KEEP CALM, AND CARRY ON
Relaxation and Well-Being during Social Distancing

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In these uncertain times, as we all hunker down, it’s important to be able to relax our body’s stress response. A stressful state is disruptive to your body and its natural immune system, so take the time to offer yourself activities that counter the overactive mind and overstimulating barrage of news, and use of screens that have become the new normal.

Here are some suggestions, pick one or more to incorporate into each day:

MOVE — a little or a lot
1) walking, jogging or riding a bike is a safe way to get some exercise and the benefits of being outside
2) dig in your garden, hands in the earth will help you to feel grounded
3) planks, squats, push-ups and sit-ups — let technology help and look for workouts on youtube.com or on tv, or get creative and make up your own routine
4) yoga or stretching — you can find classes online — or you can make up your own practice, tuning in to exactly what your body is asking for right now
5) dance!!

BREATHE —
1) Conscious Breathing — this is a simple mindfulness technique that can be done anywhere for as few as three breaths or for as long as you’d like. Sit with a tall spine. Relax your temples and your forehead, your jaw, neck and shoulders. Then bring your attention to your breath. Notice your inhale. Begin with the very beginning of your inhale and follow the whole breath in with your attention. Then notice the very beginning of your exhale and follow the whole breath out. Notice wherever you feel this breath most prominently and focus there. If your mind wanders gently bring it back to your breath and begin again with no harsh judgment.
2) Lengthen Exhale — begin with a few breaths of simply noticing the breath and then tune in to the duration of inhale and exhale. Let the inhale equal the exhale for a couple of breaths, keep the breath calm, smooth and easy — never force it. Once you have established a smooth flowing even inhale and exhale (maybe a count of 3, 4 or 5 — count if you’d like or just estimate), gently add a count to your exhale and take a few breaths there. When you are ready, add another count to your exhale and continue in this pattern until your exhale is double your inhale, or until you are at a comfortable maximum. Don’t exceed a place of comfort here. The exhale is the relaxing half of the breath and will help your body initiate a relaxation response.

MEDITATION and GUIDED RELAXATION —
1) Meditation - Set aside some time for peace and quiet each day. Whether you meditate, spend time in prayer, read inspirational poetry or stand and gaze at a favorite photo, piece of art or out your window, giving your mind a break every day is a good idea for your productivity and for your health. Again, technology can help here. If you have never really meditated and would like to try, I would recommend either the Headspace or Calm Apps. Also, you could look for guided meditations by my personal favorite leaders, Tara Brach, Dr. Rick Hanson or Jack Kornfield. I have never tried it, but I think the iPhone and iWatch also offer an app called Breathe or Breathing App. Just sitting with attention to your breath as in the Conscious Breathing section above is one form of Meditation. Other types that might appeal to you at this time, are Walking Meditation, Meditation on Sounds, Meditation on an object, like a seashell, or a candle. In these forms you simply focus your awareness on the walking, the sounds, or the object and gently bring your mind repeatedly back to that focus.
whenever you realize that it has wandered. Begin with short stints of time, and feel free to lengthen as you get more experience.

2) Body Scan for Relaxation - Either lay down or sit in a comfortable position, take a few moments to settle into your position and then place your attention on your feet, hold your attention there until you feel a slight buzz or vibration, which is simply your awareness; then with an exhale consciously relax the muscles of your feet, shift your attention upwards to your ankles, and go through the same steps. Continue with, calves and shins, knees, thighs, hips, glutes, abdominals, low back, ribcage, mid-back, chest, upper back and shoulder blades, collar bones, tops of shoulders, throat, neck, jaw, cheeks, brow, forehead, scalp. Allow your whole body to rest, feel the weight of your limbs and your head if laying down. Feel whatever parts of you are grounded. Stay in relaxed state for as long as you’d like.

3) Tense and Release — Lay flat, sit tall, or stand. Tense all your muscles including the muscles of your face, and on an exhale of your choice release all the tension, imagining it flowing out of your body. Repeat 3 to 5 times. Rest in relaxed state for as long as you’d like.

4) Visualization — Sit with a tall spine, and allow yourself time to settle, and your breath to even out into a calm flowing natural pace. Then choose a place that makes you very happy, and simply imagine that you are there, gazing out at the ocean, or walking along a mountain path. Choose any place from which you can conjure up sights, sounds, smells and feelings. Tune into the senses, as you visualize this “happy place.”

SELF-CARE —

1) Self massage - Alleviate stress that has accumulated in your body, and keep your immune system working at its best. Take a few minutes in the morning and in the evening, and even a 5-minute break from work in the middle of the day for this feel good ritual. Begin with your hands. Massage the fingers, the palms and the backs of the hands, knead the webbing between thumbs and forefinger, especially on the right hand, this is a trigger point for the immune system. Move to the feet, and massage the toes, the soles, the heels and the insteps. Then massage the neck, beginning close to the occipital joint, where the skull meets the spine, and gently rub up down the back and the sides of the neck, slide the fingers to the collarbone area and massage the upper chest area and the tops of the shoulders. End with a gentle massage of your temples, and a moment of stillness, allowing yourself to feel the effects of your massage.

2) Gratitude Practice - In times like this, it can be challenging to evoke these feelings, but if you simply write a list of three things (big or small) you are grateful for every day, before long you will have a long list of things that are right about your world. Your well-being can grow right alongside this list. This is well-documented, science-backed and so simple.

3) Maintain Joy in Life - If you can’t do what you do, do what you can! Sing, Dance, Play, Paint, Laugh, Smile. Do the activities that you enjoy to the extent that you can, and be creative.

CONNECTION —

1) Text friends and families, with news, funny stories, pretty pictures
2) Send e-mails or personal letters
3) Phone or FaceTime with others
4) Send out an Instagram Challenge
5) Give yourself periodic breaks from social media and the news
6) Remember we are all in this together, and together we will get through it.

In conclusion, following a sensible healthy lifestyle including good diet and plenty of rest and sleep will also help to keep you feeling your best throughout this challenging time. When feeling overwhelmed, choose one or more of the above suggestions and with compassion give yourself permission to nurture yourself. Remind yourself often — This Too Shall Pass!

Stay safe, be well.