

Wellness Tip

Cultivating Equanimity when the World is Hurting

Exposure to injustice and bad news often leads to feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and anger. If left unchecked we develop a sense of overwhelm - unable to focus on what matters to us, intrusive and ruminative thoughts about all that is going wrong, and intense feelings such as guilt, anxiety, shame, and anger.

What can you do to feel a sense of composure when confronted by yet another headline featuring local, regional, national, or international distress?

1. Be mindful about what you feel

You are a human being. You will feel something in response to what has happened/is happening. The goal isn't to get rid of unpleasant emotions, as that would simply be denying your experience. Rather, notice and make space for what you feel. Name them (there may be many) and provide validation of your experience. Say something to yourself like *"It's okay to be [whatever emotion(s) you're feeling]. It makes sense that I would feel this way."*

Notice if emotions such as guilt and shame arise, especially if the bad news is related to communities far away. We can feel badly when other people are suffering, and we aren't due to our physical location or privilege. Rather than spiraling in self-focused emotions like guilt and shame, acknowledge the feeling(s) and instead see if you can remain present with what is and bear witness to what others are going through.

Spend 5-10 minutes sitting quietly with yourself, away from digital distractors like your smartphone, TV, or computer. Resist the urge to use technology as a quick escape from unpleasant feelings. Observe what's happening within you – your sensations, emotions, and thoughts – with mindful curiosity.

Take slow deep breaths, spending more time on the exhale. For example, breathe in for four seconds, pause, then exhale for eight. Repeat. This practice can help calm your nervous system.

2. Consider different media habits

With our 24/7 news cycle and easy access to world events via radio, TV, print, social media, etc. it can feel as though you should be tuned in consistently in order to stay informed. Recognize, though, that this 24/7 all-you-can-consume buffet of news is detrimental to your well-being if you simply absorb the information without considering what you are going to do with it.

When reading headlines, listening to new stories, watching videos, or deep diving into articles ask yourself:

- *Does this help me take productive action?*
- *Does it provide a healthier perspective?*
- *Does it improve my mood?*

If the answer to all three is "no," consider setting boundaries around news consumption.

Boundaries may include time limits (e.g., 20 minutes per day but not 2 hours), modality limits (e.g., radio material but not video material), or source limits (e.g., following one or two trusted news sites but not five). Experiment with consumption limits and make adjustments as needed.

3. Focus on what you can control

Feeling out of control leads to a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, despair, and overwhelm. Remember, though, that you do have a sphere of influence in your tiny corner of the world. Focus on things within your control:

- *Your voice* (consider how you want to bring attention to causes you care about)
- *Your money* (consider whether you want to engage in wallet activism via donations to causes you care about or ensuring your spending, saving, and investing is aligned with your values)
- *Your time* (consider whether you have time available to involve yourself with efforts that matter to you)
- *Your attention* (consider challenging the negativity bias by balancing the news you intake by proactively seek stories that inspire and give you hope or practice Loving Kindness meditation)

4. Prioritize self-care

Caring for your well-being is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Unfortunately, it is when the world feels chaotic that we tend to give up on activities that promote and protect our wellness.

It is okay to set boundaries and take breaks. It is okay to take time to move your body, sleep, cook/eat a nutritious meal, and connect with others. You are encouraged to consider one or two attainable goals that prioritize your well-being and use friends, family, or digital reminders to hold you accountable.

If you would like to talk with someone about your well-being, or for any other questions or concerns, feel free to contact the Medical Student Counseling Center to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment: osac-mscc@uiowa.edu | 319-335-8056 | 1240 MERF

Check out the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Remember, life is really hard at times - be gentle with yourself!

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Pronouns: she/her