F O C U S

VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE, LLC

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SURVIVING TUMULTUOUS TIMES

For most Americans, 2020 has already been a rough year —and its not over yet. A pandemic, natural disasters, economic decline, and for many, the loss of a job have taken a toll on their mental health. "Stress is particularly acute when you're experiencing a situation that is outside of your control," says Dr. Kerry Ressler, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "You may feel stuck, frozen or helpless." After a traumatic period, even when things settle down it can be difficult to move on and regain a sense of normalcy. So, how can you reduce your stress and regain your footing after going through a bad time, whether that's the result off a large-scale national emergency or even just a personal patch of bad luck? **Step back.** When traumatic events are occurring, whether it's a natural disaster, pandemic, or mass shooting, you need to stay abreast of the news, but at the same time avoid re-traumatizing yourself by immersing yourself in round-the-clock coverage, says Dr. Ressler. Limit the time you spend in front of the screen or reading about the events of the day. The goal is to stay informed without increasing your anxiety level. Turn off the notifications on your phone, and be particularly wary of spending too much time on social media. "

People have the tendency to amplify each other's panic," says Dr. Ressler. "Instead, limit your exposure to checking in on the news a couple of times a day, and then turn it off. Listen to an unrelated podcast or go for a run." **Take action.** "What we do know from research is that one of the biggest precipitators of anxiety is a feeling of helplessness, when everything seems out of your control," says Dr. Ressler. To take back some control, get involved in activities that can help others or address the situation. Volunteer, or help with food drives. Even helping a friend or a neighbor with a problem can make you feel like you are in an active not

passive, role in the face of uncertainty. Taking on an hobby or self-improvement project can also help you move forward. If you lose your job, use some of the unexpected time to take a class or learn a new skill you've always wanted to master. For example, there are a lot of great apps you can use to learn a new language. **Reach out.** Social connections are crucial in difficult situations. If you can't see people in person, then connect with the help of technology, such as video conferencing or even a simple phone call. Get rose-colored glasses. While advice to look on the bright side in the face of hard times may seem trite and unhelpful, don't scoff. Evidence shows that positive thinking and having the ability to reframe a situation in more positive terms can help people become more resilient in the face of problems, says Dr. Ressler. Look for the silver linings whenever you can. A job loss, for example, may lead to new opportunities. **Be patient.** Moving on from a traumatic event takes time. Give yourself permission to grieve. Grief doesn't just occur when you experience a death; rather, people experience grief in Many situations, says Dr. Ressler. This may include the loss of an opportunity or missing out on something you were looking forward to doing. Allow yourself time to grieve, but eventually try to ready yourself to move past it. "You can get into the habit of grief," says Dr. Ressler. So, set some small goals. Use behavioral rewards, and strategies such as deep breathing, mindfulness, aromatherapy, and physical activity to reduce your anxiety and start pushing yourself to move forward. **Get help.** Make sure that your sadness doesn't cross over into depression. "The symptoms of depression overlap with normal symptoms of stress and grief," says Dr. Ressler. But if you start to experience significant alterations in appetite, energy, or motivation, or if you begin to get sad or tearful without knowing why—and these symptoms last

(continued from cover) for more than a week or two—these may be warning signs that you are experiencing depression and need to seek medical help. "If you have a period of sadness that goes on for more than a couple of days and it's really getting in the way of you moving on or functioning at work or home, it may be wise to reach out," says Dr. Ressler. **Source: Harvard Women's Health Watch, Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, June 2020.**

