

Finding and maintaining your sense of personal control

This tool was created by one of our senior clinical team members, Kate McPhee, Psychologist & Clinical Associate Coordinator at AccessEAP.

When COVID-19 started to move from a virus to a pandemic, many of us watched our phones and televisions in awe at the changes it made to our daily lives. In response, we started to panic buy toilet paper, stopped shaking hands and saw our jobs impacted. This may have affected people in different ways. Some of us may have had our hours reduced or lost our jobs. Some of us may have been required to work from home and shift to working and collaborating virtually. Some of us may have been required to continue to travel to our workspaces while everyone else was at home.

Our ability to make these and many other changes is astonishing. COVID-19 has forced change on things that many of us thought would never change. The biggest example of this is work from home, and instead of creating greater relaxation and increased work-life balance, these changes increased personal insecurity and doubts about the future. It may have impacted how we feel or decreased our sense of personal control. This loss has been felt globally. On a personal level, it has impacted our ability to manage our mental and physical health as well as our financial and personal freedom. When a stressful situation like a pandemic occurs, we start to see that there are a few things we can control. One of these things is ourselves; how we think and feel, how we look after ourselves and how we can connect and communicate with others such as co-workers, friends and loved ones.

When we think about our levels of personal control changing at the hands of something or someone else, we often focus on the many things that we have lost. To keep going during the stress, focusing on what we have lost is not particularly helpful, and what seems to be most beneficial is focusing on what we can find. As humans, our brains were designed to have a negativity bias to help protect us from harm. What this means is that we tend to focus on the negatives in situations. While this can be very beneficial in helping us make a decision that is risky and prevent us from harm, it is easy to fall into a habit of constantly looking at the negatives. COVID-19 is something that can too easily dominate our thinking all of the time, which can further increase our feelings of not being in control of our lives.

The good news is that there are a few simple tips and tools that we can use to help us feel more in control of our lives. Making decisions and feeling in control is an important part of being resilient and getting through tough times, such as those we are experiencing. Remember, we're in this together, and we will get through this. Changing your outlook from what you have lost to look for those things that can help us feel in control of our lives:

- **Media selection** – mainstream news coverage and social media posts in the past week has focused on cluster outbreaks, and there has been talk of the impact of the 'second wave'. You can find the facts from reliable sources. Take a break from social media by putting your phone down or not checking it as frequently.



- **Physical health** - you are in control of your body and mind. Take some time to invest in your fitness by engaging in physical activity. Physical activity releases endorphins into our bodies which help improve our mood.
- **Find support** - make sure to connect with friends, family or loved ones. Talking can help you put things in perspective and identify actions that will help resolve how you are feeling. You can also reach out for professional support from your EAP. It's completely confidential and talking with a clinical expert can help you. Remember, we're here to support you.
- **Different perspectives** - focus on your values and strengths. Ask yourself about a previous time in your life where you were feeling less in control. How did you change things? Use your past experiences and your strengths to focus on what to do next.
- **Balance emotions** - make sure that you continue to do the things that give you joy. This might be eating good food, physical activity, listening to music or a personal hobby. It's ok to take time to still enjoy these things. Try to build a regular schedule of things you enjoy.

These strategies might not feel big enough given what's happening around the world with the pandemic, but doing them can make us feel like we have some control. Each decision and action will increasingly build your feeling of being in control and strengthen your resilience.

Settling into the change and taking small steps to take a more active role in your life can feel like we have increased our personal control. This may be another thing that we find during COVID-19, a sense that we can adapt and grow despite the obstacles. If we could do this, then who knows what we can conquer next.

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**.

