



## Mind Over Matter

### How to Take Charge of Your Mental Health and Stay Strong During the COVID-19 Pandemic

It's well-documented that long-term stress can negatively impact overall health. So it's no surprise that today's unprecedented circumstances, and the emotional strain they bring, are doing just that.

#### What is stress?

Stress is a mental, physical or emotional reaction to external or internal change, activating what is known as the “fight or flight” survival mode, designed to boost our focus and help us escape predators.

#### Why does a natural response get such a bad rap?

In small doses, stress can benefit our health, challenging us to grow in positive ways—think a promotion at work or a high-intensity interval workout. However, when this reaction continues over time without relief, it is known as “distress,” and may be detrimental.

#### What is the impact of prolonged stress?

Chronic stress, which involves consistently heightened levels of the hormone cortisol, can have a detrimental impact on our physical and emotional health, negatively influencing functions related to digestion, blood pressure, sleep, sexual health and more. Research shows that our immune systems also suffer, resulting

“We have all experienced the stress of this historic event in some capacity. You are not alone and you are not powerless.”

- Paris Kharbat, DO

in our bodies’ increased vulnerability to infection, slower wound healing and even reduced efficacy of recommended vaccinations meant to keep us healthy, like the flu shot.

#### How is pandemic stress different?

Research shows that traumatic events are typically followed by increases in new and existing cases of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse and mental and behavioral disorders.<sup>1</sup>

From the economy’s impact on job security to the social costs of physical distancing, the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, presents its own entirely unique set of stressors. This unprecedented period of isolation has also robbed us of the meaningful opportunity to come together with loved ones and our communities in order to heal.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207195/>

## The Path Forward

"We have the power to shape our lives and rise above the stressors facing us right now," says Dr. Kharbat. "Though we may feel stagnant and powerless, it's important to remember that there are strategies we can take to boost our mental and physical health during this time."

### ✓ Acknowledge that it's OK to mourn.

Whether you're grieving a cancelled event like your teen's graduation or just miss your friends, know these feelings are valid. Research shows that emotional suppression is linked to poorer immune health, so let it out through activities like journaling or mindfulness practice.

### ✓ Have a regular sleep schedule.

Sleep is great for the immune system and helps control inflammation; it also has a positive influence on mental health. Adults should aim for 7–9 hours per night.

### ✓ Minimize or avoid alcohol.

Excess alcohol intake lowers our immunity and is linked to a greater likelihood of respiratory diseases. Since it impacts mood regulation and impairs sleep, it also exacerbates existing mental health issues.

### ✓ Embrace the power to help others.

The feel-good chemical, oxytocin, released when performing acts of kindness, can positively impact mental, cognitive and immune health. Do a good deed—it makes a difference.

### ✓ Practice mindfulness meditation.

Meditation can boost immunity, as well as improve symptoms of anxiety and depression. Remember the Thai soccer team trapped in a cave in 2018? The meditation practice led by their coach has been cited as key to the survival of the 12 players, keeping them calm before rescue.

### ✓ Make exercise a habit.

Even 15 minutes of movement per day can help significantly reduce the risk of depression; some studies have found exercise to be as effective as medication. Regular moderate exercise is also associated with an improvement in immunity and lower risk of illness.



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## We're Here for You

If you're experiencing any medical concerns or simply feel the need to connect with a primary care physician, 98point6's virtual care clinic is available 24/7.

**A SOURCE YOU CAN TRUST:** This resource was put together using expert guidance from 98point6's board-certified physicians.

## Take a Mindfulness Moment

We've collected some meditation exercises, recommended by our physicians and guided by 98point6's Mary Margaret Thomas, MSN, RN. Have a listen and try them out at

[98point6.com/mindful-meditations](https://98point6.com/mindful-meditations)