A SELF-CARE GUIDE FOR LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Tips for Maintaining your Mental and Physical Well-Being During a Difficult and Uncertain Time of Changes and Challenges

Stephanie Sogg, PhD
MGH Weight Center/
Harvard Medical School
Boston, MA
NOTE:

This document is a resource that I created with my own patients in mind, but much of the guidance is widely and generally applicable.

This document is lengthy, and it contains a lot of information and guidance; feel free to review it at your own pace, and to focus on and make use of the parts of this document that are most useful to you.

I hope that you will find this to be a helpful resource, and wish you and your loved ones the best as we all experience this challenging time.

DISCLAIMER:

This document was developed independently by myself, revised according to input from expert colleagues. It does not represent the views of, and is not being distributed on behalf of, my employers/institutions (Massachusetts General Hospital, MGH Weight Center, Harvard Medical School).

This document is not intended to be a substitute for individually-tailored professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read in this document.

The current version of this document was written on March 27, 2020. I anticipate that this document will evolve over time, as circumstances change, official public health guidance evolves, and in response to input I get from readers. PLEASE CONSIDER THE MOST CURRENT PUBLIC HEALTH ADVICE WHEN READING THIS DOCUMENT. If guidance in this document conflicts with current public health guidelines, or guidance from your own healthcare provider(s), the other guidance must take precedence over any suggestions contained in this document.
INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, people are facing a frightening situation that is affecting every aspect of our daily lives. The anxiety surrounding this situation is made worse by uncertainty – the world has never faced a situation quite like this before, and it is hard for anyone, including our governments and our scientific experts, to know for sure what we should be doing, how we can stay safe, how long this situation will last, or what will happen next. Our daily routines have been upended, and our ability to connect with others has been limited by the necessary social distancing measures and regulations. It is completely normal and expectable that people will be feeling anxious, stressed, sad, and confused during a time like this. At the same time, the structures and comforts that we normally depend upon to help us cope with difficult emotions have likely changed dramatically, and/or our access to them has been decreased.

In a situation like this, people may be finding it difficult to take care of their mental and physical well-being, because of logistical challenges or intense emotions. This guide is intended to help you to safeguard your mental and physical health and continue engaging in important self-care behaviors, at a time when doing these things might seem difficult or even impossible. Below, you will find recommendations for steps that you (and your loved ones) can take to help to cope with the current situation in a healthy way.

CORE PRINCIPLE: USING A SCHEDULE-BUILDING APPROACH TO MAINTAIN HEALTHY FUNCTIONING, MINIMIZE STRESS, AND IMPROVE COPING

There are a number of necessary changes that have been made in our cities, states, and countries that have led to enormous changes in our daily lives and routines. Activities that once gave structure to your day, week, or month have been canceled or are now happening “virtually”. Some people who were working may now find themselves not working, or working from home, or working on a very different schedule or with very different responsibilities than before. Classes have been canceled or have moved online. Regular social events or gatherings have been canceled or are happening virtually. Children and teenagers are now home all day instead of going to school.

The uncertainty, very real risks, and significant disruption to “life as we know it” resulting from the Coronavirus crisis may lead (directly or indirectly) the risk of a number of negative consequences, including:

- Social isolation
- Low mood and symptoms of depression
- Increased feelings of anxiety, panic, and/or being overwhelmed
- Sleep disruption
- Decrease in necessary health-related behaviors such as meal-planning, physical activity, etc.
- Increase in unhealthy behaviors
- Emotional eating
One of the best approaches for coping with the various types of challenges brought about by the current situation, and decreasing the risk of the negative consequences listed above, is to create a consistent schedule and routine for yourself (and the rest of your household, if you live with others). Using this overall approach of devising a schedule/routine will help you to do all the things you need to do to cope with the current situation in a healthy way.

LIFE FEELS COMPLETELY CHAOTIC AND UNCERTAIN RIGHT NOW – WHY ON EARTH DO I NEED A ROUTINE OR A SCHEDULE AT A TIME LIKE THIS?

- The fact that life feels chaotic and uncertain right now is the exact reason why developing a routine is so important. Most of us are used to having work, various appointments, educational or social obligations, and other external factors to structure our daily routine.
- When this structure falls away (or changes dramatically), there is a very natural temptation to operate without any clear routine or structure for yourself (and/or your household).
- However, without at least a minimal amount of structure and consistency, there is a significant risk for increased anxiety, low mood, feelings of discouragement, lagging motivation, a lapse in healthy behaviors, and an increase in unhealthy behaviors.

This guide will provide suggestions for how to decrease these risks by building a schedule/routine, what types of activities/tasks to include, and how to create a balance in your daily/weekly life that will help you to function well during this crisis and take care of your mental and physical well-being.

