

## WELLNESS TIPS

### COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Covid-19 has created considerable uncertainty in our lives. You might find yourselves worrying and becoming more anxious, with thoughts of – *When will ...? What if ...?, How will ...? Should I...?* -- related to every day decisions such as running errands to how your learning will be impacted by changes in offering classes, clerkships, and research; timing for taking Step exams; ability to present yourself well in residency interviews; to worries about finances and family members' health. It may be difficult to redirect your thinking from these concerns.

While uncertainty is a part of life and each of us has a different tolerance for uncertainty, we all desire to have a sense of control over our lives. When one's sense of control is challenged, anxiety, low mood, helplessness, feeling overwhelmed, irritability and feelings of anger may occur.

Some patterns for coping with uncertainty aren't helpful or productive in the long run. Excessive worrying takes energy and interferes with your ability to focus, decreasing effectiveness in dealing with current tasks and demands. Procrastination and avoidance, frequent requests for reassurance, trying to do everything yourself without assistance, and micromanaging others' behaviors often result in increasing your stress.

Although we can't change the uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic, there are steps you can take to moderate the stress you are experiencing.

#### FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

Create a schedule -- (Yes, you have heard it from the MSCC counselors before) include study, breaks, meals, exercise, and leisure. These self-care activities deserve more than "when I can fit it in" or "... have time." Figure out what works currently and adjust as needed.

Make choices that work for you -- These may be different than others' choices

Tend to self-care -- Eating, sleeping, exercising, leisure

Focus on daily tasks -- assignments, academic preparation, getting groceries. Even small tasks and projects can support increased feelings of control and feelings of accomplishment.

Think about what was helpful for you in past situations that were uncertain

Challenge All-or-Nothing thinking -- which limits identifying potential options for action.

Seek out information from sources that you consider reliable -- Having the most accurate and current information will help you make better decisions about plans for coping with the uncertainty. You may not receive a definitive answer, for instance how clerkships will play out next semester, but you will receive some information. At other times you may learn that what you believe isn't accurate.

## **FOCUS ON THE PRESENT**

Mindfulness techniques -- even for short breaks during the day can be helpful.

Begin by focusing on your breathing. Notice how your body is feeling. If your mind wanders, return it to the here and now.

Begin to recognize and try to limit negative thinking that increase anxiety and stress.

Notice if you are having "what if ..." thoughts about what might happen in the future.

These thoughts are counterproductive and take mental energy, focusing on assumptions that may not be accurate or even likely to occur.

Ask yourself:

"How would (someone you trust) respond to this thought?"

"How is this thought helping me?"

Identify what you are grateful for -- Consider adding to a list so you can refer to it regularly.

Practicing your religious or spiritual beliefs may be helpful

## **ACKNOWLEDGE AND RECOGNIZE YOUR EMOTIONS**

It is normal to experience anxiety, low mood, anger, feelings of loss.

Not acknowledging your emotions can result in increasing your stress.

Don't judge your emotions. Use them as information about what you are experiencing.

Remind yourself that your emotions don't have to drive your behaviors --

Avoid acting impulsively on your emotions. For example, blaming others when angry may not change circumstances. Choose ways to express anger with the potential to be constructive and beneficial.

Taking a break, exercising, or using relaxation techniques, talking with someone can moderate intensity of emotions and allow you to more effectively develop a plan of action.

## **MANAGE YOUR ANXIETY**

Engage in physical activity -- Anything from an exercise routine to completing household chores. Physical movement can work off physical energy associated with anxiety and provide distraction.

Limit checking the news --\_if it contributes to anxiety or feelings of helplessness.

Limit what you talk about or how long you talk with others if it increases your anxiety--

Learn relaxation, meditation, mindfulness techniques --Find apps or YouTube videos that you like.

Seek support from friends or family -- Or talk with an MSCC counselor, your PCP, or a mental health provider for assistance in managing your anxiety.

Months of uncertainty surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic continue to be disruptive and stressful and these are difficult times, adding to other uncertainties in our lives. The strategies of focusing on what you can control, the here and now, acknowledging your emotions, and managing your anxiety can support coping effectively as we move through this time.

American Psychological Association. "The Great Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing with Stress of Uncertainty".

<https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-uncertainty>

HelpGuide. "Dealing with Uncertainty During the Coronavirus Pandemic". Lawrence Robinson and Melinda Smith. April 2020.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/dealing-with-uncertainty.htm>

University of Michigan Counseling and Psychological Services. "Coping with Uncertainty."

<https://caps.umich.edu/article/coping-uncertainty>

" Progressive Muscle Relaxation (female voice)" Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospital. March 2014 (There is also a version with a male voice.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSgpUUjReSQ>

"Mindful Breathing Meditation (5 Minutes)." September 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmFUDkj1Aq0>

See the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips. <https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Stay well and stay healthy!

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