Countering a Culture of Fear:

Mental health recommendations in response to the Coronavirus

By Danielle Dekker

**Background:**

Living in today's fast paced, technologically advanced world poses challenges to all of us in remaining centered and calm, a key practice in developing resiliency towards stress. Demands to process ever increasing amounts of information taxes us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is no wonder popularity has grown both in research and practice of mindfulness and meditation as a mental health intervention. When external stressful events occur at a societal, and even global level, such as the outbreak of the Coronavirus, heightened levels of fear can become contagious and grow disproportionate to the actual risk, making maintaining mental health and wellbeing even more challenging. Strategies for staying centered, calm, grounded, and in positive emotional states not only help in coping with stress but increase immune functioning and boost our body's own natural defenses to illness.

**Keep Stress Low:**

Did you know that our bodies enter regenerative and self-healing states when our stress levels are low and when we engage in positive emotions? What happens when we are subject to heightened and chronic levels of stress? There is extensive documentation of the inhibiting effect of chronic stress on the immune system (Maté, 2003). When the fight-or-flight nervous system is switched on and stays on, the body utilizes all its energy reserves to deal with the constant threat it perceives from the outer environment so that the body has no energy left in its inner environment for growth and repair, compromising the immune system (Dispenza, 2017). Over 1,400 chemical reactions and over thirty hormones and neurotransmitters respond to external stressful stimuli, including the production of cortisol, a common stress hormone (Church, 2009). DHEA is a hormone in your body that is associated with cell repair, and produced by the adrenal glands, but also shares the same chemical precursors to produce cortisol. When the adrenals use those precursors to make cortisol, production shifts away from making DNA (Church, 2009). The great news is that by caring for our mental health and de-stressing ourselves, we have the ability to enter into regenerative states which give our immune systems the advantage.

**Strategies:**

What are some strategies we can take to de-stress ourselves? As a psychotherapist specializing in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, I see first-hand how negative self-talk and negative core beliefs about oneself, resulting from earlier traumatic experiences, can create undue fear and anxiety in people's lives. If you are feeling an uncomfortable level of anxiety due to recent events in the news, one question that may be helpful to ask yourself is "what fear is this triggering in me?" It is possible that an earlier experience has led to beliefs such as "I cannot trust myself," "I am not safe," or "I cannot handle this." If this is the case, it may indicate that you are struggling with unprocessed trauma, and there is help. I would encourage to seek therapy to address these earlier wounds. An easy way to start countering these beliefs is to engage in positive self-talk and affirmations such as "I can create my own sense of safety, " "I am strong and resilient," and "I deserve health and wellness."

**Elevated Emotions Boost Immune Function:**

Did you know that elevated emotions can boost immunoglobulin A (IgA), one of the primary proteins responsible for healthy immune function which fights bacteria, viruses, and other organisms that invade the body? In one study, participants were asked move into an elevated emotional state such as love, joy, inspiration, or gratitude for nine to ten minutes three times a day. Average IgA levels dramatically increased by 49.5 percent. The normal range for IgA is from 37 to 87 milligrams per deciliter (mg/ dL), but some people measured more than 100 mg/dL at the end of the 4-day study (Dispenza, 2017). How might you implement this powerful strategy into your life? Meditation is a time-honored way to practice this, and there are many forms and styles, including guided meditation.

**Heart Math Coherence Technique**

Researchers at the Heart Math Institute have also developed various techniques. One I'd like to suggest here is the Quick Coherence Technique which consists of the following:

Step 1: Heart focused breathing. Focus your attention in the area of the heart. Imagine that your breath is flowing in and out of the chest area. Breathe a little slower and deeper than usual.

Step 2: Activate a positive feeling. Make a sincere attempt to experience a regenerative feeling such as such as appreciation or care for someone or something in your life.

Use whenever you recognize energy draining moments, however subtle.

Knowing that you can achieve positive effects with just 5-10 minutes 2-3 times per day makes this exercise practical and user-friendly.

**Power of Guided Visualization:**

What other strategies can assist in attaining calm, regenerative states of mental and physical health? Guided visualization is another tool that is well tested, as using the power of the imagination can shift one's physiology from a place of distress to calm within short periods of time. EMDR therapy utilizes several of these visualizations. I'd like to share a quick 10 minute guided visualization entitled "Light Stream," demonstrated here by Dr. Jamie Marich at the Institute for Creative Mindfulness. In this exercise, you imagine a healing light either moving through your body or over your body like a shield to clear out body level distress and discomfort. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjBAzyV3gzU>

**Elevate Emotions & Engage in Self Care:**

There are many ways to elevate our emotions and engage in self-care, and I invite you to take the actions that work for you. In addition to some of the exercises suggested here, I encourage you to limit your exposure to news media reports of medical information, as these tend to become dramatized and sensationalized, creating increased levels of fear and anxiety.

**Stay Informed:**

The World Health Organization is an excellent source for obtaining facts and updates. In addition, the Centers for Disease and Control (CDC) has released mental health recommendations to address the outbreak included here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/coping.html> and suggestions for countering stigma that is negatively impacting certain groups, included here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/related-stigma.html>.

**Opportunities:**

The recent outbreak of the Coronavirus is an opportunity to pause and attend to our own self-care. It is also an opportunity for global networking, problem solving, and cooperation. Instead of propagating fear and stigma, let's create an environment where our mental health and well-being are supported.

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