1. BASIC TIPS FOR SCHEDULE-BUILDING

- If you live with other people (relatives, friends, housemates, etc.), consider working together to create daily routines for each member of the household that all mesh together well.
  - Make sure that everyone’s schedule works well with everyone else’s, and to include combined or communal activities/tasks in the schedule (where appropriate). In households with children (or an elderly or ill adult who needs care) and more than one adult, make sure to schedule times in which one or the other adult is spending time with the children (or adult who needs care), so that each adult has some “time off” during the day to take care of his or her own needs. Remember that having a consistent daily routine is even more important for children, who do better and feel more secure if they have a general sense of what they can expect from one day to the next.
- Try to keep bedtimes/waking times roughly the same each day.
  - See “Sleep” section, below, for why this is important, and for more information and tips about sleep.
- Make it a point to get dressed and cleaned up every day, even if you will not be going anywhere or seeing anyone.
  - Spending a day in your pajamas or sweats can be fun and relaxing, but spending a long stretch of time without changing your clothes, bathing, etc. can end up feeling rather depressing. If you don’t need to wear any specific type of clothes (for instance, if you are not visually tele-commuting), then absolutely wear what is comfortable, but don’t do
anything that makes yourself feel as though you are “letting yourself go” (whatever that means to you), because that is not good for your morale!

- **Make sure to formally include all of your important activities/tasks into your schedule.**
  - Think of all of your activities, behaviors, and tasks as falling into three major categories:
    - **Activities that are good for your mental well-being**
    - **Activities that are good for your physical well-being**
    - **Activities that are necessary for the upkeep of your home/household.**
      - *Each of these categories is covered in detail in a separate section, later in this document.*
  - The aim is to create a schedule/routine that has a specific slot for every type of activity or task that is important for you to be doing, so that activities in any one specific category are not neglected, and that other types of activities are not over-emphasized, leaving no time for other important activities or behaviors.
  - *Be sure that all three categories are fully represented in your schedule, so that no single category is left out, or over-emphasized.*

- **If you are caring for children or other loved ones, make sure to include all three types of activities/tasks that they will need into the household’s schedule!**
  - This guide does not explicitly cover childcare activities and responsibilities, or items specific to children’s academic or leisure activities, but if you live with children, or are caring for adult loved ones, make sure that your schedule reflects the things that you and they need to do to be safe and maintain their physical and mental well-being, as well as your own.
    - Many resources are available on the Internet for guidance around schooling children and teenagers at home. These resources tend to emphasize the importance of a daily routine that balances academic, creative, social, and physical activities.

- **Keep the schedule flexible, but do make sure to KEEP IT!**
  - At first it may seem like an unnecessary hassle to write out a schedule or to go about your daily activities in this seemingly-artificial, planned-out way. Why not take advantage of this situation by allowing yourself to just “go with the flow”?
  - It is, of course, necessary to be flexible in how you create, revise, and follow your schedule – you are not aiming for military-style Basic Training!
    - If you are not flexible in how you build/follow your schedule, it may not work well for you when you set out to implement it, and you may be tempted to abandon it altogether.
  - Remember, however, that having some structure, if it is appropriately flexible and realistic, is really important. The downside of not having structure, as noted above, is that for most people, having completely unstructured time for days or weeks on end takes a very negative toll on your mental and physical health, leaving you feeling apathetic, unmotivated, or even depressed, and increasing the risk that behaviors that are necessary for your well-being won’t get done, and that behaviors that are not good for your well-being will happen more often.
2. GETTING STARTED: CREATE THE OUTLINES OF YOUR SCHEDULE
Start by drawing (or creating on your computer) a weekly grid template. Experiment with different layouts, until you find one that works for you. You might want to divide the days into “morning”, “afternoon”, and “evening” rows, or make a grid that allows you to plan hour by hour. Here are some examples (and you can find various other templates by Googling “Weekly Grid” or “Weekly Schedule template” and then searching the results under the “images” tab):

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3. CHOOSE WHAT GOES INTO IN YOUR SCHEDULE

Next, make a comprehensive list of the specific activities or behaviors that you want to include in your daily or weekly routine – make sure to include activities or items from all three of these important and necessary categories: Activities that are good for your mental well-being, activities that are good for your physical well-being, and activities that are necessary for the upkeep of your home/household. Expect to be adding or changing items on your list as you continue to refine this process. *In the next section of this document, you will find more detailed, comprehensive discussion/suggestions for each of these three categories.*

- **Category 1: Activities/tasks for your mental well-being**
  - Social contact
  - Enjoyable leisure activities
  - Larger projects:

- **Category 2: Activities/tasks for your physical health**
  - *Eating*
    - Meal/snack scheduling
    - Meal/snack planning
    - Food shopping/ordering
    - Food preparation
  - Physical activity
  - Specific health/medical needs

- **Category 3: Activities/tasks necessary for the upkeep of your household**
  - Work tasks
  - Household upkeep

4. FILL IN YOUR SCHEDULE

Once you have your list of activities/tasks/behaviors, experiment with “plugging them into” your schedule. Make sure to take into account the schedules/routines of others in your household, or which times of day might be the most easy or realistic for certain activities as opposed to others. If this task seems overwhelming, try starting out by just mapping out one day (perhaps tomorrow, whatever that day may be), and see how that goes, to help you get the hang of it.

