

RETHINKING

CRISIS

**Strategies to move from
Crisis to Empowerment**

Introduction

Crisis is a part of everyone's life, but it impacts each of us in different ways at different times. Some of us have experienced MANY crises while others may only identify one or two situations that they would describe as a crisis.

If you are currently experiencing a crisis or are just emerging from one, this manual is written especially for you. It's written by people that have lived through, and even grown, as a result of emotional distress, trauma and other crisis situations. We are hopeful that this guide provides needed space for self-reflection and awareness, exposure to information and tips, and ideas of wellness tools and activities to build your own resilience for physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual well-being.



We are survivors, and the survivor in us honors the survivor in you. Be well on your journey!

A Special Note:

During the writing of this manual, an unexpected international crisis emerged; COVID-19. While not the focus, the authors did include a section at the end of this manual on COVID-19 with the intention of it helping to clarify and offer you with basic information. Please feel free to share this section alone, or this manual in its entirety.

What is a Crisis?

While this is a simple question, it does not have a simple answer. Why? The answer depends on the person.

A crisis may be an outside circumstance – for example, the COVID-19 crisis. This

certainly is affecting many of us. Typical boundaries that divide people are easily crossed by the virus - country, age, wealth, race, religion, gender, etc. There are also many other personal “crisis” events, such as loss of a job, death of a loved one, etc.

Crisis: “A time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger.”
Dictionary.com

But the true essence of “crisis,” and what this manual really addresses, is the internal feelings of distress that arise within us as a response to life moments. In this way, “crisis” is a uniquely personal experience, created more by a constellation of factors than any particular event. Each of us has a history that

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has shaped who we are today and how we respond to circumstances around us. Hence, it is a unique experience. Two people in identical circumstances will have very different responses.

For one it may feel like their feet have been knocked out from under them, while another in

the same circumstance will barely feel a ground shake beneath their feet. Here’s an example – I remember once watching a TV biography show. The narrator said...“And then tragedy struck !!!” Well, my ears perked up. As the story was

told about a man who lost his 75 year-old mother, I became a bit self-righteous. “Are you kidding?,” I thought to myself. “I had more deaths in my family before I was 10 years old!!” But then, as I listened, I realized that, for this man, it was a tragedy. He had not had the experiences to build the muscles he needed to weather this kind of emotional storm, and it actually sidelined him from his life and his career for almost a decade. My response would have been different – not better, just different – because we’re all different.

Internal Signs of Distress

Some of us had childhoods that were abusive, neglectful, unpredictable, and scary. All of these experiences shape the way we view life, others, and situations that arise. Some of us may believe that these experiences have made us stronger – “strong in the broken places” as some say. On the other hand, these experiences might leave us feeling generally anxious all the time, waiting for bad things to happen and being very sensitive and aware of potentially distressful situations. Either way, we are forever changed and shaped by those around us, how they treated us, what we witnessed and how we survived.

We each experience stress in our own unique ways. As we grow up, we learn how to respond to challenges by watching those around us for cues of what is and isn’t acceptable. In addition, our bodies have natural defense mechanisms that signal when things are out of sync, alerting our body and mind so we can react to keep ourselves safe. Think about what happens when you startle a dog or cat. Their first reaction is to get into a defensive posture and hiss or bark. In an instant, they’re ready to protect themselves. Humans are much the same way.

We get flooded with chemicals, like adrenaline, that assist our minds and bodies to combat the danger.

Our Internal Alarm – Let’s Fight or Flight: Those of us who have grown up in homes with violence, abuse or neglect may have activated this “danger” alert many times. Over time, parts of our system can get worn out and broken. For



some of us, the “alarm bell” goes off often, even when there’s no danger there. Similarly, our alarm bell may signal a five-alarm fire, when the situation is barely a one-alarm fire. In these cases, our bodies are flooded with overwhelming amounts of “fight or flight”

chemicals. We’re ready for a battle that doesn’t exist. We may try to run if we can, but if cornered, we’re also ready to fight.

Our Response to Danger: While some of us respond to our internal alarm by going into a “fight/flight” stance, others of us may respond in a different way, by “freezing” or “checking out.” This is known as “dissociating” and, like fight/flight, is an automatic biological response. In the same way a deer freezes in the middle of the road in fear when a car approaches, we too may go into a freeze mode. This can lead to brain fog, an inability to speak or speak clearly, feeling stuck in place and unable to move, or spacing out. The spacing out, or dissociating, can be mild or more extreme, including total memory loss of the time like a blackout.

So, for those of us with trauma histories, we may find that our responses to stressful life events may fall along this continuum of fight, flight or freeze.

Here’s another way to look at it, graphically:

FLIPPING OUR LID

Make a fist with your thumb tucked inside your fingers. This is a hand model of our brains.



THUMB

In this hand model, our fingers represent where our emotions and memories live.

It is called the Limbic System and it is where our Fight, Flight, Freeze reactions to danger are triggered.

FINGERS

In this hand model, our fingers represent our Rational Brain. When our rational brain is activated, we are able to think, reason and make decisions about how we are going to respond to danger. As in the image above, it covers and controls our Limbic System (thumb) and we use it to think through situations.

However, at times when our Limbic System (thumb) is really activated, it can cause us to “flip our lid,” and our rational brain (fingers) can be taken over by our emotions and we can’t think clearly.

To un-flip our lids, we can use the strategies included in this manual to help us ground, calm our bodies and mind, and feel more empowered.

For some of us, especially those of us who have experienced trauma, our emotions can over-ride our logical mind. When this happens, it’s hard to remember that feelings aren’t facts. Our feelings can color how we view and

respond to situations. This is especially true when the situation triggers a sensitive area, sometimes leading us to react out of feelings rather than respond in a thoughtful way. Stepping back and evaluating the situation from our thinking mind can help us respond in a way that will serve us instead of creating more chaos or crisis.



Is this a Crisis or Emergency?

An **emergency** is an urgent situation that puts you or others in immediate harm.

A **crisis** is something that causes distress, but with support, resources and skills, can be resolved without having to access 911 or medical intervention.

