

Special Edition Veteran Bulletin

Tips for Coping with Stress of COVID-19

Hello from your Vet Center. We felt it may be appropriate to send out a bit of information regarding coping with stress during COVID-19. Many of these tips are direct reflections of dialogue, discussions, questions, and comments of Veterans contending the stressors of COVID-19.

Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.

Try not to keep things boxed up, compartmentalized, buried, and remember we're Veterans – we don't do the "suck it up and drive on" routine anymore. If you're a client of the Vet Center, if you are receiving this newsletter, then you have a Battle Buddy and an opportunity to get the stress of the day off your chest. Sometimes talking about what concerns us, to a friend, a loved one, a counselor no matter how big or small can ease burdens and aid in maintaining the health of the whole person or the whole family.

The National Center for PTSD identifies five key principles for community care efforts during the COVID-19 outbreak. These principles work well within the family as well: Promote a Sense of Safety Promote a Sense of Self- and Community-Efficacy Promote a Sense of Connectedness Promote a Sense of Calming

Promote a Sense of Hope

Limit the amount of time you're reading about coronavirus or watching the news.

One invention I am extremely grateful to be without is the invention of 24-hour news networks and social media. As a child, I remember having three channels. The news was delivered at regularly scheduled hours of the day as stories developed. It's normal for us to want to try to keep up on current affairs – especially if there are known threats to health and safety being posted in newscasts and social media. The problem with this is that there is continuous media coverage, and no one can possibly read or watch all and remain current. Constantly checking for updates is not good for your mental health and only reinforces any prior and present anxiety (and fatigue) you may have.

"Confirmation-Bias" is a person's tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or strengthens one's prior personal beliefs or theories. It is a type of cognitive bias. People display this bias when they gather or remember information selectively, or when they interpret it in a biased way. The effect is stronger for desired outcomes, for emotionally charged issues, and for deeply entrenched beliefs. Try to check once or twice a day to keep up with important updates and be firm with yourself about leaving it at that.

Make it a goal to limit your amount of exposure to social media posts about coronavirus. Pun intended, social media blasts about coronavirus are just that – blasts or bombardment of unregulated

and mostly unfounded information and it is adding to the panic people are feeling. Try to stay away from people's social media posts about the situation. Remember you are in control of what information you take in and can mute or hide words and phrases, or "take a break" from friends or from your social media feed.

Only trust factual, science-based resources.

Are you watching news or news-commentary? With 24-hour news programming much of the reporting becomes regurgitated into news-commentary. One of the main concerns about watching too much news-commentary is the unceasing presentation of the subject matter – much like the symptom of intrusive or reoccurring thoughts, feelings or themes for a Veteran who suffers from PTSD or anxiety. Factual data presented for example: data for an outbreak is presented factually, it is presented with limited information in real time with the basic information at hand. Then news-commentary takes this information and develops it into a monologue or various monologues, with unlimited outcomes without need for factual reference because its commentary entertainment.

Reliable news sources for Coronavirus information and rumor control can be found at these web sites:

Center for Disease Control (CDC)
(includes map tracking cases by state):
www.coronavirus.gov

VA Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) website (includes positive cases at VHA facilities):
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus/>

VA Webpage for Frequently Asked Questions concerning the Coronavirus:
<https://www.va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions/>

Federal Emergency Management Rumor Control:
<https://www.fema.gov/coronavirus-Rumor-Control>

Current Michigan websites for information on Coronavirus to include State Executive Orders and Updates on Economic Assistance are the following:

MICHIGAN COVID-19 Executive Orders Library:
https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98178_98455-521682--,00.html

To apply for unemployment benefits, please visit the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity:
https://www.michigan.gov/leo/0,5863,7-336-78421_97241---,00.html

To apply for assistance with food, health insurance, and other needs, please go to MI Bridges:
https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/s/isd-landing-page?language=en_US

To find resources in your local community, you can call 211 or visit this website:
<https://www.mi211.org/>

An additional military resource clearing house is the website Operation WE ARE HERE at: <http://www.operationwearehere.com/>

Distract, disrupt, create a little folly!

As long as you're keeping up to date with professional, fact-based information and guidelines, the rest of the time you don't need to be thinking about coronavirus. So, what's to do? This may be a great time to learn a new skill, purge the house, practice minimalization, organize your calendar, train your dog. If you find you have additional time on your hands and additional anxiety "put it to work." A good focus is to learn how to become more present in your life.

Celebrate the tiny joys - I'm not naturally one who celebrates anything or likes to be celebrated. However, I have utilized this tip several times in the military to improve morale and every time the results have been overwhelmingly positive. Celebrate every and any "good thing" that is happening in your AO (Area of Occupation) birthdays – yes, please, your grandchild drew a nice picture and is showing it to you on Skype – "AMAZING!!" These "tiny celebrations" are not a passive aggressive means of expression but a way to acknowledge that things are going well and in the middle of some very high anxiety – "we're doing alright – right now."

Grounding/Identifying the Moment or Present - Take a moment to check in with yourself and identify the moment you're in. You can do this by asking questions about your surroundings and your current state. Ask yourself questions like: Where am I? What is around me? What

noises do I hear? What can I physically feel around me? What do I smell? Who is around? How am I feeling? What am I grateful for right now?