5. “ROAD TEST” YOUR SCHEDULE

Once you have devised a “draft” of your schedule, try implementing it and see what happens. One way to go about this might be to start by just mapping out one day (perhaps tomorrow, whatever that day may be), and then try it out, and see what works and what doesn’t.
6. REVIEW, EVALUATE, AND REVISE AS NEEDED

Review and revise as needed: You should absolutely expect that as time goes on and you try out different things, you will need to tweak and refine your schedule/routine to eventually devise one that works the best for you. Remember, keep your schedule flexible enough that you (and your household) can realistically follow it without feeling overly regimented, too busy, or too unstructured and bored.

A DETAILED LOOK AT EACH OF THE THREE MAJOR CATEGORIES OF DAILY/WEEKLY ACTIVITIES AND BEHAVIORS

Category 1: Activities/tasks for your mental well-being

First and foremost, make sure that you are taking care of yourself in a positive way by creating dedicated spaces in your daily schedule for various activities that bring you pleasure, satisfaction, and comfort. This is important for anyone, on a general basis, but it is also a way to reduce the risk of using eating as your main source of enjoyment or comfort during this stressful time.

Below are some categories/examples of this type of activity – try to incorporate each of these types of pleasurable activity into your schedule at least a few times per week, if not daily:

- **Social contact:** Social connection is extremely important during any stressful time, and social isolation is more likely right now given the (very necessary) social distancing measures that have been put in place.
  - Just because you are not able to meet up with people in person right now does not mean that social isolation is inevitable. Try one or more of these things to make sure you stay connected to the people you love:
    - Schedule a regular daily or weekly phone call or video chat with one or more members of your social support network (friends, family, etc.) You might try scheduling a weekly check-in with each of several people, so that you have at least one social contact every day.
    - Many methods are available to connect by phone or video, including Zoom, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, or even simply using the “conference calling” feature on your smart phone.
    - Come up with some type of project that you can work on over time with one or more other people, such as writing a collection of stories, playing an online game, documenting your family tree, researching the fantasy vacation you will take together when life gets “back to normal”, etc. You could work together virtually, or independently, with virtual meetings from time to time to share your progress.
**Enjoyable leisure activities:** Leisure activities like watching TV/Netflix, playing video games, catching up on reading, and doing craft projects are important and necessary for your emotional well-being. However, without structure, some people find themselves getting lost in one of these activities for hours, which can end up contributing to a worsening emotional state.

- Make sure that your schedule includes plenty of these enjoyable things
  - Ideally, include time slots for several enjoyable leisure activities each day
  - However, be sure to carve out **specific blocks of time** for these activities, so that you don’t end up “binge-ing” on them and feeling worse rather than better, or neglecting other things that need to be done.

**Larger projects:** Do you have some big project you’ve been wanting to do for ages, but you never had the time? Maybe you have have been wanting to clean out all of your closets, organize 20 years of photos, take an on-line language class, learn to knit, etc. If you do have a lot of free time now, this would be a great time to start one of these projects!

- Even with lots of free time, starting a big project may seem a bit overwhelming. It doesn’t have to be. Try the following process for getting started on your project in a manageable (and more enjoyable and sustainable) way:
  - First, break the project up into very small, distinct sub-projects (for instance, organizing one month’s or one year’s worth of photos at a time, researching online language classes, choosing one closet or one section of a closet at a time, etc.)
  - Set aside a block of time to your master daily schedule, on one or more days per week, to work on ONE of the smaller components of your project (or for a small chunk of time).
    - You could instead choose to divide up the project into chunks of time – for instance, spend 20-30 minutes going through photos, weeding the yard, etc.
      - At the end of the designated time period (e.g., after 30 minutes), stop, put that activity aside, and move on to the next item on your schedule – you can return and do another time block of this project later or on another day.
  - No matter what, do not work on the project for too much longer than the pre-specified block of time – if you get too caught up and cannot stop working, you may wind up getting burned out and giving up!
  - If you find that the block of time you set aside for these sub-tasks is too short or too long, adjust your schedule accordingly moving forward.

**Limiting exposure to news and other informational media:** Enormous amounts of information are being generated by the various types of news media, hour by hour – there is enough new information coming out that you could spend the entire day reading/listening/watching and not even scratch the surface.

During a time of crisis, it is important to stay informed about risks, formal guidance for maintaining safety, and new developments. However, the messages and content coming in from the news and other sources of media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) can be anxiety-
provoking and overwhelming, and this can, in turn, affect your self-care behaviors in a negative way.

How to balance the need to stay informed with the need to avoid panic and overwhelm? The scheduling approach described in this document may also help you to consume news/media in a way that meets both of those needs:

- Choose specific (brief!) times in your daily schedule during which you will check the news (TV news, newspaper content, social media feeds) and limit your consumption of news media to these times only.
  - This will decrease your exposure to material that may increase your anxiety more than is necessary, warranted, or helpful, and prevent you from being drawn into a never-ending “rabbit-hole” of chasing article after article.
- Choose your news media consumption times wisely
  - For instance, avoid checking the news just before meals or just before bed.
  - Consider deliberately scheduling some type of positive and comforting activity to occur immediately after your scheduled news-checking times.
- Remember, although it is important to stay informed, it is unlikely that limiting your news consumption to, for example, one half-hour slot in the morning and one half-hour slot in the evening, will cause you to miss crucial information that was needed immediately. In other words, yes, things are happening at a breakneck pace, but there is unlikely to be a serious negative consequence if you learn of a new development a few hours after that news first breaks.

