DR. VERMANI
balanced wellbeing

From Surviving to Thriving through COVID-19

by Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych

We're all impacted by the Coronavirus epidemic. For many, life has slowed to a near standstill. Whether you're juggling the needs of working from home in a bustling household sheltering in place while confined under one roof with no immediate end in sight, or dealing with the isolation of living alone through this unprecedented time, incorporating supporting and life-affirming strategies will carry us throughout and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

During these unprecedented times, we're stressed, fatigued, and confused, some of us more than ever before. We're feeling a loss of control. We've isolated, angry, worried, wracked with self-doubt, feeling overwhelmed by dark thoughts, moods, and anxieties. We may also be feeling the effects physically, with symptoms like muscle tension, exhaustion, headaches, heart palpitations, panic attacks, irritability, moodiness, and restlessness. For some, these times are even more unsettling and traumatic. It is safe to say that we're all suffering to some degree. Let's take a moment to pause, and explore how we can not only survive but thrive during this challenging time.

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Life is a series of experiences. We judge these experiences as positive or negative. We're born alone, and we die alone. On life's journey, we will all experience highs and lows, and live through times of great joy and suffering. The purpose of our journey is to become the highest and best version of ourselves.

It is suffering that compels us to change. Seeking to alleviate our pain and suffering, we stop and think, we begin to shift and change. That's right —suffering is a catalyst for change. Our discomfort requires us to explore ways of bettering our situation, improving our living conditions and easing our symptoms. We are now in a situation that providing us with the time and opportunity to focus on becoming a higher, better version of ourselves. Here and now, we have a chance to pay attention to ourselves, mind, body, and soul, take stock of where we are and think about where we need to shift to be healthier and better versions of ourselves. After all, this is what life is all about, striving to be the best that we can be.

BEYOND SURVIVAL

Why settle for survival when you can shift and thrive? We have an opportunity to take this global COVID-19 pause seriously, to reflect on our lives and where we are and where we would like to be. To that end, I have compiled a list of strategies to help you make the COVID-19 crisis an opportunity for positive change.

YOUR SELF, YOUR TIME AND YOUR ENVIRONMENT

I tell my patients: "Don't give from your well, give from your overflow." We simply need to take care of ourselves before taking care of others. Start with you. Ask yourself: What do I need to prioritize today to make me healthier and happier? What self-care can I bring into my day?

Many women today feel as though they have lost themselves in the needs and agendas of others. Maybe they gave too much in a relationship that didn't work out. Maybe they're in a family situation where they find that they give too much time to work, family responsibilities and supporting the people they care about, and find little time for themselves. Maybe they've invested so heavily into their role as a mother, partner and/or caregiver, that they have lost the most important connection of their lives — to themselves.

An empowered woman knows who she is. With most of us suddenly experiencing more time on our hands than we could have imagined, there's no better time than the present to reconnect with ourselves. What do most average people do with their time? They wake up each day, eat, work, complain and one day die. Why not break that cycle for your betterment? Wake up, meditate, pray, run, explore what you love to do, truly connect with others, help others less fortunate than you are, while making sure that you make time for yourself and your passions.

CREATING THE IDEAL LIFE

Find what you love to do... and do it! Get out of your comfort zone and create your ideal life.
No matter how demanding others may be of your time, start with taking care of your needs. While sheltering in place, it's the perfect time to establish new routines that factor in your own basic needs. Create supportive routines that help you take control of your time, your energies and your environment. Pay attention to:

- setting aside the time to care for your hygiene and your appearance, not just others'
- eating healthy meals regularly, on schedule
- following social distancing and community guidelines, get outside, when possible, for fresh air and exercise. Do something you enjoy, while connecting to the earth with all your senses.
- laying out a clear schedule for yourself and your household, including time together and apart
- making time to communicate with others. Connect, face-to-face, with people around the world using an ever-increasing array of web-based platforms, like Zoom, FaceTime, and Skype, to name a few
- calling — rather than texting —and enjoying the spontaneity of one-on-one conversation
- doing at least three things that bring you joy every day
- setting aside time for yourself, for meditation, sitting with your thoughts and emotions
- bringing in some playfulness, explore new interests, play board games, learning a new skill
- getting enough sleep

SET BOUNDARIES

- learn to say no to the demands of others when you don't have the energy or time to take on the responsibilities required of meeting their needs or desires
- stand up for yourself and what you wish to do with your time, attention and energies
- set time limits on technology, by building time away from Phones computers and TV
- if working from home, set up a workspace that meets your needs, and set healthy limits with breaks, and an end to the working day
- limit stimulants, like caffeine and sugar, and depressants, like alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes
- stay informed, but limit daily exposure to news and COVID-19 virus updates

REACH OUT TO YOUR SUPPORTS

We're all in this together, but at times we're bound to feel isolated and very much alone. It's important to stay engaged and connected to the people and activities that bring you joy, fulfillment, and happiness. Strive each day to:

- stay in touch with family, friends, and colleagues to feel connection and love
- manage your loneliness and negativity by sharing what you're feeling and going through
- engage with people, but don't use them as distractions, or let yourself fall into becoming a sounding board for others to vent their negative ruminations
- follow your regular workout routine, or take advantage of one of many online fitness classes
- continue to spend time on your interests and intellectual pursuits
- limit your exposure to negative people, those who complain endlessly or imagine worse case scenarios
- stay in touch with yourself, through meditation. Even for a few minutes a day, meditation, or connecting with yourself, enables you to stay calm amidst the chaos

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR THOUGHTS

During this unprecedented time, we need to stay connected to our thoughts and feelings. Rather than numbing with substances, or distractions with negative financial consequences, like on-line gambling or shopping, allow yourself to process what you are going through and how it is affecting you. Explore what may be bubbling up from your past.

