



## Traversing Trauma in Uncertain Times

The simplest definition of trauma is an experience that overwhelms one's capacity to cope. Given the wide range of disruptions caused by COVID-19 to our everyday life as well as the impact these disruptions may have on your sense of safety, trust and control we can expect current world events to be a traumatizing experience for many. A traumatic response to COVID-19 may be experienced on both the individual and collective level, making it especially challenging for individuals with a trauma history. It is not uncommon for trauma responses to resurface and/or intensify. Global and community crises can produce feelings (fear, frustration, helplessness) and physical reactions (tight shoulders, raised voices) connected to prior traumatic experiences.

As we traverse this new landscape, some will be surprised at their capacity to manage this crisis with calm next steps, while others may find themselves thinking "I thought I had gotten past some of these feelings and sensations." Both responses are normal and make sense. A history of trauma can make everything feel like a crisis, so when crisis is happening all around, it can feel less destabilizing for you than others. However, this is NOT business as usual. Here are tools and information to assist you during these uncertain times.

### Create and sustain predictability where you can.

This is an important part of managing trauma responses and re-establishing a sense of safety, trust, and control. Engaging in a behavior or activity at the same time every day each week can begin to rebuild trust in your environment. As your trust in your environment grows it can help re-establish a sense of safety allowing you to better manage the unpredictable and uncertain. Predictability also offers small ways to build trust in your own capacity and allow choices and control in the areas where these are possible.

*Give Yourself an Uplifting Message:* All of us can benefit from daily encouragement. Affirmations can assist trauma survivors recognize the validity their emotions and experiences. Mantras can help you set an intention as well as provide grounding when repeated regularly throughout the day. A favorite prayer or religious text that inspires, a song that speaks to you or brightens your mood are good places to start. The form this takes is less important than setting a daily/weekly intention to nourish yourself using words and music. Here are a few ideas:

I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment.

Even when things aren't okay, I can offer gentle compassion to myself.

I am doing enough, and I'm allowed to rest.

*Connect Regularly with Sources of Support:* Set up a daily or weekly virtual date with someone you care about. Share a meal, create some art, or watch a movie together. Write a weekly email to a friend or family member. If your therapist offers tele-therapy, this can be a good way to build in some predictability to your schedule.

*Protect your Sleep:* Sleep is a vital component of every human being's wellbeing. Sleep enables the body to repair, restore and clear away lingering stress hormones in order to be ready to tackle the challenges of a new day.

Go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day.

Avoid screens for at least thirty minutes before bed.

Engage in a routine that prepares you to sleep.

*Be mindful of your work routine:* Whether you are working from home or going into the community, most of us are experiencing disruptions. Think about some of these ideas for finding predictability in your work.

*If you are working from home (and can do so):*

- Commute to and from work. A short walk around the block will help transition to and from work.
- Set an end of workday time and stick to it!
- Consider setting up and dismantling your workstation as part of your daily routine.
- Eat meals around the same time daily.
- Set alarm every 1-2 hours to remind yourself to take a micro-break to breathe or stretch.
- Turn off notifications and limit checking work related calls and emails during non-work hours.

*If you are home but not working, switch up daily activities throughout the day. You might read for an hour and then complete a chore. You might watch a movie and then plan a meal.*

*If you are working in the community:*

- Consider what you can do before work to prepare yourself to face that day's challenges.
- Create an afterwork ritual – even something as simple as taking a shower or going for a walk.

## **Practice self-care.**

During stressful times, it is important to be intentional about self-care. Having a solid routine will help but there may be times during the day when your stress increases and you need to access an immediate tool.

### *For when you have two minutes:*

- Love on your pet
- Mindfully wash your hands; as you focus, imagine your difficulties or challenges washing away with the water.
- Do jumping jacks or run in place
- Breathe for two minutes watching this visual

### *For when you have five minutes:*

- Do a free 5 minute guided meditation with Simple Habit
- Watch a short funny video on YouTube or Instagram
- Dance or shake out tension/stress
- Turn up your favorite song and loudly sing along – singing makes it hard for negative thoughts to enter

### *For when you have ten minutes:*

- Journal with/without a prompt. Here are a few prompts to consider:
  - What are the things I need to let go of today?
  - How am I caring for myself today? What makes that easy? What makes that difficult?
  - What am I learning about myself as a result of the changes COVID-19 has brought?
- Create a "Well Done" list. Create a list of things you have done that you can celebrate - even the small things.
- Read a blog post on one of your favorite topics

### *For when you have 30 minutes or longer:*

- Use old magazines to create a collage
- Take a longer mindful walk and engage your five senses
- Work on a home project
- Attend an virtual concert on Instagram in your living room
- Take a virtual museum or zoo tour
- Listen to a podcast on a topic about which you have been curious