What is the difference between a crisis and an emergency? The answer lies in the urgency of the situation. A person who experiences a mental health or substance use **crisis** may express intensity of our mood or thinking, an increase in irritability and/or a loss of connection with people that causes us

distress. This is sometimes described in the mental health system as an increase in “symptoms,” or “Budding” (Building up to a Drink or Drug) or “white knuckling” when the focus is on substance use. More common than both of these is the presence of a co-occurring or dual involvement of mental health and substance use challenges, where substances are used to either mask emotional distress or actually increase difficult emotions. Substance use can also lessen our inhibitions, increasing the likelihood of acting on thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

No matter our specific challenges, when we experience a crisis, a combination of support, a good plan, and hard work can be beneficial to work through these periods without having to access in-patient services, detox or return to use. In this way, we can prevent a crisis from becoming an emergency.

An **emergency**, on the other hand, is when we experience an immediate danger that requires a call to 911 or hospital/detox-based treatment. This requirement is more prevalent in the mental health community due to laws mandating hospitalization for anyone in “imminent danger” of harming themselves or others. It’s also likely that, if someone has been primarily receiving services for substance use, but expresses suicidal or self-harming thoughts, a referral would be immediately made to mental health services.

Outward Signs of Distress

Often, when we experience distress, it shows up in our behavior. It’s important to notice our own behavior as a signal that we may be experiencing physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual distress. Some “behavioral cues” include:

- Repeating old habits or patterns. Do you find that you are tempted to start smoking cigarettes, even though you quit years ago? Picking up old habits as a way to cope is very common and could be a signal to us that we are distressed.
- Lashing out, yelling, throwing things. When our internal distress levels reach a boiling point, we may be tempted to release energy out of frustration. This may be a warning sign that it’s time to relieve our stress in healthier ways.

- Pacing, leg shaking, wringing our hands. Sometimes when our nervous system needs to release tension, it does so through our body. Be aware of these stress signals.

As you read these examples, think about what you've been thinking or feeling over the past few days or weeks.



Rethinking Crisis

Since crisis is more about what goes on inside than outside, we have much more power over it. We can't eliminate crises – they're just a part of life. Challenges we're confronted with will often feel distressing. **But**, we can become stronger in the broken places, more aware of our own super-heroes within, and learn new strategies that lessen the impact of those difficult moments. We can take those moments that have historically felt like an **emergency**, and bring it back a few notches so it becomes more of a workable crisis moment that we can get through without having our lives disrupted and dismantled.

The next sections of this manual can help you do that. In the following pages, you'll find:

- **Tools to help in the moment** – when we feel our insides starting to churn up with anxiety, fear, anger, despair. These tools help us take a pause and get re-centered before taking any actions.

- **Self – Reflection Tips and Tools** that can remind you about you, beyond the “patient” or “client.” Who are you and what great things do you bring to the table already.
- **Planning Tips and Tools** that help us think through what the difficult moments are like when we’re not in the midst of all the emotions so we can plan ahead. When we already have a plan of how to slow down the crisis, we don’t have to come up with it in the moment. There are many self-help strategies circulating to help people deal with the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual impacts of living through a crisis including an epidemic. These are mostly targeted to people with easy access to support networks, can make choices about where they go and when, and have the resources to get books, movies and other distractions to help ride through this time of uncertainty. Many people don’t have these luxuries right now, and this section is for people who find themselves facing limits. These strategies will also be divided into the categories of:
 - ⇒ Strategies to help with physical distress
 - ⇒ Strategies to help with emotional distress
 - ⇒ Strategies to help with intellectual distress
 - ⇒ Strategies to help with spiritual distress

Physical Distress



Imagine you're walking down the street. When you turn the corner, you see a lion staring at you. Right away, your body starts pumping out chemicals that will allow you to do what's needed to survive. And that's really good when there's a lion. But not so good when we're worried about things going on

around us, . Our brains have the same reaction to any kind of "danger," though, and all those chemicals can cause all sorts of physical discomforts, including:

- sweaty palms
- heart fluttering (palpitations)
- shortness of breath
- dizziness or headaches
- tingling in fingers or toes
- aches and pains (old injuries will often ache again !!)
- muscle tension
- restlessness
- digestive issues like diarrhea or constipation
- nausea



Think about your body. Describe the physical sensations have you been experiencing over the past few weeks:



One strategy: Breathing

Why this may help: Normally, we breathe very shallowly, up in our chests. Learning to breathe down into our stomachs naturally helps calm us down. It also brings more oxygen into our body and brain, which helps us think more clearly. Belly breathing before a stressful situation can be very helpful. Here is what you do:

- ⇒ First, breathe as you normally do
- ⇒ What parts of your body move as you breathe? Notice what it feels like
- ⇒ Now, sit and place your hand on your stomach
- ⇒ With your mouth closed, breathe in for four seconds or until you feel your whole chest fill with air all the way down to your belly
- ⇒ Hold in the air for four seconds
- ⇒ Slowly blow all the air out until it's all gone
- ⇒ Try this three or four times



Did you notice anything different about how you feel?

Intellectual Distress

When our inner sensors tell us that something isn't right and we may be in danger, our brains work differently, too. We can think of our brains as being three brains in one. Part of our brain is just dedicated to our survival – it runs our heart, our breathing, etc. A second part of our brain is called our “emotional brain.” This part of the brain rules our emotions and holds our memories. Sometimes our emotions will have words connected to them and sometimes they're just feelings with no words. Our third brain is where we do the complex thinking needed for decision making, using judgment, navigating social relationships, etc. It's this third brain that we rely on most to guide us through the complex nature of living with others in the world. But in times of stress, our third brain steps aside a bit to allow the survival brains to be more in charge. This can lead to thinking problems, including:

- difficulty concentrating
- difficulty with decision making
- retaining information
- hard time processing information
- less patience with others
- More difficulty managing relationships that are complicated



Think about your OWN THINKING lately. What kinds of thoughts have felt challenging?