Listen without intending to respond - When you're engaged in conversation, how often do you worry about what to say next? Often, we're only half-listening to the other person because we're constantly thinking about our own stories and what we can add to the conversation. And when speaking to someone ask yourself if the listener is listening to hear and understand or are they listening to reply. Be okay with not knowing all the answers - You don't need to know all the answers concerning you and your loved ones – we have been conditioned in recent decades to have answers to our problems almost instantly.

Keep up with your usual routine as best you can.

This is easier said than done with the current situation but do your best to keep up your regular routine as much as is realistic. Try to keep a good sleep routine, remember your medication, work during working hours (even if you're working from home), and eat when you usually would. Remember, as a Vet Center member one of your priority goals is self-advocacy.

Practice self-care.

As well as ensuring you are sleeping, eating and keeping up with personal hygiene, set aside time each day to do one act of self-care. You could take the time for a bath, do some stretching, anything that makes you feel good.

Consider meditation, breathing exercises as well as other relaxation techniques.

Meditation and yoga are outstanding methods of relieving stress and anxiety. If you've never meditated before there are lots of resources online to guide you. You could practice breathing exercises. Yoga and other mindful movement can be useful. Even listening to relaxing music or an audiobook can help you to unwind.

Set boundaries with others.

Most people are talking about the situation, a lot of the time. If loved ones are talking about coronavirus, and you're trying to get your mind off it, be firm and assertive. Regarding coronavirus, anxiety and your mental health, understand that you can set and establish your boundaries and limitations. If others around you won't respect your boundaries, or you don't feel able to ask them, you could remove yourself from the situation instead (keep in mind the action of removing oneself due to a disagreeable issue may increase one's symptoms of isolation and avoidance). Methods of setting boundaries are to discover what type of boundary you are trying to establish – meaning is it a “Rigid, Healthy or Porous/Diffused Boundary?” Additionally, when setting boundaries remember the 4-Y's:

Your Time – In today's world, time is an important asset. We often feel we never have enough time to focus on what's important in our lives, yet time is often what we least protect through effective boundaries.

Your Emotions – Your emotions are where your love and caring comes from. Your emotions or the “ways you feel about a certain situation” are also not expressed in language in real time and often are misunderstood by others. Our ability to communicate feelings appropriately prevents others from becoming overinvolved in our issues or preventing us from becoming too protective of sharing.

Your Energy – Your energy is the well-spring from which you function. This energy can come from many sources; your “alone time”, your inner peace, activities that invigorate you, etc. When others do or say things that rob you of this energy (such as invade your privacy, create turmoil, make unreasonable demands, keep you from prayer, meditation, etc.), you are less likely to function effectively.

Your Personal Values (Roles and Bonds) – Anything in your life that is important to you (such as your personal values, needs, family, etc.) can be areas that can benefit from effective boundaries. What other areas of your life need boundaries?

Monitor your mental health.

Keep an eye on your mental health. If you notice signs that you are struggling, use your self-management tools to try and get things back on track. Be self-aware.

If you feel your mental health is declining, reach out for help. If you find that your mental health is declining and you're not able to cope, speak to a loved one, a medical professional, your psychiatrist or crisis team if you have one. Remember your crisis plan if you have one. Remember that mental health is just as important as

physical health. Take care of yourself never hesitate to use the numbers below or call our office during normal operating hours

Vet Center Call Center
1-877-WAR-VETS (927-8387)

Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255

Connect with the Veterans Crisis Line to reach caring, qualified responders with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Many of them are Veterans themselves

Travis B. Leland, LCSW
Readjustment Counselor
Escanaba Vet Center



Directors Note

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact all our lives in some way or another. Many of us have experienced a significant amount of adjustment since this virus hit the US. We now have confirmed cases in various locations in the UP. On a personal level this experience feels like what I experienced when deployed to Iraq. The first is that "I am stuck here, and I can't do much about it. The second is "this too will eventually pass, and I will get through it together with my battle buddies." I got through my deployment in Iraq by relying on the support from my friends and leaders, and I practiced the skills I was taught in training. I encourage us all to practice the skills of social distancing advised by the CDC and personal protection to include hand washing, etc. Thank you to Travis Leland for putting together an outstanding article to help us get through this pandemic.

Jim Harsh, Vet Center Director

The Vet Center will continue to remain open during this time. We are currently providing counseling by Video and phone. We are not seeing clients face to face at the present time. Vet Center clients can continue to contact their providers by phone or Video Connect. You can

call the Vet Center at 906-223-0244 to connect with your counselor.

Services Impacted

The Escanaba Vet Center as well as the offices in Houghton, Sault Ste, Marie, and Marquette are not seeing Veterans face to face but continue to provide services by VTEL and phone. If there is a behavioral health crisis, screening will allow accommodations to be made.

Group Sessions

Vet Center face to face group sessions are currently suspended until further notice. We will conduct group video and telephone sessions until such time as we can gather in person again.

Benefits Questions

The VSO offices at the Vet Center are currently closed until further notice and the stay in place restrictions are lifted.