

## Dealing with Cumulative Stress

It has been over 8 months since COVID-19 began to change our daily lives in unimaginable ways. The ongoing stressors with this pandemic has no doubt had an impact on both children and adults. Stress might be piling on from different sources in different ways, at different times. <sup>1</sup>**The combination of various stress factors, such as, personal stress, financial stress, familial stress, cultural stress, is what leads to cumulative stress.** Cumulative stress, is the result of the compounding of many stressors we may be experiencing.

During times of prolonged stress, experts often talk about the importance of self care. Tips to take care of ourselves in order to cope more effectively with stress are often given in the form of one time luxuries. However, it is more helpful to think about caring for ourselves as part of our daily routines in order to build our self resilience. Building our self resilience by increasing healthy habits helps us bounce back faster in the face of adversity. In fact, building our resilience helps us deal with the long term or cumulative effects of stress, and better equips us to deal with stressful situations and return to our baseline functioning faster. It is important to recognize the signs of cumulative stress to address the effects. The following signs of cumulative stress are taken directly from the International Federation of Red Cross:<sup>2</sup>



**Physical symptoms:** overtiredness, diarrhea, constipation, headaches, abdominal and back pains, sleeping disorders, appetite changes.

**Emotional signs:** anxiety, frustration, guilt, mood swings, undue pessimism or optimism, irritability, crying spells, nightmares, apathy, depression.

**Mental signs:** forgetfulness, poor concentration, poor job performance, negative attitude, loss of creativity and motivation, boredom, negative self-talk, paranoid thoughts.

**Relational signs:** feeling isolated, resentful or intolerant of others, loneliness, marriage problems, nagging, social withdrawal, antisocial behaviour.

**Behavioral changes:** increased alcohol, drug and/or tobacco use, change in eating habits or sexual behavior, increase in risky behavior, hyperactivity, avoidance of situations, cynical attitudes.

**Collapse of belief systems:** feeling of emptiness, doubt in religious beliefs, feeling unforgiven, looking for magical solutions, loss of purpose of life, needing to prove self-worth, cynicism about life.

<sup>1</sup> PhD., D'Anniballe, Janine. (2020) *Collective Trauma and Cumulative Stress During COVID and Strategies to Cultivate Resilience*.

<sup>2</sup> International Federation of Red Cross. *Managing Stress in the Field*. (2001). Retrieved from: <http://helid.digicollection.org/en/d/Js2897e/3.html>

## Helpful Tips in Dealing with Cumulative Stress:

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- 1) **Notice signs and symptoms** of when you begin to feel the impacts of stress. What does your body feel like? What is your mood like? What helps you to relax or clear your mind? Can you make time for this each day?
- 2) **Take care of yourself physically.** Eating right, getting enough sleep, and taking time for physical activity are all important aspects of daily routine. These are all forms of self care!
- 3) **Stay connected to your social networks.** In what ways are you nurturing your relationships during COVID-19? Are you able to take socially distanced walks with friends or colleagues? Are you able to meet with your book club over Zoom?
- 4) **Take care of yourself mentally and emotionally.** “Mental self-care also involves doing things that help you stay mentally healthy. Practicing self-compassion and acceptance, for example, helps you maintain a healthier inner dialogue.<sup>3</sup>” Finding what recharges you emotionally is important. Daily meditations, belly breathing, or short mindfulness exercises might help you through a long day in front of your computer or caregiving for young children.
- 5) **Don’t multi-task!** In the moment you may feel like you are accomplishing more by multi-tasking, however experts caution against this. “Scientists have found that multitaskers actually experience more stress and that the effects of multitasking linger once the tasks are complete, resulting in persistent fractured thinking and lack of focus. In other words, multitasking is affecting our brain and stress levels even when we’re not doing it<sup>4</sup>.”