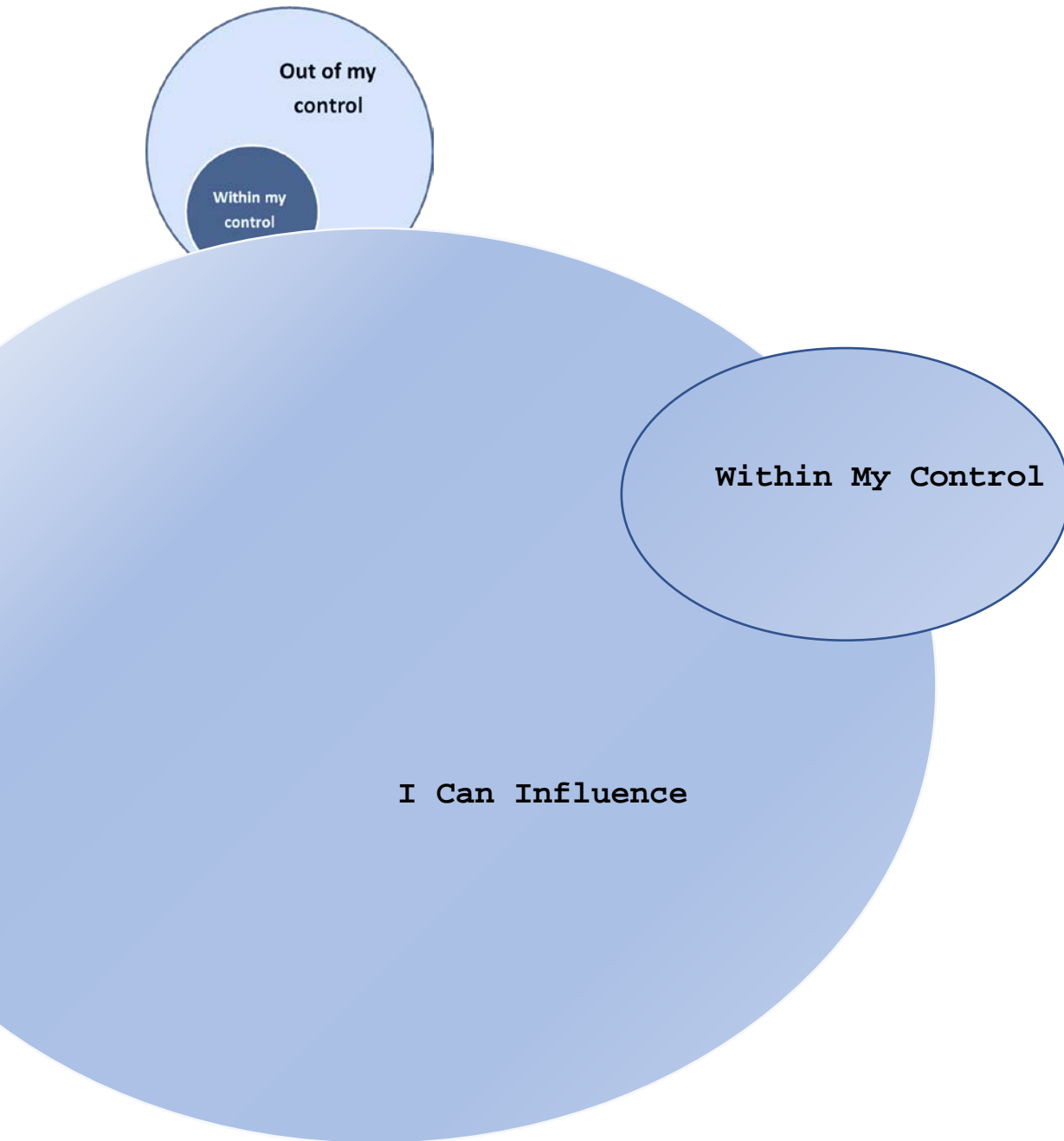


One strategy: Sphere of Influence

Why this may help: We all would like to think that we have a lot of control over a lot of things. We Don't !! We have even LESS control when we're in places where others make the majority of the rules, such as emergency rooms, crisis units, mental health systems, , etc.

For those of us with trauma histories – most of us – it can feel real scary to lose our inner sense of control. A lot of times, though, our distress isn't about the realities around us, but our inner confusion about where we do and don't have control. Trying to be in control of those things over which we have no power can lead to inner turmoil. One way to help is to figure out what we DO and DON'T have control over. This exercise may help to decrease some of the inner racing thoughts or obsessive thoughts.

Taking back my Control. (Instructions on next page)



Everything Else

Instructions:

1. Take a moment to consider all the things that are contributing to your overwhelmed feeling, e.g. limited time to yourself, ongoing worry about someone you care about, feeling tired, you have a cold, etc. If it helps, quickly scribble them down below.

2. Add each 'Overwhelm Item' to your Spheres of Influence in the following way:
 - If you have complete CONTROL over the item (i.e. you can resolve it on your own without needing anyone else's help or input), write it down in the first circle labeled "WITHIN MY CONTROL"
 - If you have PARTIAL control or can INFLUENCE the item (i.e. you can resolve part of the item or influence the outcome through your actions or behavior), write this item in the second circle labeled "I CAN INFLUENCE."
 - If the item is COMPLETELY OUTSIDE of your control or influence (i.e. there is nothing you could do or say that could directly impact this item), write this item OUTSIDE in the area labeled "EVERYTHING ELSE..."
 - If you think of other things that are overwhelming you as you do this exercise, add those into your Sphere of Influence as above.