**Category 2: Activities/tasks for your physical health:**

Stress, uncertainty, and lack of structure all make it difficult to continue to engage in behaviors that are necessary to keep your body healthy. When a crisis is going on, it sometimes feels as though these types of things are either too difficult to do, or that it is too hard to focus on these things right now, or even that it might be pointless to do them.

It is absolutely true that these things are difficult to do, and to focus on, during times like these, but actually it is arguably even more important to continue to do them during a crisis, to maintain your health and fitness (and your resistance to illness!). Remember, too, that these factors affect not just your physical health, but your mental well-being, as well.

Below are tips for using the scheduling approach to ensure that you continue to be healthy in your sleep, eating, activity, and specific medically-related behaviors.
**Sleep:** Getting adequate sleep is crucial to protecting your immune system, managing your mood and your ability to cope with stress, and regulating your weight and other aspects of your health.

- As mentioned above, **one of the most important things you can do is to keep your bedtimes/waking times roughly the same from day to day.**
  - Even if you were not maintaining consistent bedtimes/waking times before, if you are able to do so now, it is highly recommend that you do so.
  - Keeping the same waking time each morning is more important than keeping the same bedtime each night, though both are important.
  - If possible, keep bedtimes/waking times that are not too different from the ones you keep in your “normal life”.
  - Varying bedtime/waking time by too much, or too often, can lead to problems with insomnia, because your body will be less able to get into, and stay in, a stable rhythm.
  - You do not need to go to bed or get up at exactly the same time daily, but **try not to vary bedtime or waking time more than one hour in either direction.**
  - Even if you do not need to do anything specific in the morning, continue to **wake up and get out of bed around the same time** daily.
    - If you do not have anything pressing to do first thing in the morning, that’s fine – relax and enjoy, but get up and out of bed to do this!
- It is also crucial that you **avoid napping** if possible. Napping throws your sleeping schedule off and can contribute to insomnia, which then leads to more napping, and a vicious cycle of sleep problems.
  - If you must nap, make sure that you do so within the first few hours after waking up, not too close to your intended bedtime.

**Eating:** Maintaining a healthy and balanced eating pattern is challenging for most people under the best of circumstances, and it is particularly hard to do during a time when you are feeling stressed and down, and when your routine has been dramatically changed.

You can use the scheduling approach to help make sure that you maintain healthy eating during this time, by building specific eating-related things into your daily/weekly schedule:

- **Meal/snack scheduling:** Designate specific times each day for all three meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner) as well as planning in times for snacks, so that you are not going more than about 4 (waking) hours without eating.
  - It is also important to make sure that you are not snacking too frequently, because of the lack of structure, boredom, or negative emotions. Keeping to a meal/snack schedule will help with this.
- **Meal/snack planning:** Choose a block of time on one day per week when you will sit down and plan out the meals and snacks you will eat the following week – choose recipes and specific meals and snacks, and make a grocery list (for online shopping, or in-person grocery shopping if this is safe to do).
  - **Important:** You are aiming for a **healthy overall balance** in your weekly eating. Do not try to be overly-restrictive or plan out a “perfect” plan of eating – this may lead you to get bored or to feel deprived, and this is when impulsive
eating of less-healthy foods is likely to happen. This then leads to feeling out of control, feeling guilty, and abandoning your efforts to eat healthfully.

- **Follow the “80/20 rule:**
  - Try to eat foods that are on the healthier side most (about 80%) of the time, and allow yourself to have more caloric or more “treat-like” foods the rest of the time.
  - Make sure that even the healthier meals/snacks you are planning are things that you truly enjoy.
  - Also make sure that you **truly allow yourself** that other 20% - include one or two meals/snacks each week that are more of a “treat”
    - For example, plan on ordering out once each week, or having dessert two nights per week, etc.
    - However, do make sure that you **plan ahead of time** what this treat will be, and how much of it you will have, so that you feel in control and do not end up feeling guilty about it
    - Feeling guilty about what you have eaten doesn’t help you to eat more healthfully; it usually has the opposite result: you feel down on yourself and discouraged, and this makes it even harder to eat healthfully -not easier!

- **Food shopping/ordering:** As much as is possible, given the current situation, try to schedule a consistent day/time for shopping or ordering the foods you will need for the meal/snack plan you have devised.
  - **Note:** Some people find it easier to plan and to shop/order for a few days at a time, rather than an entire week. This is fine, as long as you continue to shop/order on a regular basis so that you don’t end up with a day or more for which you have no plan, or you have no healthy food available and cannot follow your plan.

- **Food preparation:** Set aside specific times during the week when you will be prepping or cooking the meals/snacks you plan to eat that week.