COFFEE'S HEALTHY WHOLE-BODY BENEFITS

"The most important thing we've learned about coffee over the past 20 years is that there's very little indication that it is bad for you," says Edward Giovannucci, M.D., professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "If anything, there's more evidence that it may be healthy to drink." The benefits are probably due to anti-inflammatories and antioxidants found naturally in coffee: polyphenols (such as chlorogenic and quinic acids) and diterpenes (such as cafestol and kahweol). It's likely that many of coffee's health perks extend to decaf too, because with decaf, only the caffeine, not these other compounds, is removed. Studies have found that coffee has positive effect on the risk of a variety of conditions and diseases, including brain health and weight control. But not all of the benefits have the same strength of evidence behind them. (See the table at right). Of course, adding

sugar to your coffee may offset some of the benefits you get from it. In general, people can safely consume up to 400 mg of caffeine per day the amount in two to four 8-ounce cups of coffee. For some, too much coffee irritates the stomach, causes anxiety or the jitters, disrupts sleep, and increases the frequency of heart palpitations. Three or more cups per day appears to trigger migraines in people prone to them. And pregnant women, people who are at risk of osteoporosis, and those taking certain drugs (including some antibiotics, antidepressants, and antipsychotics) should limit their intake of caffeinated coffee. Current research suggests the following in lowering health risks:

Strongest evidence for lowering risk of:

- **Endometrial cancer, gallstones, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, liver fibrosis, cirrhosis, and liver cancer, oral cancers, and Type 2 diabetes**

Moderate evidence for lowering the risk of:

- **Colorectal cancer, coronary heart disease, heart failure, stroke, melanoma and non melanoma skin cancers, Parkinson's disease, and respiratory disease**

- **Improves alertness, concentration, focus, energy levels, and mood**

Some evidence for lowering the risk of:

- **Age-related cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease, breast cancer, depression, pancreatic cancer, and prostate cancer**

- **Increases the variety of healthy bacteria in the gut**

Limited evidence for lowering the risk of:

- **Falls by the elderly, possibly due to caffeine increasing alertness or reaction time,**

- **Weight gain**

Source: Jennifer Cook, Consumer Reports, September 26, 2019.

8 BEST WORKOUTS TO DO FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

Are you having trouble keeping fit during the COVID-19 quarantine? Try not to stress about it — there are plenty of options out there for you. Let's go down the eight best workouts you can try for better mental health during this difficult time. **Running.** Not only is running great exercise to improve your mental health, but it's also a great way to get some time in the great outdoors during this period of quarantine. Running outside helps you get Vitamin D from the sun, which helps stop symptoms of depression. The cardio helps improve your blood flow, which can help improve your brain function. And, it can tire you out which will help you sleep better without medical intervention. Just make sure you have appropriate clothing, running shoes, and keep observing social distancing rules. **Yoga.** If you need to relax, yoga is probably the exercise for you. The American Psychological Association has found that yoga helps improve your physical and mental wellness, and can significantly reduce anxiety. Use soothing music to relax even more while you practice your yoga. The benefits of yoga for our mental health really can't be underestimated. Some different types of yoga you might want to try out are: Bikram,Vinyasa, Ashtanga, Restorative, Power, Iyengar, Anusara, Jivamukti, Sivananda, Hatha. And, once we're able to go back into the world again, you'll be able to try strange and experimental yoga classes like goat yoga or dog yoga. These are classes with actual animals at them! That may seem like a weird choice, but they're actually shown to have therapeutic benefits while you exercise. **Boxing.** If you have or can get a boxing bag, boxing is a really great way to get out aggression and relieve any stress you have. It might seem too aggressive, but it's actually a really fun and engaging workout that many different types of people can enjoy. Boxing is also a really great way to improve your confidence in yourself, and can help