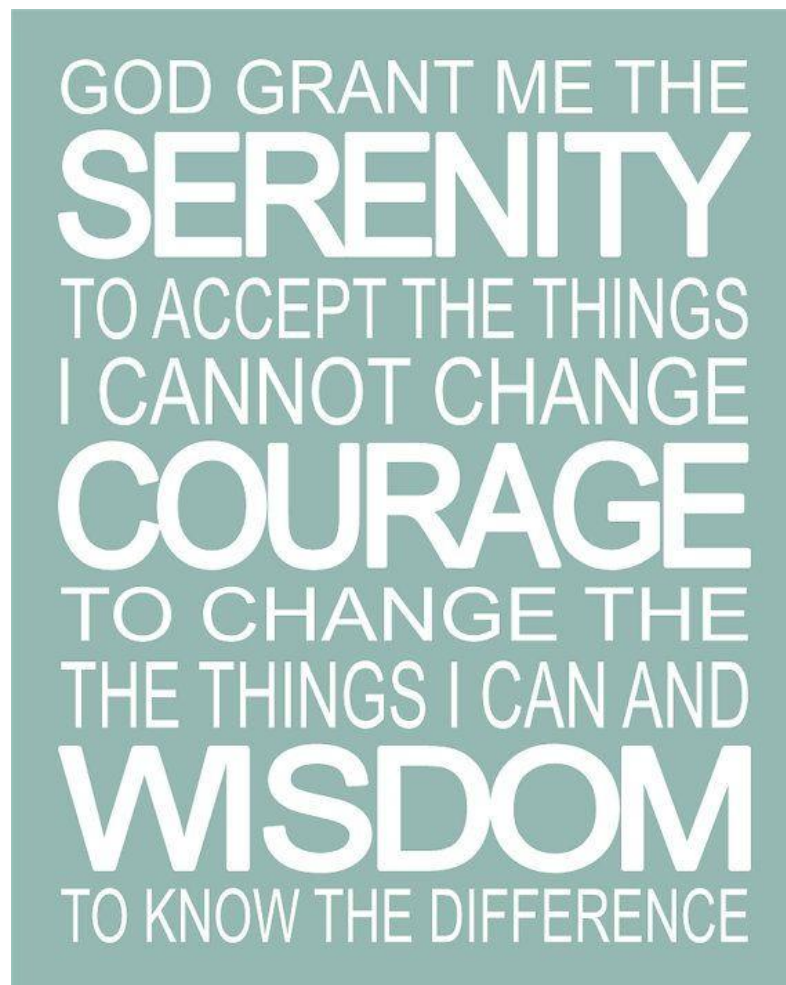
From your "Spheres of Influence" that you created:

⇒ FOR the items you have CONTROL over, TAKE ACTION (however small) on at least ONE as soon as possible – it will help you feel better.

⇒ FOR the items you have PARTIAL CONTROL or INFLUENCE over, write down the steps you can take and when you might be able to do that.

⇒ Finally (and most importantly) **LET GO of EVERYTHING ELSE!**
Strikethrough each of these items on your "Spheres of Influence." If you can't control or influence it, then it's a waste of your precious energy to even think about it.

Here's a familiar quote that may help. (Feel free to replace the word "God" with whatever works for you!!)



Emotional Distress

For the general public, the mental health effects of COVID-19 are as important to address as the physical health effects. For the one in five who already have mental health challenges, the emotional impacts can be even greater. Those of us that are separated from friends and family may be feeling additional levels of emotional disconnection and distress during these times. As a result, you may be feeling:

- Constant worry or anxiety
- Overwhelmed
- Difficulty relaxing
- Confusion
- Sense of being overwhelmed
- Feeling powerless
- Mood swings
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Irritability or short temper
- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Worsening of mental health conditions
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.



Think about your OWN Emotions. What kinds of emotions have you been feeling? Have you noticed other things that let you know that you're feeling emotional stress?



One strategy: Journaling

Why this may help: Thinking in writing has this magical quality of clarifying your thoughts. Research has shown that spending time to write out our thoughts or feelings - the essence of Journaling - can help with clearing out our thoughts, leading to better decision making. Personal writing can also help with coping, especially during stressful events like dealing with COVID-19 and can help relieve anxiety and boost immune cell activity.

What you write, you control. Getting thoughts from the inside of your mind to paper can help you tap into what lies beneath - what is important to you, what is really fueling the distress and potential ways you may want to move forward.

Journaling Exercise - The 5 Minute Journal

People have been journaling for centuries, and journals vary dramatically person-to-person. What you may find useful in a journal is personal and unique to you. The hard part of learning if or how journaling may feel helpful is simply getting started if you haven't journaled before.

Perhaps the best way to try it out is to start small and just focus on your thoughts.

Directions:

- Put aside 5 minutes each morning and evening to journal.
- Start your journaling each morning and evening answering these two simple questions:
 - What am I feeling right now?
 - Do I know why?
- Write down any thoughts/feelings that you become aware of. (Just write them down without censoring them or judging them - they just are.)
- Keep writing for 5 minutes. If you want to stop, stop. If you want to keep writing and add other themes to your writing, feel free to do that.

Your journaling is not your performing for history. It's you reflecting. It's you working through your problems. It's you figuring things out and clearing your head. Write about the maddingly frustrating people you encountered today. The comment, the tweet, the news headline that made you furious. Write about the wounds you still carry from childhood. The person who didn't treat you right. The terrible experience. The parent who was just a little too busy or a little too critical or a little too tied up dealing with their own issues to be what we needed. The sources of anxiety or worry, the frustrations that routinely pop up at the worst

times, the reasons you have trouble staying in relationships, whatever problem you are dealing with—take them to your journal. You’ll be shocked by how good you feel after.

Leave Your Destructive Thoughts In Your Journal

Note how this makes you feel:

(You might want to try it a few times before deciding for sure if this is helpful or not. The first time or two can just feel awkward because it’s something new. But by the third time, you should have a pretty clear idea how you feel during or after deep breathing.)

Spiritual Distress

Our spiritual wellbeing is important to our physical and emotional wellbeing. When we’re feeling stressed, there’s a good chance that our spirit may be as impacted as our body and mind. This is true whether you meet your spiritual needs through religious participation or any other ways, such as visiting nature, meditating, etc. In these times, it’s common to experience a spiritual vacuum with the following feeling or thoughts:

- A weariness of the heart
- A sinking feeling that nothing really matters
- Questioning beliefs that were once unquestionable, like “Does God even exist?”
- Wondering about the meaning or purpose of life.