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<sup>3</sup> Scott, Elizabeth, MS. 2020. Very Well Mind. 5 Self-Care Practices for Every Area of Your Life. Retrieved from: <https://www.verywellmind.com/self-care-strategies-overall-stress-reduction-3144729>

<sup>4</sup> Women’s Health. (2018). Multitasking Makes More Stress Not Less. Retrieved from: <https://mavendoctors.io/women/mind-body-wellness/multitasking-makes-more-stress-not-less-4tEP9lt8cUy5W7sakjCC4Q>

## Holidays Are Different? What to keep in mind this year.<sup>5</sup>

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- **Community levels of COVID-19**
  - Be informed about levels of COVID-19 cases in the gathering location as well as the locations where people are traveling from
- **Risk of exposure during travel**
  - All travel pitstops are possible places of exposure. Be cautious when traveling through airports, bus and train stations, public transport, gas stations, and rest stops.
- **Safe gathering**
  - Small indoor spaces pose greater risk. Can you social distance indoors, possibly with a couple windows open? If the weather is nice, social distance outdoors.
  - Consider short-duration and small group sizes.
- **Watch the 3 W's.<sup>56</sup>**
  - Wear masks.
  - Wash hands.
  - Watch your distance.
- **Acknowledging loss and gratitude can coexist.<sup>789</sup>**
  - Holidays can bring joy and celebration, and they can also bring up complex emotions especially amidst the present circumstances with COVID-19. Take time to share the highs and lows with those you love.
    - Stay mindful of how children may experience grief and loss (e.g., fear, anxiety, irritability, sadness, withdrawal, changes in sleep or appetite, increases in temper tantrums or clinging behaviors, physical symptoms such as stomach or headaches, forgetfulness, or competition for adults' time)
    - Ask children how they're feeling. What are they grateful and excited about? What might they be sad or mad about?
      - Then, listen and validate.
      - Read the social story included in this month's newsletter with children!
      - Remind children that all emotions are okay to feel and express. Share with them how you are also feeling loss and gratitude this season, and/or talk about their favorite book character who sometimes feels sad, mad, or excited too.
      - If verbally expressing emotions seems tough, try engaging children in artistic expression such as through music, dance, or drawing.

### Do not host or participate in any in-person gatherings if you or someone you love...<sup>5</sup>

- Has been diagnosed with COVID-19, yet has not met criteria for when it is safe to be around others
- Is experiencing symptoms of COVID-19
- Is waiting for COVID-19 test results
- Has been exposed to someone with COVID-19 in the last 14 days
- Is at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19

<sup>5</sup> CDC. (2020, November 27). Holidays. CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>

<sup>6</sup> Collins, F. (2020, November 12). Planning your holidays during the covid-19 pandemic. NIH Director's Blog.

\*\*\*\*\*[directorsblog.nih.gov/2020/11/12/planning-your-holidays-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/](https://directorsblog.nih.gov/2020/11/12/planning-your-holidays-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/)

<sup>7</sup> Mental Health America. (2020). Preparing for the holidays during covid-19. MHA. <https://mhanational.org/preparing-holidays-during-covid-19>

<sup>8</sup> Rubenstein, B. (2016, December 7). Helping kids cope with grief and loss during the holiday season. SPCC. <https://www.spcc-roch.org/helping-kids-cope-with-grief-and-loss-during-the-holiday-season/>

<sup>9</sup> Denver Children's Advocacy Center. (2020, November 10). Managing transitions, grief, and loss related to covid-19. [Webinar]. DCAC.

## Get Creative with Connection!<sup>1011</sup>

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- **Have a holiday cooking/baking party over Zoom**
  - Pick one recipe for you all to make or have each household pick their personal favorite and gather around the kitchen together from afar!
- **Plan a holiday movie watch party**
  - The family favorite film that you might usually gather around to watch together at home or the theater? Plan a time where you can each cozy in at your own homes to watch the same movie and video-chat each other after to share when you laughed or teared up the most!
- **Arrange a drive-by holiday treat drop**
  - Mix up your favorite holiday baked goods and leave some on your loved one's doorstep. Make it an exchange and pick up treats left on the doorstep from your loved ones, too!
  - Baking not your thing? Exchange homemade cards or gifts from your favorite small local store!



### FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT:

Contact our warm line at,  
(303) 245-4418, to talk directly to  
an Early Childhood Mental Health  
Consultant.



<sup>10</sup> Austrew, A. (2020, October 29). 8 creative, covid-friendly ways families are celebrating the holidays in 2020. Care.com. [care.com/c/stories/17055/COVID-friendly-ways-celebrate-holidays/](https://www.care.com/c/stories/17055/COVID-friendly-ways-celebrate-holidays/)

<sup>11</sup> Creative Cook Co. (2020). Online cooking classes calendar. Creative cook co. <http://www.creativecookco.com/online-cooking-classes/>