



## START LIVING CORPORATE WELLNESS

# From **Surviving** To **Thriving** Through **COVID-19**

By: Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych.

***We have all been impacted by the Coronavirus epidemic. In the beginning, for many, life slowed down to a near standstill. For many others, work became unpredictable, with increased or ever-changing hours, uncertainty and health risks. In the months that followed, many of us moved through isolation and a prudent and tentative return to a new normalcy, while bracing for a possible second wave. During these continuing uncertain times, we can incorporate supportive and life-affirming strategies that will carry us through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.***

With the COVID-19 second wave upon us, many of us find ourselves more stressed, fatigued, and confused than ever before. We're feeling a loss of control. People are 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, boredom, worrisome and increased restlessness.

COVID-19 has been a time of extremes for many. For some it has brought deeper bonding with family; for others, it has intensified conflicts and substance abuse. Many have suffered temporary or permanent job loss, while others have settled well into new work routines — minus the taxing and stressful commute times — while working from home. On the other hand, many people working from home find themselves overworking and feeling isolated, missing the in-person team supports and comradery. Many people have made this a time to focus on healthier pursuits; others have fallen into unhealthy patterns of substance use, or abuse.

For most of us, in one way or another, these times have been and continue to be deeply unsettling and traumatic on various levels. It is safe to say that we're all suffering from this sudden change to some degree.

Let's take a moment to pause, and explore how we can not only survive but thrive during this very 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 are born into family units and communities, and will all experience highs and lows, and go 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 pause, stop and reflect. Our discomfort requires us to explore ways of improving our situation and bettering our living conditions to ease our symptoms and suffering. It is here where we begin to shift and change. That's right... suffering

is a catalyst for change. We need to reflect on what positive changes we can make to cope, shift and change during these times.

For many, COVID-19 has created a pause in the non-stop 'rat race,' actions of our lives. This pause provides us with the time and opportunity to focus on becoming higher, better versions of ourselves. Right here and right now, we have a chance to pay attention to ourselves, mind, body, and soul, take stock of where we are, and think about how we can become 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 COVID-19 pause and put it to good use, to reflect on our lives and where we are and where we would like to be. To that end, here are some 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." By this, I mean that we need to take care of ourselves before we take care of others. Start with you! Ask yourself: What do I need to prioritize today to make me healthier and happier?

Many people get caught up in the needs and agendas of others, and find little time for themselves. Maybe they've invested so heavily into their role as a parent, partner or caregiver, that they have lost their most important connection — to themselves.

With COVID-19, most of us are experiencing more time on our hands than usual. 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, go to sleep at night, wake up the next day and do it all again. Why not break that cycle for your betterment? Wake up, meditate, pray, exercise, truly connect with others, help others less fortunate than yourself, while making sure that you make time for yourself and your passions.

### **CREATE YOUR 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. Now is the perfect time to establish new routines that factor in your own basic needs. Begin to incorporate supportive routines that help you take control of your time, your energies and your environment. Routines like:

- Setting aside the time to care for your hygiene and your appearance
- Eating healthy meals regularly, on schedule
- Following social distancing guidelines, get outside, whenever possible, for fresh air and basic exercise, in nature
- Laying out a clear structure for your day 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 and energy exchange of one-on-one conversation
- Doing at least three things that bring you joy every day. Life is unpredictable, so why not live each day as if it is your last? Make sure you include pleasurable activities and love-filled moments each and every day
- Carving out time for yourself, for meditation, sitting with your thoughts and emotions
- Bringing in some playfulness, like exploring new interests, playing board games, learning a new skill
- Getting enough sleep, resting and listening to your body, and breaking unhealthy habits like engaging in excessive comfort foods or alcohol/drug use substances

## 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. Begin to:

- Stand up for yourself and what you wish to do with your time, attention and energy
- Set time limits on technology, by building time away from phones, computers and TV
- Create a workspace that meets your needs
- Structure your work schedule to include breaks and a reasonable end to the working day
- Limit stimulants, like caffeine and sugar, and depressants, like alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes
- Stay informed, but ensure you 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
- Spend time on your interests and intellectual pursuits
- Limit your exposure to negative people, those who complain endlessly or imagine worse case scenarios
- Keep 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 engaging in distractions with negative financial consequences,

like on-line gambling or shopping, allow yourself to process what you are going through and how it is impacting you. Explore what may be bubbling up from your past. Many of us experience fear and self-doubts. We need to challenge the truth behind our thought sand realize that fear is often *False Evidence Appearing Real*.

What you focus on, expands. It is easy to become stuck in anxious ruminations and forecasting worst-case scenarios. Make the effort to reframe hopeless, negative thoughts to positive, grateful ones. Yes, there are challenges out there, but there is also beauty and goodness. Surround yourself with positive people. Think positive, empowering thoughts. Remember, 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 using 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 tackle, 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 this dreaded 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

Try mind/body practices, with apps like *Insight Timer*, *Headspace* and *Calm*. Use workbooks, such as *Mind Over Mood* to manage anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed. Enforce and promote a calm state of mind with breathing exercises. Meditate, listen to mindfulness podcasts, videos, positive affirmations, mantras. 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
- What negative thoughts do you hold that can be reframed to positive, adaptive thoughts instilling hope and lifting your spirits than depleting you

### USE YOUR TIME WISELY

The outside world — even while you're staying at home more than ever — at times seems designed to distract you at every turn. It's important to minimize distractions, like social media, gossip, negative chatter, and self-soothing habits, like online shopping.

Tune out time-wasting distractions and tune in to yourself — your interests, your needs, your passions and your connection to yourself. Make every hour count. Pay 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. Seek attention if you're experiencing symptoms. Use *Telehealth* to talk to a healthcare professional. There are also many mental health-care resources and tools at your disposal, including distress lines, EAP and support centres.

There are also many secure online video chat platforms that 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 are experiencing symptoms of mood, anxiety, or stress, call a crisis line or distress centre. Seek out stress-management resources and supports. Call friends and family. Create healthy support groups and buddy systems. Manage your health, sleep and hygiene. Use a lightbox if you experience seasonal depression/low mood symptoms.

### IMAGINE YOUR HIGHEST AND BEST

The future is imagination, and 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. Plant the seeds for what you hope to bring forth into your life. Imagine your world shifting for your betterment and growth. Imagine you at your highest and best.

In psychology, we say that for any habit to change we must reinforce the new healthy habit for at least 21 days. At this point in time, as the world is re-setting patterns and redefining health standards, you can also re-invent and reset. Introduce healthy habits that help you learn to grow, and re-enforce these new habits for 21 days. Shed the unhealthy patterns that no longer serve you.

This is a perfect time to shift and change. Just like everyone else, and the world itself, you are at once perfect and a work in progress. In this time of chaos and uncertainty, take care of yourself, hold yourself accountable for your mind, body and spiritual health and make the effort to create positive changes that will ensure that you will not only survive but thrive through and beyond COVID-19.

### About Dr. Vermani:

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, *A Deeper Wellness*, is scheduled for publication in 2021.

Website: [www.drvermanowellness.com](http://www.drvermanowellness.com) [www.mvstartliving.com](http://www.mvstartliving.com)

