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How can we take care of our MENTAL HEALTH in this time of trouble?

(based on Daniel Goleman's "Emotional Intelligence")

Paola Franceschelli, UGSS FAO

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To: All members

From: Evelyn Kortum, General Secretary

Dear colleagues,

We are all experiencing the dramatic consequences of the coronavirus these days. We are impacted by the need to telework, stay home, by school closure, travel restrictions, supply shortages to name a few. However, the anxiety about getting the virus ourselves, worry that our loved ones will get it, worries about financial implications and all the other dark scenarios flooding the news and social media — is to a large extent of our own making. In short, the actual pandemic causes unavoidable pain, while our resistance to adapting to the changes creates fertile ground for all the other anxiety problems.

It's important to remember that our **emotional** and **psychological** response to crises are natural and very human. But the truth is these responses often bring us more suffering by narrowing and cluttering our mind and keeping us from seeing clearly the best course of action.

The way to overcome this natural tendency is to build our mental resilience. Being **resilient** means to be able to quickly adapt, making us better able to leverage change, solve problems, and settle a conflict. In many ways, adaptability is the master skill when it comes to resilience. In the work environment, resilience reduces our own risk of burnout. This means we're able to respond to stress in a healthy way and can bounce back after challenges and grow stronger in the process.

Mental resilience, especially in challenging times like the present, means managing our mind in a way that increases our ability to face the actual problem and to deal with anxiety about the unknown. Resilience is the skill of noticing our own thoughts, unhooking from the non-constructive ones, and rebalancing quickly. This skill can be nurtured and trained, see more at www.resilience.org; and <https://education.resilience.org/>

We wish to share some effective strategies that have kindly been compiled for you by our active member Paola Franceschelli from FAO UGSS.

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Calm the mind

When you focus on calming and clearing your mind, you can pay attention to what is really going on around you and what is coming up within you. You can observe and manage your thoughts and catch them when they start to run away towards doomsday scenarios. You can hold your focus on what you choose versus what pulls at you with each ping of a breaking news notification. Also, putting a name to your feelings helps you regain a more rational state of mind. Knowing the triggers that ignite an emotional hijack in your brain, and having a plan to take back control, is a huge first step towards emotional balance.

This calm and present state is crucial. Right away, it helps keep the mind from wandering and getting hooked, and it reduces the pits of stress and worry that we can easily get stuck in. Even more importantly, the continued practice of unhooking and focusing our minds builds a muscle of resilience that will serve us time and time again. When we practice bringing ourselves back to the present moment, we deepen our capacity to cope and weather all sorts of crises, whether global or personal. One of the best tools to practice being present, to be in the “here and now” is Mindfulness, which emphasizes “letting go” of things one has no control over. See more on <https://www.headspace.com/mindfulness>; and on <https://heartfulness.org/en/about-heartfulness/>

Connect with others through compassion

Unfortunately, many of the circles of community that provide support in times of stress are now closed off to us as cities and governments work to contain the spread of the virus. Schools are shut down, events are cancelled, and businesses have enacted work-from-home policies and travel bans. The natural by-product of this is a growing sense of isolation and separation from the people and groups who can best quell our fears and anxieties.

The present climate of fear can also create stigmas and judgments about who is to blame and who is to be avoided, along with a dark, survivalist “every person for him/herself” mindset and behaviours. We can easily forget our shared vulnerability and interdependence.

But meaningful connection can occur even from the recommended six feet of social distance between you and your neighbour — and it begins with compassion. Compassion is the intention to be of benefit to others and it starts in the mind. Practically speaking, compassion starts by asking yourself one question as you go about your day and connect — virtually and in person — with others: How can I help this person to have a better day?

With that simple question, amazing things begin to happen. The mind expands, the eyes open to who and what is really in front of us, and we see possibilities for ourselves and others that are rich with hope and ripe with opportunity.

See more on <https://uplift.tv/2019/maya-soetoro-ng-grassroots-compassion/>;
<https://uplift.tv/2018/important-lessons-on-happiness/>

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Breathe!

When you sense a hostile, negative or adversarial reaction arising, simply think to yourself “I’m remaining calm,” and deliberately take a series of slow, deep breaths. This will help short circuit your amygdala’s natural attempt to restrict higher reasoning (“fight or fly” reaction), while oxygen can be a powerful ally of the prefrontal cortex (designed for detailed reasoning).

You can use this simple technique to better manage your response to conflict, stressful situations and other challenges. You can also build on it. For example, once you have learned to detect, and manage, the early signs of your own hijacks, you will have a greater capacity to notice them in others. You can use the same technique to maintain a calm, clear mind when those around you struggle to do so. People who focus their energy on constructive problem solving – basically things they can actually control, tend to recover more quickly from setbacks. See more on <https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/science-breathing>

Practice Yoga

You may wish to consider practicing Yoga, which is the best way to practice conscious breathing and to allow the best connection between body and mind.

Yoga has incredible benefits as it builds strength, awareness and harmony in both the mind and body. While there are more than 100 different types, or schools, of yoga, most sessions typically include breathing exercises, meditation, and assuming postures (sometimes called asana or poses) that stretch and flex various muscle groups. This practice focus on preventive medicine and believes in the body’s ability to heal itself. Yoga is a great tool for staying healthy, please see links herewith for more information <https://uplift.tv/2017/the-evolution-of-science-and-yoga/>

<https://uplift.tv/2018/really-practice-yoga/>
<https://yogavastu.com/>
<https://www.worldyogainstitute.org/#>
<https://www.yogaanytime.com/mx/about-us>
<https://itsyogabrighton.co.uk/>

Change perspective

Perspective is paramount. Events and situations do not have an inherent meaning - only the meaning that we give to them. Normally, we create meaning without any conscious thought. We simply react. However, it’s possible to change our perspective in ways that improve our emotional lives. Our body provides important cues in three specific ways. These are called the three markers of emotional balance, or the 3Rs:

1. Recognition – early on, your body gives you warning signs of an impending emotional hijack. The reactions would probably include a pounding heart, sweaty palms, dry mouth, butterflies, and shallow breathing. Simply recognizing your body’s automatic physiological stress response is the first part of emotional balance.