- Wondering about your own value in the world.
- A sense of deep grieving

Spirituality is often a sense of connection to a bigger picture, individually defined, that gives meaning and purpose to a person's life.



Think about your OWN spiritual center. What questions are you asking yourself that indicate that your spirit is feeling overwhelmed?



One strategy: Filling Your Heart

Why this may help: Heart weariness can leave us feeling empty, depleted, exhausted. When we're in this space, our defenses can be lowered, giving our negative self-thoughts more volume in our heads. Sometimes, the only way to quiet those voices that bring us to darkness and despair is to intentionally sit down and think about those things which are meaningful to us, and "heart-warming."

Instructions: On the next page, there's a heart, waiting to be filled. Close your eyes for a moment and start to think about those things that bring you joy in life.

Here are some general themes to prompt ideas:

- People you love and hope to see or talk to when lock-downs and other restrictions are lifted;
- People you love and feel committed to, even if your efforts have to be delayed due to incarceration, emotional struggles at the moment, etc.;
- Things you've done that your proud of;
- Hopes and dreams for the future;
- Places you've been that bring you peace, like the ocean or the mountains or a special trip you got to take;

And remember...you deserve to feel OK !!

Fill Your Heart



Self-Help Strategies

Strategies to Support Greater Physical Well-being

Why breathing may help: Breathing is often a way to trigger our own internal “relaxation response.” The great thing about breathing is that we do it all the time and we can do it anywhere. The way we breathe, though, can either add to our sense of stress or diminish it by switching off our “fight or flight” response. When we feel stressed, we often “shallow breathe.” This can add to light-headedness, dizziness and other physical discomforts. Deep breathing, on the other hand, can often center us and help us feel more grounded. (For a small group of people, breathing exercises can actually cause greater anxiety, so always trust your own response. If you’re feeling more anxious, stop and try something else!!)

Post-traumatic stress can affect the way you breathe. Holding your breath, as well as breathing rapidly or shallowly can sometimes lead to chronic anxiety. Awareness and regulation of the quality of our breathing can have several positive effects. Slowing and deepening our breath allows for adequate intake of oxygen and output of carbon dioxide, both of which are necessary for physical well-being. Conscious breathing during times of distress can allow us to release muscular and emotional tension, reducing our level of distress. Focusing awareness on our breathing can shift our thoughts away from nonproductive or negative thinking and bring us fully back into the present.

On the next few pages, there are a variety of breathing exercises. Try them out and see if they're helpful for you.

A simple deep breathing exercise

Breathe in through your nose, counting silently 1, 2, 3, 4 as you inhale.

Breathe out through your mouth, counting silently 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 as you slowly exhale.

Repeat breathing and counting two more times.



Note how this makes you feel:

(You might want to try it a few times before deciding for sure if this is helpful or not. The first time or two can just feel awkward because it's something new. But by the third time, you should have a pretty clear idea how you feel during or after deep breathing.)

Belly Breathing

Normally, we breathe very shallowly, up in our chests. Learning to breathe down into our stomachs naturally helps calm us down. It also brings more oxygen into

our body and brain, which helps us think more clearly. Belly breathing before a stressful situation can be very helpful. Here is what you do:

- ⇒ First, breathe as you normally do.
- ⇒ What parts of your body move as you breathe? Notice what it feels like.

- ⇒ Now, sit and place your hand on your stomach.
- ⇒ With your mouth closed, breathe in for four seconds or until you feel your whole chest fill with air all the way down to your belly
- ⇒ Hold in the air for four seconds.
- ⇒ Slowly blow all the air out until it's all gone.

- ⇒ Try this three or four times.



Note how this makes you feel:

(You might want to try it a few times before deciding for sure if this is helpful or not. The first time or two can just feel awkward because it's something new. But by the third time, you should have a pretty clear idea how you feel during or after deep breathing.)

90 SECOND STRESS BREAK

1ST 30 SECONDS:

Notice your breathing.

See if you can make your inhale longer than your exhale.

2ND 30 SECONDS:

Keep breathing slowly.

Notice any muscles in your body that are tense.

On each exhale, see if you can relax the tense places.

LAST 30 SECONDS:

Keep breathing slowly.

With each breath, say something positive to yourself, such as:

“I got this.” “Keep going.” “I can do this.”

When the 90 seconds are up, go about your day!



Note how this makes you feel:

(Again, you might want to try it a few times before deciding for sure if this is helpful or not. The first time or two can just feel awkward because it's something new. But by the third time, you should have a pretty clear idea how you feel during or after deep breathing.)

HERE'S ANOTHER ONE TO TRY:

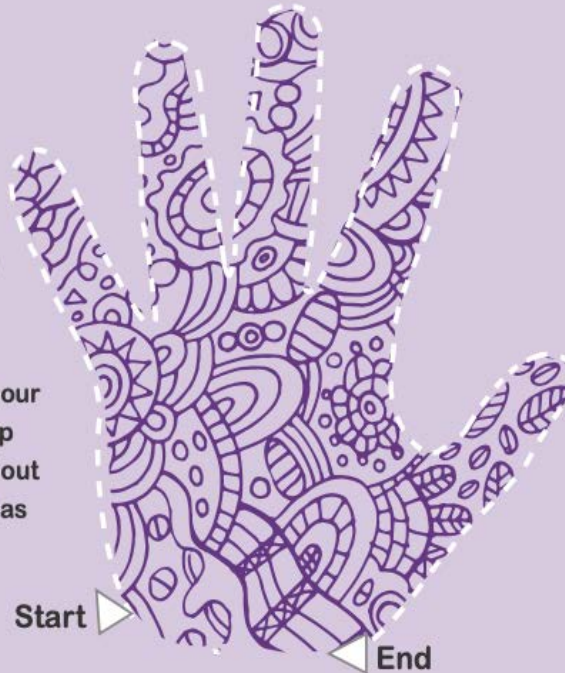
TAKE 5

Use your pointer finger to trace your other hand

Breathe in through your nose

Breathe out through your mouth

Breathe in through your nose as you trace up your finger; breathe out through your mouth as you trace down;



Note how this makes you feel:

(Again, you might want to try it a few times before deciding for sure if this is helpful or not. The first time or two can just feel awkward because it's something new. But by the third time, you should have a pretty clear idea how you feel during or after deep breathing.)