- **Physical activity:** There is almost nothing that is more helpful in building your ability to cope with stress than physical activity. Physical activity can help calm anxiety in the moment, and in addition, engaging in physical activity on a regular basis reduces your overall stress level and helps you to cope better with the stress that you do feel. Physical activity does this directly, but it also helps with these things indirectly by improving your sleep quality. Regular physical activity can also help to regulate your appetite and food cravings.
  - Make sure that you set aside a designated part of your schedule for some form of physical activity **every day, or nearly every day.**
  - Choose a time in your daily schedule that will work the best for you – if you know that you hate being active in the morning, choose a later time slot. If you know you have a tendency to put off doing activity and to get caught up in other things until there is no time left for activity, choose a time slot close to the start of the day. Avoid doing activity within about 1.5 to 2 hours before your planned bedtime.
If you do not already have a physical activity routine, this is a great time to start one, but be sure to **start small and increase slowly and gradually**.

- This is important both for avoiding injury, but also for avoiding feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of getting into the habit of doing consistent physical activity.

**Make sure you choose activities that you actually enjoy, or at least ones that you do not find too difficult or unpleasant** – otherwise you will not want to do them (and who could blame you? No one wants to make time to do something that is really unpleasant!)

- Remember: Physical activity does not need to be hard or painful to “count” – any activity is better than none at all!

**Always follow the most recent public health guidance regarding outdoor recreation.** Note that at the time when this document was created, there was no public health guidance to avoid outdoor recreation, as long as the activity in question could be performed while maintaining adequate social distancing. Guidance may have changed since the development of this document; the **most recent guidance should be followed**.

**Only engage in physical activity that is safe for you**, given your specific fitness level, health conditions, etc. If in doubt, consult a medical provider (virtually or by phone, if necessary) before starting a physical activity routine.

- **If you are having symptoms of Coronavirus, or any other illness, do not engage in physical activity unless a medical professional clears you to do so.**

Your gym or other athletic facility may be closed currently, and even if it is still open, it may not be advisable to go there because of the need for social distancing. However, there are still many ways to stay active. Instead of stopping your physical activity routine altogether, try switching to activities you can do safely (and staying 6 feet away from other people), such as:

- Walking, running, or cycling outdoors – you can make the time go more quickly during a walk or a run, or make it more enjoyable, by using that time to talk on the phone to a loved one or listen to a podcast, or pep it up by listening to upbeat music. If you have scheduled regular phone calls with loved ones, as suggested above, you can multitask by walking at the same time!
- Any time you leave your home, make sure that you wash your hands and take any other infection-control measures **every time** before you leave, and as soon as you return home.
- Use home equipment, if you have it (e.g., stationary bicycle, treadmill, elliptical, rowing machine, free weights)
- Use free online videos (or videos available on-demand through your cable provider) to do aerobics or dance/Zumba classes, yoga, resistance exercises, or other types of activity you can do at home without special equipment
- Use an active videogame, such as the Wii platform, if you have access to that type of equipment – this can be done on your own, or with other members of your household.
- On your own, or with other people in your household, have a daily dance party! Make a playlist of upbeat songs that you love, and spend 20 minutes or half an hour shaking your booty.
• **Specific health/medical needs:** This category includes things like taking your medicine at prescribed times, or attending to other medical needs such as using your CPAP/BIPAP machine if you have one, doing prescribed physical therapy exercises on a regular basis or, if you have undergone bariatric surgery, taking your vitamins/supplements and drinking enough fluids.
  • Make sure that these necessary health behaviors don’t go by the wayside by **specifically writing them into your daily/weekly schedule.**

**Category 3: Necessary activities/tasks for the upkeep of your household**

During a time of high stress, and especially if this coincides with a major change in your daily schedule, creating a lot of unstructured time, it can be difficult to feel motivated to tackle certain types of things that are less enjoyable or harder to do but still need to get done.

Making these things part of your daily or weekly schedule can help ensure that you continue to get things done, without letting them build up until you feel overwhelmed. Scheduling these activities can also help make sure that they don’t take over your whole day, so that there is no time available for taking care of your personal physical and emotional needs!