REFRAME NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

What you focus on, expands. It is easy to become stuck in anxious loops and worst-case scenarios. Make the effort to reframe hopeless, negative thoughts to positive, grateful, hopeful thoughts. Yes, there are challenges out there, but there is also beauty and goodness.

Surround yourself with positive people. Think positive, empowering thoughts. Remember that life doesn't give us more than we can handle.

DERAIL MALADAPTIVE HABITS AND PATTERNS

We all have them! But whatever your go-to negative habits and routines... like comfort eating, procrastination, denial, using substances, overuse of distractions like video games, porn, gambling, online shopping, to name a few, bring forth safety plans and practices to overcome challenges that keep you stuck in unhealthy patterns.

Avoid procrastination with the 15-minute rule. Putting off a dreaded task is something we all do. Whether it's exercising, working on something you're not confident you can do, or something you dislike, the only cure for procrastination is doing the very thing you have been avoiding. So just do it ... and no matter what the task, encourage yourself to stick with a task for 15 minutes before giving up. Have faith in your skillset, and you'll soon realize that when it comes to procrastination, the only way through it is to do it.

PROACTIVELY MANAGE STRESS

Engage mind/body practices, apps like "insight timer", "headspace", or "calm" and working on workbooks to manage feelings of being anxious and overwhelmed like "mind over mood."

Enforce and promote a calm state of mind – breathing exercises, meditate, listen to mindfulness podcasts, videos, positive affirmations, journal, mantras. And complete a daily gratitude log. At the end of every day make note of:

- what you are grateful for
- the things that brought you joy
- what you love about yourself

PROACTIVELY MANAGE STRESS

To live is to learn, so never stop! Freeing and expanding your mind is imperative to self-empowerment. Educate yourself in every way you can. Even if you don't have a formal education there are many ways available to acquire new skills, explore subjects that interest you and expand your knowledge and understanding. Taking the initiative to learn something new is one of the most empowering gifts a person can give themselves. Why not sign up for an online course, learn a new language, join a book club, take a culinary tour of the city where you live, and learn about the history and traditions of the many cultures that make up your community.

USE YOUR TIME WISELY

The outside world — even while you're staying at home — can seem designed to distract you at every turn. It's important to minimize distractions, like social media, gossip, negative chatter, self-soothing habits like online shopping. Tune out time-wasting distractions and come back to yourself — your interests, your needs, your passions and your connection to yourself. Make every hour count. Practice paying attention to how you spend your time, and soon it will be a habit that pays you back and enriches your life every day.

MANAGE YOUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Be proactive. Manage your physical and mental health. Seek attention if you're experiencing symptoms. Use telehealth to talk to a healthcare professional. There are also many mental health care resources, tools at your disposal in the form of distress lines and support centres. If anxiety is unmanageable, there are many HIPAA compliant video chat platforms to facilitate counseling services with professionals specializing in stress, anxiety, mood, and suicide crisis management. If you're in need, take initiatives to seek therapy. If you find symptoms bubbling up of mood, anxiety, and stress, call a crisis line, distress centre, look up stress management resources and supports. Call friends and family. Create healthy support groups and buddy systems. Manage health, sleep hygiene and bring in a lightbox to manage seasonal depression/low mood symptoms.

STRIVING FOR OUR HIGHEST AND BEST

The future is imagination, you can imagine whatever you hope to manifest for yourself. There is no limit as to how beautiful your life can become. As we pass through this time, rather than imagining worst-case scenarios, envision what you want to bring forth in your life. Create a vision board. Plant the seeds for what you hope to bring forth into your life. Imagine you at your highest and best.

In psychology, we say for any habit to change we must reinforce the healthy habit for at least 21 days. At this point in time, the world is re-setting patterns and health standards for many. At the same time, we can introduce healthy habits and learn to grow, or return to unhealthy patterns that no longer serve us. What will you choose? Why not make this a time to reflect and reset?

This is a moment in time and this moment will pass. Let's breathe in the beauty and perfection of right now. Seize this opportunity to shift and change. You are at once perfect and a work in progress, just like everyone else, and the world itself. Amongst the chaos and uncertainty, please remember to breathe, be grateful, take care of yourself, and create beauty amongst the chaos.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych., is a clinical psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress, mood and anxiety disorders. She is a well-known speaker and author, and founder of Let's Start Living Corporate Wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, will be released in 2020.