Strategies to Support Greater Emotional Well-being

Why using your senses helps: Often, emotional distress comes from getting caught into our “emotional brain.” When we’re caught in our emotional brain,

we're often disconnected from our thinking brain that helps us to understand our emotions or cope with out emotions. Using our senses can help us tap back into our upper brain to help us deal with emotions that may be overwhelming us.

Our five Senses:

This technique will take you through your five senses to help remind you of the present. This is a calming technique that can help you get through tough or stressful situations.

Take a deep breath to begin.

LOOK: 

Look around for five things that you can see and say them to yourself in your mind. For example, you could say, "I see the chair. I see the cup. I see the picture frame...."

FEEL:

Pay attention to your body and think of four things that you can feel and say them quietly in your mind. For example, you could say, "I feel my feet in my socks, my hands in my lap, the hair on the back of my neck, and the chair I am sitting on."

LISTEN: 

Listen for three sounds. It could be the sound of cars outside, the sound of a clock ticking, or the sound of your stomach rumbling. Say the three things to yourself in your mind.

SMELL:

Name two things you can smell. If you can't smell anything, then just think of and imagine your two favorite smells.



TASTE:

Say one thing you can taste. It may be the toothpaste from brushing your teeth or your tongue in your mouth. If you can't taste anything, then think of your favorite thing to taste.

Peer Connection: A Pathway to Healing

Peer to peer support is all around us! It has been around since the dawn of time. As people, we are hardwired to **CONNECT**. It's in our DNA.... In times of stress and distress, we also tend to feel comforted most by those who can say, "Ah...yes...I've been there, too. You're not alone." Likewise, if we've been through something ourselves, we often feel a special compassion for those struggling with problems that we've also faced and may even have the urge to reach out a helping hand.

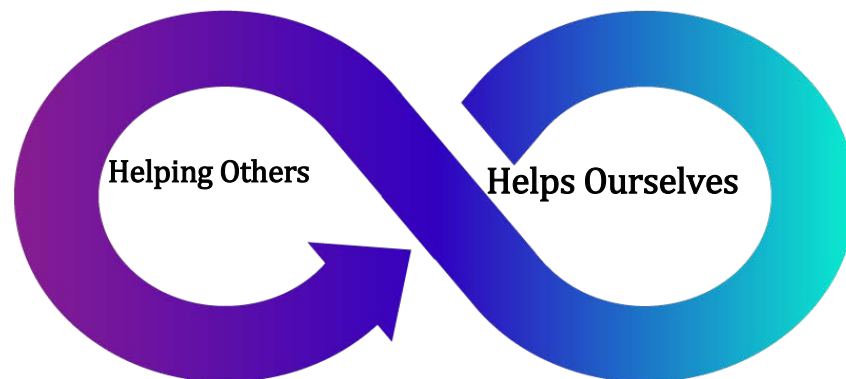
"Walking a mile in someone else's shoes isn't as much about the walk or the shoes; it's to be able to think like they think, feel what they feel, and understand why they are who and where they are. Every step is about empathy."

Toni Sorenson

Here's are some examples:

- A first-time mom gets support at church from another mom with several children.
- A person hears that his co-worker lost his son in a car accident. He reaches out to the person because he also lost a child and wants to offer support.
- Someone that just had a heart attack, receives support and "lessons" learned from another person that recovered from a heart attack a year earlier

- A widow turns to another man for support that lost his wife too The amazing thing about people is that, even when we're struggling, we reach out and care about others. Humans actually derive pleasure from helping others.



Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.

Brene Brown

What we know is that reaching out to others makes **US** feel better and can help

Did You Know?

Peer support can be formal, such as Certified Peer Specialists who work in our mental health, substance use and judicial systems. But you don't have to be a Certified Peer Specialist to **DO** peer support. As a matter of fact, peer to peer relationships have existed way before "formal" peer support, in professional settings with specialty trained and certified Peer Specialists

US cope better with our own stress. In Peer Support we understand each other because, although everyone has their own unique stories, we have similar experiences that can create a bond that allows us to learn together, figure out

how to change the way we do things and the way we think, and to figure out how to move forward in our lives.

EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE: THE POWER OF SHARED EXPERIENCE



In many professional settings, people are called “experts” due to their educational background, or years working in a profession. In peer support, we are sometimes referred to as “Experts by Experience” because our knowledge and wisdom comes from surviving difficult situations.

When we consider experiences such as incarceration, hospitalization, gang involvement, substance use, homelessness, and suicide attempts to name a few, imagine what it would be like to receive support from someone else that has similar experiences. You may already know some of these people where you currently are living... perhaps **YOU** are that person that reaches out when new

people come. These are examples of Peer Support and have proven to be an incredibly effective way to support, connect and heal together.

The irony is that it's **US** that frequently feels better when we support others!

Peer Support is different from the support you get from counselors, doctors and case managers. It is more than just being friends. In Peer Support you understand each other because, although everyone has their own unique stories, you have similar experiences that can create a bond that allows you to learn together, figure out how to change the way you do things and the way you think, and to figure out how to move forward in your lives. By sharing your experiences and building trust in each other, you learn to go forward in new ways that move you away from seeing yourself as "mentally ill" and the limitations of such a view. In Peer Support, you can safely try out new ideas and new ways of being through "learning" rather than a "treatment."

Mary Ellen Copeland

WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Broadly defined, "peer support" refers to a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience (Riessman, 1989). A "peer" is an equal, someone with whom one shares demographic or social similarities. "Support" expresses the kind of deeply felt empathy, encouragement, and assistance that people with shared experiences can offer one another within a reciprocal relationship.

Broken down to its simplest description, peer support is utilizing your own personal experiences to provide support, guidance, and mentoring to those who are experiencing difficulties, similar to your own.