• **Working from home:** If you are working from home, try not to let the availability of unstructured time or the absence of co-workers, supervisors, or meetings interfere with your ability to get things done – or cause your work to bleed into and take over your entire day.
  • As much as is possible given the demands of your job/employers, **choose specific time blocks in your schedule during which you will work, and limit any work-related activity to those times.**
    ▪ Your work demands may have increased because of Coronavirus-related circumstances, but it is still important to set specific work hours, even if they are longer than usual.
    ▪ Make sure you set boundaries by letting colleagues/supervisors know when you will be available – and that you will not be responding to work-related calls, e-mails, texts, etc. outside of those times.
    ▪ **Make sure that you yourself respect these boundaries** and stay away from your work e-mail, or work files on your computer, outside of those hours. This is a good way to limit work-related stress and avoid burnout.
  • Make sure that you **build short breaks into your blocks of work time,** so that you do not get burned out. Taking brief, scheduled breaks will actually help you stay more focused and less distracted.
    ▪ Set alarms to prompt you to take breaks, if necessary.
    ▪ Make sure to schedule breaks for meals and snacks, to keep a healthy eating schedule during work hours, and **make sure you step away from your work to eat,** instead of trying to multi-task.
  • It may help to try to make your “working-at-home” day be as similar as possible to your “working at work” day. Here are some suggestions around that:
    • If there are tasks or activities that you tend to do every day when you start or end the work day, do those things, or a version of those things, to help you mentally switch “on” and “off” from work mode when the time comes to do so. For instance, if the first thing you do each work day is
check in with a colleague (see below), make a to-do list, or check your
e-mail, make sure you start off your home work hours by doing the same
(or a similar) thing. A friend of mine is still taking a walk to her train
station at the start and the end of each work day, to give her more of a
feeling of normal routine (and to help her stay active!)
• Even if no one is going to be seeing you, make sure you change from
your sleeping clothes into something else. You don’t have to wear a 3-
piece suit or high heels, but keep sleeping and working outfits different
to help you keep a working mindset.
• If there are certain activities that you do not do when you are working at
your workplace, avoid doing them during your working hours when you
are working from home. For instance, if you would not leave your desk
and wander into the kitchen or break room to look for a snack just
because you are bored at work, do not do this at home, either. If you
would not do household tasks while on a work call at the office, do not
do these things while taking work calls at home.
• You might find it helpful to schedule a virtual “meeting” (using FaceTime, Zoom, etc.)
with co-workers at the start or mid-point of each working day, to check in, discuss
projects, plans, progress and priorities, and provide additional vital social contact.
• If possible, choose a specific space in your home where you will do work-
related tasks, and try to make sure it is separate from where you sleep, and where you spend time
when you are relaxing. This will help to strengthen that mental boundary between
work time and non-work time.
• The New York Times has published some articles with helpful tips for managing the
transition to working from home (Note: Subscription may be required for full access to these
items):
  ▪ How to Work From Home, if You’ve Never Done It Before - https://nyti.ms/2vfH5eb
  ▪ How to Stick to a Schedule When You Work From Home - https://nyti.ms/2INkNoN
  ▪ How to Work From Home Now That Your Boss Doesn’t Want You Coming In - https://nyti.ms/39MiJrB

• **Household upkeep:** No matter what crisis is happening in the world, there will always be
things that need to be done at home – cleaning, laundry, paying the bills, yard work, etc.
  • It is hard to feel motivated to do these things when a crisis is happening and the world
feels like it is in chaos.
  • However, doing these things will actually give you more of a feeling of order and
control.
  • Make it easier to ensure that they get done by designating specific times in your
schedule for each of these types of tasks.
  ▪ Some may be done weekly or less often; others may need to be done more
than once per week.
  ▪ Make sure you schedule these things on a day/time that is the easiest to do
them, and one when you are most likely to actually feel willing to tackle them.
ADDITIONAL WAYS TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR WELL-BEING

**Self-compassion:**

Self-compassion is a vital emotional “survival skill” (and it has been scientifically shown to be good for your physical and mental health!) Self-compassion involves 3 different, equally-important components:

- **Component 1: Self-kindness**
  - Though we often think that the only way we can make sure that we can be at our best and “stay on the straight and narrow” is if we are very strict and hard on ourselves, the opposite tends to be true. Being hard on yourself tends to make people feel bad about themselves, and it drags down the motivation and confidence needed to tackle difficult challenges. Self-kindness is not the same as “making excuses” for yourself or “giving yourself a break” that you may not feel you deserve. It is simply being as kind and understanding with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

- **Component 2: Mindfulness**
  - Thousands of pages could be written about the concept of mindfulness, but the most brief and straightforward way of thinking about it is that mindfulness means “awareness”. Simply be aware of what you are experiencing – what are you seeing, feeling (physically and emotionally), and thinking right now, in the present moment? Take a moment to just observe, notice, and be aware of what is happening with you right now. Importantly, maintain this awareness without judging! Being mindful, in and of itself, has great power to make negative physical and emotional experiences feel less intense and more bearable.

- **Component 3: “Common humanity”**
  - This means that you recognize that you are a human being and, like all human beings, you are not perfect all the time, and that you sometimes make mistakes – no human is immune to these things. Try to respond to your own imperfectness with self-compassion and understanding.
  - Realizing your common humanity helps with another component of self-compassion, self-kindness (see above).
  - Recognizing that you are part of the whole worldwide community of human beings can also help you understand that the things that are happening to you are also happening to other people, which can make you feel less isolated, and to recognize that (as one wise gentleman I know used to say) “you are not being singled out for abuse”.
    - This is especially true of the Coronavirus crisis – everyone is feeling afraid, everyone is feeling uncertain, and everyone’s life is being affected in ways that are tough to deal with.
  - Though you might expect that recognizing that all of humanity is struggling with problems might make you feel worse, and overwhelmed, instead, this tends to make people feel less isolated and less likely to take their own troubles, anxieties, and disappointments “personally”.


