

INSIGHT

An Information Resource from COMCARE

Volume 3, Issue 3

FACE COVID

How to Respond Effectively to the Corona Crisis

Excerpts taken from paper by Dr. Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap; Russ Harris 2020.

'FACE COVID' is a set of practical steps for responding effectively to the Corona crisis, using the principles of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Here's a quick summary of the key steps:

- F** = Focus on what's in your control
- A** = Acknowledge your thoughts & feelings
- C** = Come back into your body
- E** = Engage in what you're doing
- C** = Committed action
- O** = Opening up
- V** = Values
- I** = Identify resources
- D** = Disinfect & distance



INSIGHT is published monthly by COMCARE, a program of the County Commissioner's Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP). If you wish to provide comments or feedback, please forward your comments to Lucy Kitner or Michele Denk at COMCARE at the following email addresses: lkitner@pacounties.org; mdenk@pacounties.org. Thank You.

F = FOCUS ON WHAT'S IN YOUR CONTROL

The Corona crisis can affect us in many different ways: physically, emotionally, economically, socially, and psychologically. All of us are (or soon will be) dealing with the very real challenges of widespread serious illness and the inabilities of healthcare systems to cope with it, social and community disruption, economic fallout and financial problems, obstacles and interruptions to many aspects of life ... and the list goes on.

Many Pennsylvanians have either known the effects of coronavirus first-hand, or with a friend or family member... and all of us have felt the impact of the disruption of our lives, work, or social activities.

And when we are facing a crisis like this, fear and anxiety are inevitable; they are normal, natural responses to challenging situations infused with danger and uncertainty. It's all too easy to get lost in worrying and ruminating about all sorts of things that are out of your control: what might happen in the future; how the virus might affect you or your loved ones or your community or your country or the world – and what will happen then - and so on.

And while it's completely natural for us to get lost in such worries, it's not useful or helpful. Indeed, the more we focus on what's not in our control, the more hopeless or anxious we're likely to feel. So, the single most useful thing anyone can do in any type of crisis – Corona-related or otherwise - is to: **focus on what's in your control.**

You can't control what happens in the future. You can't control Corona virus itself or the world economy or how your government manages this whole sordid mess. And you can't magically control your feelings, eliminating all that perfectly natural fear and anxiety. But you can control what you do - here and now. And that matters.

When a big storm blows up, the boats in the harbor drop anchor – because if they don't, they'll get swept out to sea. And of course, dropping anchor doesn't make the storm go away (anchors can't

control the weather) - but it can hold a boat steady in the harbor, until the storm passes in its own good time.

Similarly, in an ongoing crisis, we're all going to experience 'emotional storms': unhelpful thoughts spinning inside our head, and painful feelings whirling around our body. And if we're swept away by that storm inside us, there's nothing effective we can do. So, the first practical step is to 'drop anchor', using the simple **ACE** formula:

- **A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings** – Silently and kindly acknowledge whatever is 'showing up' inside you: thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, sensation, urges. Take the stance of a curious scientist, observing what's going on in your inner world.



- **C = Come back into your body** – Come back into and connect with your physical body. Find your own way of doing this. You could try stretching your arms or neck, straightening up your spine in your chair, or taking deep breaths.
- **E = Engage in what you're doing** - Get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on the activity you are doing. Look around your room (what you can see). Notice things your can hear, and smell... and notice what you are doing.

Dropping anchor is a very useful skill. You can use it for handling difficult thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges and sensations more effectively; switching off autopilot and engaging in life; grounding and steadying yourself in difficult situations; disrupting rumination, obsessing and worrying; and focusing your attention on the task or activity you are doing. The better you anchor yourself in the here and now, the more control you have over your actions – which makes it a lot easier to do the next steps: COVID.



C = COMMITTED ACTION

Committed action means effective action, guided by your core values; action you take because it's truly important to you; action you take even if it brings up difficult thoughts and feelings. Once you have dropped anchor, using the ACE formula, you will have a lot of control over your actions – so this makes it easier to do the things that truly matter.

Now obviously that includes all those protective measures against Corona – frequent handwashing, social distancing, and so on. But in addition to those fundamentals of effective action, consider: What are simple ways to look after yourself, those you live with, and those you can realistically help? What kind, caring, supportive deeds you can do?

- Can you say some kind words to someone in distress – in person or via a phone call or text message?

- Can you help someone out with a task or a chore, or cook a meal, or hold someone's hand, or play a game with a young child?
- Can you comfort and soothe someone who is sick? Or in the most serious of cases, nurse them and access whatever medical assistance is available?
- And if you're spending a lot more time at home, through self-isolation or forced quarantine, or social distancing, what are the most effective ways to spend that time?
- You may want to consider physical exercise to stay fit, cooking (as) healthy food (as possible, given restrictions), and doing meaningful activities by yourself or with others.
- And if you're familiar with acceptance and commitment therapy or other mindfulness-based approaches, how can you actively practice some of those mindfulness skills?

Repeatedly throughout the day, ask yourself 'What can I do right now - no matter how small it may be - that improves life for myself or others I live with, or people in my community?' And whatever the answer is – do it and engage in it fully.

O= OPENING UP

Opening up means making room for difficult feelings and being kind to yourself. Difficult feelings are guaranteed to keep on showing up as this crisis unfolds: fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, frustration, confusion, and many more. We can't stop them from arising; they're normal reactions. But we can open up and make room for them: acknowledge they are normal, allow them to be there (even though they hurt), and treat ourselves kindly.