Receiving and offering support can increase our awareness and give us the strength and courage to get through difficult circumstances like COVID-19. However, to offer support, we have to understand each person's definition of support varies. Let's start with your experience:

In your personal experience, how would you define support?

What types of relationships have been supportive in your recovery? What made them supportive?

What types of relationships were unsupportive? Why?

How could you find out what support means or "looks like" to your partner, family, friend or who is around you right now?

Peer to Peer Relationships: The Foundation

Healing and Recovery

We are survivors! People that have been through some of life's most difficult situations know all about healing and recovery. We are living examples of both and therefore, in our peer relationships, believe and share that healing and recovery is possible for everyone. We support the health and wellness of others in all of our interactions.

Mutuality

We believe in mutuality, equality and shared power and do not attempt to have power over others. In peer to peer relationships, we are equal and do not attempt to advise or have authority in the relationship. Instead, we recognize that mutual relationships can be healing to both individuals.

Hope

We inspire hope, courage and/or confidence. Hope is a vital component of wellness. Without hope, why would anyone try to improve his/her situation or live his/her life? Hopelessness keeps people in a dark place with no plans or energy to move forward. In peer relationships, we serve as a living example of hope. Our lived experience and resilience demonstrate to others the hope of recovery!

Empowerment

We seek to bring out the power within the other person by encouraging him/her to develop solutions to their own challenges and have the confidence in themselves to make decisions. We do that by supporting people to “find” and “use” their voice, to discover who they are and who they want to be, and by exploring all of their options, without judgement, shame, blame or guilt.

PEER SUPPORT: WHAT WE DON'T DO

1. We do not label a person or diagnose them

It is important to remember that, although we may share similar experiences with others, our process of healing as well as any treatment, approaches, medications, diagnosis, etc. that we experienced won't necessarily be effective for another person. Every person is unique and there is a lot that goes into clinical treatment; therefore, if a person is receiving treatment, our role is to support them to be educated about their treatment options, make informed decisions and be prepared to discuss any concerns with their doctor or treatment provider.

2. We are not a parent

There is a difference between offering peer support and telling people what to do or imposing rules or consequences. Remember, we are equal partners in the relationship and as such, we share with and learn from one another.

3. We NEVER offer advice

There is a difference between offering support, sharing experience and giving advice. People seldom take advice. Our role is to support people to find their own solutions, not have the answers to all their challenges. There is a skill to offering support without giving advice and it's one that can be practiced and learned.



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
SUPPORT AND ADVICE?

...POWER

Peer Supporters, know your role

PEER SUPPORT: WHAT IS OUR ROLE?

- **Serve as a resource:**

We offer our experience and “lessons learned” to be a resource to others.

- **Offer Support:**

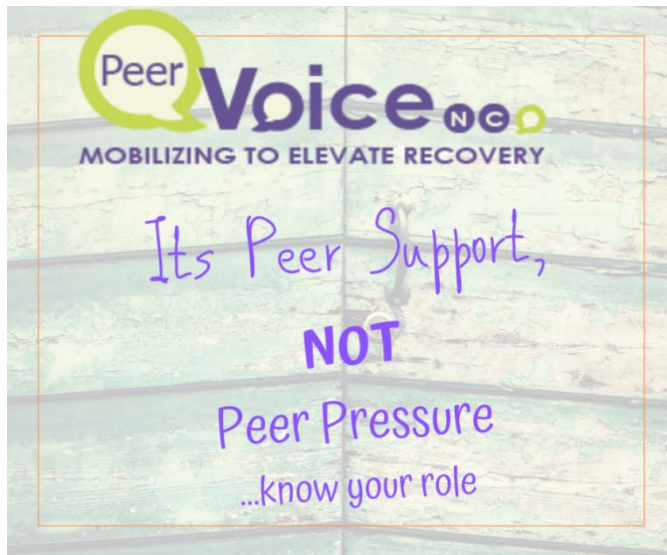
We offer support by being present, providing encouragement, giving assistance, comfort and listening without advising and without judgement.

- **Serve as a coach:**

Take a moment to reflect on the meaning that “coach” has for you; what do coaches do and what are the qualities of an effective coach? A peer relationship serves a similar role by using their experience, skills and information to guide people through difficult situations and celebrate successes.

Partner:

We seek to truly understand others; where they are and offer the type of support



they are requesting without judgment, labels, assumptions or biases. In a partnership, we both contribute to the relationship without asserting control over the other. Partners are “in this together” and our partnership can enhance both partners’ wellness. A partner doesn’t walk in front of and

pull, nor do they walk behind and push; rather, they walk side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, participating, engaging, and discussing.

ADDENDUM

Covid-19: A National Health Crisis

These are difficult times for everyone. COVID-19 has impacted all of us in many ways. It's especially difficult for those of us who may not have a strong network of support or are isolated. People, activities and resources that have supported our wellness may have been removed or altered in significant ways. Fortunately,



you are a survivor and this guide is designed to remind you of all the ways you have survived and thrived through difficult life situations. With this in mind, the guide is also to ask you to share your skills with others around you, helping them through this tough time. Together, you are

NOT alone... you are simply two people, going through a difficult time and relying on each other's strength, kindness and skills to continue your journey of wellness! Let's start by sharing some basic information about COVID-19 and the way it may be impacting our bodies...

What is Covid-19?

COVID-19 (also called "Coronavirus 2019") is a virus that is transmitted from person to person



- Between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet).
- Through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes or even is just speaking.

- These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

It's NEW !!

The virus is called “Novel” or “new” Coronavirus. **This means that humans don't have any immunity (biological disease fighters) and there's no treatments or vaccines at this point.** Scientists have been able to create a test that can determine if someone has the virus, but the tests aren't widely available yet. That's one of the reasons why this virus is so different and dangerous. It can spread from person to person real easily, and some people can get really sick or die because there isn't any treatments at this point.