Why am I including this abstract concept of self-compassion in a Coronavirus self-care guide?

Self-compassion can make every aspect of dealing with this tough situation a little bit easier. Self-compassion helps you to avoid beating yourself up when you feel that you have not been doing your best with your behaviors or managing your emotions, and when you are feeling anxious or uncertain.

There are many, many resources available on the Internet related to learning about and practicing self-compassion; a particularly helpful resource is the Webpage of one of the leading self-compassion researchers, Kristin Neff, PhD: https://self-compassion.org/

Dealing with Uncertainty:

- One of the most challenging and distressing aspects of the Coronavirus situation is that there is so much uncertainty. The biggest uncertainty of all is about what will happen in the future - in both the short- and long-term. This illness was unknown to medical and scientific experts before it appeared a few months ago, so there is very little reliable, factual information about it, which means it is hard to know what is going to happen. New knowledge is accumulating day by day, contradicting the information we heard just days ago, which can be confusing and leave us feeling even more unsure.

- In addition, the world has never before seen a pandemic on this scale – comparisons have been drawn to the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918, but that was a different illness than this one, and the world now is very different from what it was in 1918.

- Because we are currently in a situation that has never been encountered before, it is impossible to know that the short- and long-term effects will be. There are many different sources of anxiety, as people worry about the health and financial well-being of themselves, their loved ones, their communities, and those around the globe. These anxieties are very real, and the enormous degree of uncertainty can serve to make our anxiety even worse.

- It is very natural, in the face of such an anxiety-provoking situation, to be drawn into thoughts about terrible things that could happen, and focusing on frightening “what-ifs”. Being concerned about the future and possible negative outcomes can be useful to some extent, in some circumstances – but only if that concern leads us to take productive action – that is, to prepare ourselves for, or take steps to prevent or minimize, dangers or bad outcomes. Because so little is known about the current situation and what the outcomes will be, much of our worry about it may be counter-productive, causing negative consequences of its own.

- Although it is not realistic to suggest that people try to stop worrying in this situation, what we can do, to protect our psychological well-being, is to notice when we are getting carried away with imagining potential terrible consequences, to the point that it is causing so much distress that it is affecting our functioning and preventing us from doing what we need to do to take care of ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities. While it is important to do some realistic thinking about steps you can take to minimize current and
future risks to yourself and your loved ones, if you find yourself imagining “worst case scenarios”, try to pause, notice that you are doing this, and remind yourself that right now, no one knows anything for certain. While this in and of itself is also anxiety-provoking, it can also help to stop you from imagining catastrophes that you are not able to prevent, or to do anything about right now.

• It is also helpful to simply recognize how much uncertainty there is right now, and to simply acknowledge that this is distressing and anxiety-provoking, and to treat your own emotional reactions to this uncertainty with self-compassion (see self-compassion section, above). Remembering that it is very human to be distressed by uncertainty, and that people everywhere are in the same uncertain “boat”, may offer some comfort for you.

• Bottom line: When you find mind racing, imagining terrible future scenarios, pause your thinking and remind yourself “Right now, we just don’t know what will happen.”

**Emotional eating:**

During high-stress times, especially when our daily routines have been disrupted, there is a very normal and understandable tendency to seek distraction or comfort through eating high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar foods. This makes sense!

• These foods are enjoyable to eat, and it is a scientific fact that eating them does produce rewarding, anxiety-reducing reactions in our brains.

• Eating is also a quick and easy thing to do, and does not require extra effort, special equipment, special skills, or the cooperation or participation of another person.

• Most of us also have a history of eating for comfort at least a few times in our lives (and usually more than a few!), so we have learned that eating is an effective way to achieve comfort.

Unfortunately, the comfort we get from eating tends to last only for a very short time, while the negative consequences of eating for comfort (guilt, impact on weight and health, etc.) last much longer.

While a comprehensive guide to addressing emotional eating is beyond the scope of this document, here are a few strategies that can help to reduce the tendency to eat as a way of coping with emotions:

• **Notice** the urge to eat – often the tendency to reach for comforting food is so automatic, we do not notice it until we’ve already started eating. Simply being aware when you are having this urge is a helpful first step.

• **Do not judge yourself** for having this urge – See the section above about self-compassion! Remember, it is totally normal and understandable to want to seek comfort from eating. Punishing yourself for wanting to eat for comfort leads to more negative emotions, and thus potentially an even stronger need to seek comfort.

