



Hunkering Down: 4 Brain-Wise Ways to Cope During COVID-19

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” ‘Unprecedented’ = never done or known before” Oxford English Dictionary

We are, without a doubt, living in an unprecedented time of anxiety, uncertainty, fear, and unease. The word “unprecedented” is trumpeted in numerous news reports and social media outlets, describing the nature of the unfolding COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Most people on the planet today have not lived through a major health crisis of this magnitude, even those in the Boomer or The Greatest (WW2) Generation who might have experienced the polio crisis of the early 20th century. So with that, we are all in this together, figuring out what it means to shelter-in-place, quarantine, home-school, work-from-home, study remotely, socially distance, scour home/work surfaces with cleaning supplies, flatten-the-curve, protect our seniors and vulnerable populations, and wrap our heads around toilet paper shortages (and other grocery supplies).

Some of us are already dealing with exposure to COVID-19, may have a loved one impacted, or are attempting to seek medical treatment as the spread of coronavirus continues. Others are single-parents striving to balance working-from-home with children padding around in the background. Those with abuse histories may be impacted particularly as they must face sheltering-in-place with toxic family members or partners they would otherwise not be in contact with. Some of our humanity are now laid off from work or are perhaps homeless. It’s not a stress-free chapter right now. In short, not only is the coronavirus a health crisis, it’s also a psychological crisis that has the potential to send people into fight-or-flight mode.

In helping people to understand how the brain is constructed and responds to situations of stress and trauma, I wrote a four part series for Psych Central entitled 5 Nuts and Bolts of the Traumatized Brain Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4. Please click on each numbered part for specifics regarding neuroscience and how to heal the traumatized brain (along with the person who belongs to that precious cranium). I am proud to say that these articles have been re-posted by The EMDR Institute, as well as other respected organizations in the field of trauma recovery. I am going to provide for you 4 additional tips to help you lower your stress and trauma reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. As I mentioned in my articles regarding the traumatized brain, we need to tap into interventions that address “bottom-up” strategies (Malchiodi, 2020). When our brains are perceiving trauma, we go into fight, flight, freeze or fawn modes. These survival strategies that originate in the reptilian brain are designed for just that: survival. However, being locked into a trauma mode shuts down our higher

order processing (attention, focus, concentration, ability to speak). Our bodies literally “hold” the trauma in the form of hypervigilance, increased heart rate, body and muscle tension, stomachaches, and headaches. So to unlock that embodied sense of held trauma, we must release it in a somatic way. Researchers such as Bessel van der Kolk who wrote the seminal work, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body, and the Healing of Trauma* (2017), suggest the following for physiological release of “held” trauma: **yoga, mindfulness based meditation, abdominal breathing, tai chi, EMDR (a therapeutic modality that utilizes bilateral movements), somatic experiencing (therapeutic modality), and bilateral movements outside in nature (like hiking or walking).**

2. Renowned art therapist and researcher Cathy Malchiodi (2020) writes and lectures extensively on the use of expressive arts, including visual arts (drawing, painting, sculpting, collage, making music, dance) to address releasing emotion when our amygdala is activate like a fire alarm with a dying battery. To calm our heightened sensitivities and chill out the brain’s siren, we can: **draw, paint, sculpt, dance, listen to music, sing, play an instrument, write poetry, and act. There are numerous expressive arts strategies I like to use with my clients, both younger and older: craft a memory box, design stress balls, make a worry doll, design a mandala, create a dream-catcher to hold nightmares, sculpt an image that is comforting and soothing, make a body map (with a trained expressive arts therapist).** Expressive arts allow us to express and release what is sometimes not accessible verbally when that part of our brain is offline due to trauma/stress/anxiety.

3. Once we have been able to get centered, self soothe, and de-stress on a physical and emotional level, our bodies literally begin to enter a relaxation response (Benson, 1976). Our speech center (Brocha’s area) light’s up again and we can access language. Focus, concentration, memory, and speech become possible once our prefrontal cortex is activated. It is then that therapeutic modalities like cognitive restructuring can be beneficial as well as narrating one’s story (Name It to Tame It) to lower cognitive dissonance. Over the course of my career, I have routinely referred to *The Feeling Good Book: The New Mood Therapy* by David Burns as a classic book in identifying automatic negative thoughts and strategically re-writing the inner narrative to that of more reality-based and positive internal dialogue. We can: **journal, do cognitive behavioral therapy with a trained therapist, read books about cognitive restructuring, draw a timeline and label the road-map with the story of our journey, talk with trusted others for validation and support.**

4. **Supreme Self-Care:** This concept means the following: 1) Get at least 5 consecutive hours of sleep / sleep cycle to restore serotonin in your brain (the neurotransmitter that regulates mood needs to be “topped off” like a gas tank); 2) good nutrition; 3) exercise (preferably outdoors and in nature); 4) solid, nurturing social supports; 5) see a therapist if you are having a mental health crisis (many are now offering services via webcam/telephonic); 6) stay connected electronically with loved ones while needing to physically socially distance; 7) stay off of news outlets that trigger more

anxiety/trauma, and only check reliable sources for information (like CDC, WHO); 8) connect with your spirituality; 9) This To Shall Pass; 10) We will get through this together, as fellow human beings on the planet.

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