you be better at self-defense should you need it. Boxing helps our body produce more endorphins, and is really good way to manage your anger. **Biking and Cycling.** Even if you can't go to spin class right now, cycling is still a great exercise to help improve your mental health while the weather outside stays nice. And, you'd get to soak up the great outdoors and keep getting that super important Vitamin D into your system! Cycling is a really good cardiovascular workout, so it'll raise up your heart rate and bump up your endorphin level. **Dance.** Looking to get foot loose and shake out those jitters? Have you considered dancing to improve your mental and physical health? Dancing is a great way to turn off your brain and let go of the stress of everyday life. Since you probably can'g get out to a dance class right now, why not try one of the many dance class videos you can find on YouTube or other video streaming sites? There are really a lot of different options for you to dance to improve your mental health in the privacy of our own home. **Pilates.** You may find pilates intimidating, but it's actually a really good exercise to help alleviate mental problems you might be struggling with. Pilates can help you develop techniques for mindfulness, which are helpful for dealing with mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Pilates is a good way to manage your stress through strength training, and also may be helpful in improving your memory. **Swimming.** This may not be something that you can try right now, but swimming is a great way to alleviate mental health problems through exercise. Not only is swimming super fun, but it's really a great way to get a good workout that will improve your mental health. The color of water itself (blue) is naturally soothing and may improve your mental health in and of itself. Swimming improves your concentration and focus, which can help improve

symptoms of depression and anxiety. Some studies have even shown that swimming could help regenerate brain cells in areas that have deteriorated due to stress. **Walk it out.** It may seem silly, but walking as an exercise can seriously improve your mental health. It's an extremely simple, low-stress way to get exercise, disconnect from the stress of your routine, and get you out of the house without violating social distancing rules. Walking when it's sunny outside helps you get more Vitamin D, and should help any claustrophobia you may be feeling abate. Walking is an easy, cheap, and low-risk exercise that could really improve your mental health in the long term. The above workouts can help you get better mental health during a stressful time in our life. However, if you are seriously struggling, you should reach out to a healthcare professional and find out your options for therapy, counseling, and other mental health care treatments.
Source: Alternative Medicine Magazine, InnoVision Health Media, 3470 Washington Blvd, Set 102, Eagan MN 55122 877.904.7951

IS A GRUDGE KEEPING YOU UP AT NIGHT?

Many of us have had the experience of tossing and turning at night, wishing you could sleep, watching the minutes tick by on the clock by our bedside. In fact, one-third of Americans say they lie awake at least a few nights a week. You may have tried counting sheep or listening to a bedtime meditation to help you fall asleep, but according to a new study there's another practice you could consider instead: forgiveness. Researchers asked 1,423 American adults to rate themselves on how likely they were to forgive themselves for the things they did wrong and forgive others for hurting them. The participants also answered survey questions about how they had slept in the past 30 days, how they would rate their health at the moment, and how satisfied they were with their life. The results suggested that people who were more forgiving were more likely to sleep better and for longer, and in turn have better physical health. They were also more satisfied with life. This was true of people who were more forgiving of others, and people who were more forgiving of themselves — although forgiving others had a stronger relationship with better sleep. Forgiveness of self and others "may help individuals leave the past day's regrets and offenses in the past and offer an important buffer between the events of the waking day and the onset and maintenance of sound sleep," wrote the researchers, led by Luther College professor Loren Toussaint. Otherwise, as many troubled sleepers have experience, we might have too much on our minds to get any rest. When we don't forgive, we tend to linger on unpleasant thoughts and feelings, such as anger, blame, and regret. This can involve painful rumination—focused attention and repetitive thoughts about our distress. Ultimately, this study suggests, that resentment or bitterness we are harboring could be detracting from our sleep quality and our well-being. While we know sleep is important for our overall health, this study offers a new perspective on forgiveness as a key factor in achieving healthy sleep. In practice, the more we minimize the rumination that we engage in about unresolved issues, the better our sleep (and, in turn, our overall health) may be. As the researchers state, "If forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness can help people cope with the day's psychological and emotional burdens in a way that frees one's mood and promotes a more restful mental state for sleep, then they support the health-related process of sleep in meaningful ways." This study doesn't prove that forgiveness causes better sleep; only that people who tend to be forgiving also tend to sleep better. So while it isn't guaranteed to completely resolve your sleep issues, forgiveness could be one constructive practice to try, when you feel ready. Letting go of some of the difficult thoughts and feelings you're hanging on to may help you not only avoid that stare-down with your clock tonight but also feel better tomorrow. **Source: Sophie McMullen, research and editorial assistant,** *Greater Good* **magazine, UC Berkley, Berkley CA.**