Why the Big Deal? The “social isolation” efforts have been important because the virus has some sneaky ways that leads to it spreading easily:

- ⇒ People can carry the virus and spread it to others without having any symptoms themselves. Any of us could be a “silent carrier”, infecting others without even knowing it.
- ⇒ Also, people who get sick may have been carrying and spreading the virus for up to two weeks before having their own symptoms.

This is why there are such dramatic efforts to keep people apart and “social distance.”

Some Quick Facts and Myth Busters

Here's some quick facts and myth busters from the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

**FACT
1**

Diseases can make anyone sick regardless of their race or ethnicity.

People of Asian descent, including Chinese Americans, are not more likely to get COVID-19 than any other American. Help stop fear by letting people know that being of Asian descent does not increase the chance of getting or spreading COVID-19.

Because the virus first emerged in China, rumors started that this was an Asian or Chinese disease. Like all viruses, Covid-19 doesn't discriminate. It's called a

"pandemic" because it's now a world-wide illness that has infected about 3 ½ million people as of this writing and growing every day.

Exposure increases your risk of getting the virus. But for some people, the impact of the virus is more likely to be deadly. People at greater risk are:

⇒ People over 65 years old

⇒ People who have pre-existing illnesses, especially lung conditions, heart

conditions, diabetes, etc. Strong bodies can probably fight off the virus so

people will get sick but recover.

People with weakened bodies can get deathly ill.

Since we can have the virus before we actually get any symptoms, it's

**FACT
3**

Someone who has completed quarantine or has been released from isolation does not pose a risk of infection to other people.

For up-to-date information, visit CDC's coronavirus disease 2019 web page.

**FACT
2**

Some people are at increased risk of getting COVID-19.

People who have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID-19 or people who live in or have recently been in an area with ongoing spread are at an increased risk of exposure.

suggested that people “quarantine” or isolate themselves for two weeks after they know they’ve been exposed to someone with the virus. This is to slow down the spread. As of right now, with what the experts have learned about the disease so far, it’s believed that if a person who was exposed hasn’t gotten any symptoms within two weeks, he or she wasn’t infected and is safe to go back into the community.

**FACT
4**

You can help stop COVID-19 by knowing the signs and symptoms:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath

Seek medical advice if you

- Develop symptoms

AND

- Have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID-19 or if you live in or have recently been in an area with ongoing spread of COVID-19.

The symptoms of Covid-19 are very similar to other common illnesses. Testing is usually available to those with symptoms, and you can find out if you do or don’t have the virus. If you’re in a living situation where you don’t have quick access to medical support, but think you might have the virus, it’s probably best to assume you do and take precautions to minimize spreading the illness to others. These are discussed below.

There is currently no vaccine to prevent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus if it’s possible. Of course, for most people, total isolation from others isn’t possible, and for people currently in jails, mental health institutions and other residential facilities, it can be more challenging. However, there are some precautions and recommended strategies that can help you minimize your chances of getting the virus.

**FACT
5**

There are simple things you can do to help keep yourself and others healthy.



CAUTION!

Sometimes, we can mistake physical discomfort as caused by stress, but can actually be physical symptoms of COVID-19. If you have ANY of the following symptoms speak to a medical professional. Before you assume its stress, have it checked out!

- cough
- shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- fever
- chills
- muscle pain
- sore throat
- persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- New loss of taste or smell

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES



Washing your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds is recommended because soap is a great virus killer. The virus often gets into our bodies by traveling from our hands to our face (when we touch our face) and then gets inside our bodies when we breathe. So the more you wash your hands, the more likely you are to kill any of the virus germs you picked up along the way. If soap isn't available, using a **hand sanitizer** with at least 60% alcohol can also help. Be sure to cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel

dry.

Avoiding close contact with others when possible is important, especially with people who are sick. In general, putting **distance between yourself and other people (at least 6 ft)** can lessen your chance of getting the virus. This is particularly important for people who are at higher risk of getting very sick. (see below)



Wearing facemasks is important to minimize the chance that *you* will infect



other people. The Covid-19 virus is so dangerous because you can have it and be spreading it without having any symptoms at all.

Facemasks provide a barrier for the nose and mouth to either transmit droplets or receive them... it's protection for everyone!

THINGS YOU CAN DO ANYWHERE

Some people don't have the ability to follow the recommendations because of limitations posed by experiencing homelessness or living in medical or penal institutions. Here are some alternative ways to keep yourself and others safe.

Can't Wash Your Hands Often? Try these things you can do anywhere:

Hand washing decreases the risk of carrying the virus from surfaces you touched to your nose and mouth. We tend to touch our faces a lot – way more than we may realize – and this is one of the quickest routes for the virus to carry from person to person. If you can't wash your hands often, you can still:

- **Try to limit how many surfaces you touch.** Things like door handles, counters and other smooth surfaces can hold the virus for several days.
- **Use your sleeve over your hands.** When you go through doors or gates or when you pick up something from a counter, use an article of clothing like your sleeve to cover your hand.
- **Try to keep your hands from your face.** This sounds simple, but it's really hard. Try to pay attention for just 15 minutes, and you'll see how many times your hand has gone to your face. But if you can't wash your hands, keeping your hands from your face will dramatically increase your safety.
- **Cover your mouth and nose with your shirt.** When you're in shared spaces where you can't keep at least 6 feet between you and others, you might want to pull up your shirt or clothing to cover your mouth and nose to work like a mask.
- **Cough or sneeze into your inner arm or clothing.** When you cough or sneeze, use the inner space of your elbow or a piece of clothing rather than covering your mouth with your hands.
- **Turn your head or cover your mouth.** If someone else is coughing or sneezing in your presence, try to turn your head away from the person (and stay turned for about 30 seconds if you can) or use a piece of clothing to cover your mouth.

Testing is slowly becoming more available to people beyond those who are already showing symptoms. Scientists are working feverishly to try to create medications to lessen the symptoms of COVID-19 and create a vaccine. In the meantime, everyone is trying their best to slow the spread and, especially keep



the virus from infecting those who are most vulnerable – those who are older and have pre-existing medical conditions, such as COPD, diabetes, heart conditions, HIV, immunity illnesses, etc.