• **Decide** how you want to respond to this urge – Acknowledging that it is normal to seek comfort through eating, take a moment to decide whether this is what you actually want
to do, or whether you would rather first try doing something else, instead, to see if that helps. You might want to ask yourself some or all of the following questions:

- **What am I feeling right now that is making me want to eat?**
- **Will eating make me feel better? If so, for how long?**
- **Is it possible that eating in response to my emotion(s) will make me feel worse, either physically or emotionally?**
- **Is eating for comfort in line with my overall goals for myself (being healthy, managing my weight, etc.)?**
- **Can I wait for a few minutes and see if I still have such a strong urge to eat?**
- **Is there anything else I could do that would help me deal with the emotion(s) I am feeling right now? What would that be?**
- **If I do decide to go ahead and eat right now, what would be a reasonable type of food, and what would be a reasonable amount?**

**Keep on not judging!** – Even if you do end up eating for comfort, spare yourself the additional negative experience of judging yourself for it. Judging yourself for your behavior will **not** help you to eat better, or to do things differently the next time – it will likely make you feel bad about yourself, and could very well lead to additional comfort-eating, feeling discouraged, and abandoning your efforts to eat healthfully.

**Learn** - Instead of judging yourself, acknowledge that the comfort eating happened, and think about what you can observe about what happened this time that could give you ideas about what you could do differently next time.

**Nurture** yourself – Remember, the aim here is definitely **not** to remove comfort! Do not simply avoid eating for distraction or comfort; if you decide not to use eating for this purpose, make certain that you are taking some other action to help soothe your emotions. However, **be sure to avoid actions that might be dangerous to your well-being**, such as using substances like alcohol, drugs, nicotine, etc.

Note that using the scheduling strategy outlined in this document will likely be helpful in decreasing the amount of emotionally-triggered eating, for a number of reasons:

- You are less likely to act on an urge to eat for emotional reasons if you regulate your hunger by making sure you are not going too long without eating. When you are having an urge to eat for emotional reasons and **also** very hungry, it is very difficult not to act on that urge!
- Sticking to a schedule of eating at certain times will eventually create an automatic habit of eating at those times, and **not** eating during the other times. If the timing of your meals and snacks is “all over the map”, that makes it harder to deal with urges to eat for emotional reasons.
- Remember that using the scheduling strategy outlined in this document will ensure that you are automatically building things into your schedule that help with your emotional well-being (e.g., social contact, enjoyable leisure activities, adequate sleep, consistent physical activity, limiting exposure to the news, etc.), which will likely have the result of decreasing the intensity and frequency of negative emotions, and thus decreasing the frequency and intensity of urges to eat to soothe your emotions.
If your planned bariatric surgery date has been postponed:

Many, many non-emergency surgical procedures, including bariatric procedures, are being postponed, nationwide, as a way of keeping patients and providers safe, and making sure that as many medical resources as possible are available to treat patients who are in emergency medical situations.

However, knowing that there is a very good reason for your surgery to have been postponed will not necessarily keep you from feeling disappointed or anxious about it. If you are feeling disappointed or anxious, that is a very understandable reaction. If you were scheduled to have bariatric surgery in the upcoming weeks and your surgery has been postponed, likely you have been looking forward to this for months, and working hard to prepare for it. You may have made special arrangements in advance with your work, your family, and other aspects of your life, and these preparations have now been disrupted. Additionally, the fact that, right now, there is no way to know for sure exactly when your surgery will take place likely makes the anxiety and disappointment even stronger. What can you do to manage your emotional response to this postponement?

• First of all, read (or re-read) the section above about self-compassion – and recognize that your reaction is normal and valid, and that you are “allowed” to feel any emotions at all about this because no emotion is “right” or “wrong” or “legitimate” or not.
• Resist the very understandable temptation to “let things go” now that you don’t have a specific, upcoming date for your surgery. Though it would be normal to have this response, remember that, almost certainly, your surgery will happen at some point, and you will want to be totally ready for it when the time comes.
• While allowing yourself to feel disappointment, anxiety, or whatever other emotion(s) you are having, it may also be helpful to try to think of this unexpected “waiting period”, as maddening as it is, as an opportunity to get even more ready for surgery than you already were.
  o Think about behaviors and activities you can build into your daily routine now that will help you be healthier and fitter for surgery (which can reduce surgical risks and speed up your recovery).
  o Make a list of the new behaviors or habits that you will need to be incorporating into your lifelong post-surgery daily routine (e.g., drinking enough fluids; taking supplements; getting some physical activity 6-7 days per week; planning meals in advance; etc.) and start practicing them now.
• Put these activities/behaviors into the daily schedule that you are constructing, and by the time your surgery does happen, you will already be a pro at doing all of the important things that will help make sure that you have the safest, most effective outcome from your surgery.
• Spend some time thinking about what types of strategies you can use to cope with any negative emotions you may be having in response to your surgery being postponed.
  o Review the “Emotional eating” section, above.
  o Take advantage of the many, many available online resources with tips for coping with emotions (there are many general resources for coping with difficult emotions, as well as resources specific to the Coronavirus crisis – one example is a CDC webpage: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html, but there are dozens of those resources online).
• Remember, the strategies outlined in the first part of this document - using schedule-building to take care of your mental and physical health - can all be helpful in dealing with the specific emotional stressor of having your surgery date delayed.

Thank you for taking the time to review this document. These are hard times for everyone, and I hope that you have found some guidance here that will be helpful to you during this stressful period of time. Remember that your Weight Center team is still here for you, even though we are connecting with patients ‘virtually’ for now, and feel free to reach out to us for help if needed.