to have a sense of wonder, we need thrills. And we need these especially when life is hard.

4. Establish healthy rhythms. When we're at home all the time because of lockdowns (complete or partial), we can lose the habits that made us successful and happy. We may sleep longer, eat more and lounge more than before, or we may sleep and eat too little and be distracted from the things that matter. When we're under stress, we need good, workable rhythms more than ever. Set your alarm for the morning, buy only healthy foods (with maybe a few indulgences to keep life interesting) and create a schedule that works for you and those in your home.

5. Make a financial plan. Before the pandemic, many of us were living paycheck to paycheck and spending every dime we earned. We ignored advice to have several months of money in a "rainy day fund," and now it's too late to start one. Debts are rising, income has diminished, and we feel the squeeze. This may be just the wake-up call we needed to force us to make better decisions about money. We may have assumed we didn't need a budget, but we certainly need one now. We may have spent money on anything that interested us, but no longer.

One of the biggest burdens of debt is not knowing how to get out of it. Many people give up and don't make the changes they could to get out of debt and have a firm financial footing. This is the time. Go online, read a book or talk to someone who has good answers, and create a plan that works for you and your family. Implementing the strategy may be difficult, but it won't be as stressful as not having a plan.

6. Let it go. When we're on edge, people get on our nerves. Words or actions that didn't matter to us before now get under our skin. We're more easily annoyed, offended and royally hacked off! And we're probably getting on others' nerves too! Times of increased stress are opportunities to practice the fine art of forgiving and apologizing—to let it go.

Forgiveness doesn't come naturally, but give it a try. When we're hurt, we want to lash back or run and hide. But as Christians we have a bottomless well of grace that God has

given us in Christ. Paul explained to the believers in Ephesus:

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 4:31, 5:1-2, NIV).

Forgiveness is the essence of the Christian faith, and it’s the foundation of strong relationships. I’d say that people who never have to forgive or be forgiven are either living alone on another planet or have very superficial relationships. It’s a skill and a habit all of us need to acquire—especially during hard times when emotions are raw and nerves are frayed.

7. Worship. I’m not talking about going to church. By the time you’re reading this, I hope our churches are open again, but new hot spots of the virus may limit large group gatherings for a while in certain communities. Whatever the circumstances, we need to fill our hearts with the wonder, majesty and kindness of God. That’s what I mean by worship. We certainly need to connect with Him in our private devotional times, but families can pray together and talk about passages of Scripture, and small groups can join on video platforms to study, pray and encourage one another.

Worship isn’t an ancillary activity. Anxiety may indicate many things, but it certainly means that our troubles threaten to overwhelm our sense of God’s greatness and grace. I’m not suggesting we engage in superficial worship—far from it. It’s important to feel deeply, think clearly and pray expectantly. That’s what makes worship a powerful activity that transforms us from the inside out.

When we've suffered from stress for a long time and don't see light at the end of the tunnel, it's easy to think it will always be like this. Actually that's true—unless we think clearly to identify the steps we need to take and find the courage to take the first one. Trust Him, climb out of the pit and take steps toward a healthier, happier, more purposeful life. {eoa}

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Dr. Tim Clinton also serves as the executive director of the James Dobson Family Institute and recurring cohost of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, heard on nearly 1,300 radio outlets daily. Licensed as a professional counselor and as a marriage and family therapist, Clinton is recognized as a world leader in mental health and relationship issues and has authored or edited nearly 30 books. Clinton and his wife, Julie, have two children.