Remember, self-kindness is essential if you want to cope well with this crisis – especially if you are in a caregiver role. If you've ever flown on a plane, you've heard this message: 'In event of an

emergency, put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.’ Well, self-kindness is your own oxygen mask; if you need to look after others, you’ll do it a whole lot better if you’re also taking good care of yourself.

So, ask yourself, ‘If someone I loved was going through this experience, feeling what I am feeling – if I wanted to be kind and caring towards them, how would I treat them? How would I behave towards them? What might I say or do?’ Then try treating yourself the same way.

V = VALUES

Committed action should be guided by your core values: What do you want to stand for in the face of this crisis? What sort of person do you want to be, as you go through this? How do you want to treat yourself and others?

Your values might include love, respect, humor, patience, courage, honesty, caring, openness, kindness ... or numerous others. Look for ways to ‘sprinkle’ these values into your day. Let them guide and motivate your committed action.

Of course, as this crisis unfolds, there will be all sorts of obstacles in your life; goals you can’t achieve, things you can’t do, problems for which there are no simple solutions. But you can still live your values in a myriad of different ways, even in the face of all those challenges. Especially come back to your values of kindness and caring. Consider:

- What are kind, caring ways you can treat yourself as you go through this?
- What are kind words you can say to yourself, kind deeds you can do for yourself?
- What are kind ways you can treat others who are suffering?
- What are kind, caring ways of contributing to the wellbeing of your community?

- What can you say and do that will enable you to look back in years to come and feel proud of your response?

I = IDENTIFY RESOURCES

Identify resources for help, assistance, support, and advice. This includes friends, family, neighbors, health professionals, emergency services. And make sure you know the emergency helpline phone numbers, including psychological help if required.

Also reach out to your social networks. And if you are able to offer support to others, let them know; you can be a resource for other people, just as they can for you. One very important aspect of this process involves finding a reliable and trustworthy source of information for updates on the crisis and guidelines for responding to it.



D = DISINFECT & DISTANCE PHYSICALLY

I’m sure you already know this, but it’s worth repeating – disinfect your hands regularly and practice as much social distancing as realistically possible, for the greater good of your community. And remember, we’re talking about physical distancing – not cutting off emotionally.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health provides daily updates to coronavirus information at <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>; and the Center for Disease Control provides national information at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

Coping with Stress During the Coronavirus Disease Outbreak

Know the Signs of Stress – What follows are behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive responses that are all common signs of anxiety and stress. You may notice some of them as you are coping with the conditions of the coronavirus:

Have you noticed these about your behavior?

- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- An increase in your alcohol, tobacco use, or use of illegal drugs
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Having trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Crying frequently
- Worrying excessively
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty communicating or listening
- Having difficulty giving or accepting help
- Inability to feel pleasure or have fun

Have you noticed these about your body?

- Having stomach aches or diarrhea
- Having headaches and other pains
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled

What about your emotions?

- Being anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling heroic, euphoric, or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

Your Thinking?

- Having trouble remembering things
- Feeling confused
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Having difficulty making decisions



Know How to Relieve Stress – You can manage and alleviate your stress by taking time to take care of yourself.

- **Keep things in perspective.** Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the pandemic outbreak. You will want to stay up to date on news, particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have gotten sick. But make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.
- **Get the facts.** Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself against illness, if you are at risk. You may turn to your family doctor, your local news outlet, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, or the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).
- **Keep yourself healthy.** Eat healthy foods and stay hydrated (drink water). Take your vitamins and prescription medications. Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol. Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs. Get enough sleep and rest. And get physical exercise.
- **Use practical ways to relax.** Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies. Pace yourself between stressful activities and do a fun thing after a hard task. Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family. Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.

Pay Attention to your body, feelings, and spirit. Recognize and heed the early warning signs of stress. Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about the coronavirus crisis – and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions, and behavior during past events.

- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common during and after a crisis event like this coronavirus pandemic. Even if you have not gotten physically ill, you have felt the effects of a world and local community and economy that profoundly affects everyone.
- Connect with others who are also experiencing the stresses you feel. Talk about your feelings about how coronavirus has affected you and your family, co-workers, and community. Share and receive reliable information and enjoy the conversations you have that are unrelated to coronavirus – that remind you of the many positive blessings in your life.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer, or helping others in need.

Excerpts taken from: Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, HHS Publication No. SMA14-4885, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; 2014



Recognize and heed the early warning signs of stress.

Final Thought...

While we are all at home, we have been provided an “enforced” laboratory to blend and combine the many roles that define us – employee, spouse, parent, teacher, caretaker, counselor – all under the same roof! While we face a myriad of challenges that have forced us out of our comfort zones, many of us have yet to realize just what we have learned about ourselves under such an unprecedented crisis time. While we have endured many pains and sorrows, it is certain that we have also gained many victories already... and many more to come!



Connecting with Your Kids – Building Conversation

Here are some conversation starters that might be a fun way to build communication with your kids. Try some of these at mealtime... or bedtime. Turn the TV off, and give'em a whirl...

- What do you think our family motto should be?
- If you could start a new family tradition, what would it be and why?
- Where would you like to travel most?
- Something I am most proud of is....?
- What 3 words best describe you?
- A time I will never forget is...?
- What is your favorite thing about each of your family members?
- If you could have one superpower what would it be and why?
- What are you most thankful for?
- If you won the lottery, how would you spend the money?
- Describe your ideal day.
- Talk about your favorite (friend, movie, toy, game..)
- Tell us about a time that made you laugh really hard.
- What is the hardest thing about being your age?
- Talk about what you want to be when your grow up.
- How do you act when you get stressed and what makes you feel better?
- If you could master an instrument what would it be?