

Personal Tool - Managing your responses to stress

In times of a pandemic, stress is an unfortunate side effect of COVID-19. Stress, in this time of 2020, often means that the flight or fight mechanism is firing because the amygdala is under threat. The reason that COVID-19 has created stress is often because the flight mechanism is redundant as we are (in some places) still in strict physical distancing restrictions, borders are closed, and no flights are running. There is nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. The outcome is more aggression, anger, and conflict (intrapersonal and interpersonal) in our relationships.

As this pandemic is dragging on much longer than anyone had anticipated and the worry around what will happen next creates a high level of stress. To try to moderate our responses to our colleague's heavy breathing on Zoom, partner's noisy blinking (how did that get so loud?), children's messy bedrooms, neighbour's TV or parent's constant questioning around "when will this end?", we are all looking for ways to cope. There are strategies that we can employ and use to feel less frustrated by activities of daily living and more able to slow down and notice the moment.

Cognitive Restructuring

- This is firstly reviewing and then shifting the way that you think. This is a particularly robust approach and the reason that it is listed first as it often the most difficult to achieve.
- For those who are easily angered, flustered, or triggered – remembering that when you are angry, your thinking can get exaggerated and somewhat dramatic. The elegant solution is to attempt to try and replace these thoughts with slower more considered ones. For example, reviewing how often you say to yourself, "oh, it's awful, it's terrible, everything's ruined" in a rather catastrophic approach. Perhaps the alternative is to have a tell yourself, in a non-catastrophic or black and white way - "it's distressing, and it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but it's not the end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it."
- Be careful of words like "should", "never" or "always" when talking about yourself or someone else.
- Remind yourself that getting angry/frustrated/yelling at another person is not going to fix anything and that it probably will not make you feel any better.

Prioritise the workload

- On hour one of day one of the week, spend the time to plan, prioritise and rank order the work that needs to be done.
- Spend some time on different systems, trying what works best for you. Systems like [Pomodoro](#) or [Eat the Frog](#) to reduce procrastination.
- Prioritise what parts of the workload can be moved down the list or started today and then review it later.
- Make a plan of attack with work but try to adopt the mindset that plans change.



Manage your response to workplace issues

- Look at what areas are giving you the most stress now and ask what can be done about them.
- Plan and check your progress daily around the most important work.
- Look at the way that you are asking for things at work – those that report more anger say things like "I demand". Review the way you talk to others (and yourself) and see if the healthier "I would like" can be used.

Create clear work/personal life boundaries

- Bookend each part of the day with activities that mark the beginning and the end of the day.
 - For example, in the morning, go for a walk and get a coffee at your favourite café, before anyone needs you. Grab a friend or a dog to make it more enjoyable.
 - In the evening, do a class (anything really) that is booked in and paid for. This means you are more likely to finish work on time.
- Develop and maintain your interests outside of work, even if you feel that there is no energy left.
- Take your lunch break every day. No exceptions.

Plan out the rest of the year (and beyond!)

- Book in time to spend with family and friends, even if you are in stricter physical distancing requirements now. Check the terms and conditions to ensure you do not lose money but having something to look forward to can be helpful.
- Speak to payroll and ask about how much leave you have left.
- Buy a 2020 calendar, and even if all the plans on it change – display it in a part of the house, you will see regularly. This will remind you that this year will end.

Relaxation

- Learning some simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, can help reduce conflict.
- If you have a work colleague/partner/best mate that is hot-headed, learn some strong de-escalation techniques to keep relationships intact.
- Learning to relax is a powerful tool against anger and conflict as it takes its power away. Anger, for some people, is a tool that is used to avoid feeling sadness and disappointment. If you know someone (or are someone) who is often in conflict take some time to see what your triggers are and how you might potentially trigger someone else. At AccessEAP, our counsellors can assist you with that.



Problem Solving

- Learn to problem solve and understand your own decision-making model. This will reduce any further negative impacts of interpersonal conflict- as the more you know yourself, the less another person will get under your skin.
- Treat each problem and greet it as you would an old friend – with curiosity and respect. A learning approach (which is to say, "what can I learn from this?) is easier to stomach and move on from than "COVID-19 has stuffed everything up".
- An all or nothing thinking style can often lead to more anxiety and depression, so embracing a "let's get something done" approach can lead to more success.

Better communication

- All of us can improve our communication. If you are someone who jumps to conclusions quickly, remember they can be inaccurate. The "less said easily mended" approach can be helpful when in conflict.
- Listen, listen, and then listen some more. If you are unsure the line of "tell me more" is a great way to increase clarity when communication has broken down.

Humour

- One of the most powerful tools to defuse a situation is humour. This can be both an internal and external process. Just be mindful of what is appropriate.
- Find a way to listen to comedy or seek out situations (friends and family) that make you laugh.
- Refuse to take yourself too seriously. This will help the next time you stuff up/fall over or drop your coffee all over your clean top.
- Do not just "laugh off" your problems but use humour to logically think and talk through the big issues.

Remember, as your EAP, we are here to support you whatever the nature of your concerns. For a confidential conversation with one of our experienced clinical professionals, please contact **AccessEAP** on **1800 818 728**.