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2. Resilience – once you get better at recognizing the signs of stress and rationalizing what’s going on for you in your body, this will allow you to pull yourself back to the “here and now”, and recover from the fear quicker.

3. Regulation – management of these mental and physical responses will allow you to identify when to check in with your thoughts and feelings, what’s worth expending energy on and what can be let go. This in turn will help you to curb your impulse to act without thinking.

Emotional balance doesn’t mean you avoid anything bad; it’s quite the opposite. Recognition of your body’s physical reactions to stressors is the first step towards building resilience and regulating your emotional and physical responses. Your body is designed to give you tell-tale signs of stress, and the more you are able to tune in to your body and listen to the clues it provides, the better you will be able to face life, whatever it throws your way. You may wish to check more information at the following link: <https://positivepsychology.com/emotion-regulation-worksheets-strategies-dbt-skills/>

Have a positive outlook

Focusing on the positive can build your tendency to see the good things in your life. Research shows that taking conscious steps to identify these good things leads to significant increases in happiness over time. Countless studies have found that positive emotions lead to better performance and higher motivation, and better physical health too. It’s also important to remember that good feelings are contagious, and they spread through groups. In the workplace, this not only enhances everyone’s moods, but also improves their effectiveness and the work climate in general.

In this context, we wish to state our appreciation and gratitude for the effective and positive approach FAO management and Internal-Communication have taken in this crisis, by constantly informing and updating the staff through the Intranet and phone and email messages, and also through regular meetings with the Staff Representative Bodies. We firmly support the strengthening of the Counselling services offered both at HQ and in the regional offices, covering all official languages, which should be seen as strategic in the context of the implementation of the UN Mental Health Strategy and Duty of Care.

Learn new skills

Learning new skills increases your motivation, makes you more adaptable, relatable, interesting and helps you get better jobs. You can yourself set up a list of skills you may wish to learn, both in the work environment and for your personal benefit. Since it is proven by countless studies that creativity is key to transformation and wellbeing, we suggest that you have a try at several creative patterns, such as:

Journal Writing helps you define your voice. It helps you get clarity on who you are and who you want to become. Your story is your story alone. It has the power to change both your life and that of others.

<https://journaltherapy.com/journal-cafe-3/journal-course/>

An *art journal* is a visual diary; it combines elements of writing, drawing, painting, collage, and even printmaking to express yourself. This includes your everyday life, as well as your bigger hopes, dreams, and fears. This practice offers a way to de-stress and to sort through complicated emotions. As a result, you gain self-awareness and feel empowered. Discover more at this link:

<https://artjournalist.com/how-to-start-an-art-journal/>

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Mandala colouring

Mandalas represent order and structure. We have known the geometric shapes ever since our childhood days. Colouring them in provides orientation both in terms of space and time. That is why mandalas are ideal for use in occupational therapy. With their clearly defined areas they give assistance to patients for whom free drawing or painting might be difficult to cope with. In addition to that, colouring in mandalas is an activity that facilitates concentration.

When used with meditation, it is important to focus on one thing in order to feel calm and relaxed. Colouring in mandalas is highly suitable to achieve relaxation and it is not without reason that it is a favourite meditation exercise for Tibetan monks. It facilitates concentration and is suitable for all ages. More at <https://www.justcolor.net/relaxation/coloring-mandalas/>

Dancing

Dance has always been a part of human culture, rituals and celebrations. Dancing can be about recreation and self-expression, not only as a competitive activity and above all it is an enjoyable way to be more physically active and stay fit. The secret of the great health benefits it ensures, may be that dancing requires a variety of different skills, both mental and physical. Dancing requires not only balance, strength, and endurance ability, but also cognitive ability: adaptability and concentration to move according to the music, artistry for graceful and fluid motion, and memory for choreography.

Dancing can be a way to stay fit for people of all ages, shapes and sizes. It has a wide range of physical and mental benefits including: improved condition of your heart and lungs, increased muscular strength, endurance and motor fitness, increased aerobic fitness, improved muscle tone and strength, weight management, stronger bones and reduced risk of osteoporosis, better coordination, agility and flexibility; improved balance and spatial awareness, increased physical confidence, improved mental functioning, improved general and psychological wellbeing, greater self-confidence and self-esteem, better social skills. More info at the following links: <https://time.com/5484237/dancing-health-benefits/> and <https://www.5rhythms.com/>

Dancing is so powerful that it can be used as a therapy to overcome and transform strong emotions, stress-related problems, depression and even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) syndrome. It is a holistic approach to healing, based on the empirically supported assertion that mind, body, and spirit are inseparable and interconnected; changes in the body reflect changes in the mind and vice versa. Please see more at <https://adta.org/2014/11/08/what-is-dancemovement-therapy/>

Meditation

What's good about guided meditation is that it teaches you that it's okay to have thoughts and guides you through a greater clarity of mind, which is what meditation really is about. You learn to be aware of how your body and mind feel. You learn to relax, even when you feel like you're too nervous to relax. Try some simple exercises at <https://www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations> and on <https://www.gaia.com/article/begin-hacking-your-way-to-a-solid-daily-meditation-practice>

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Physical Exercise

Having an increase in blood flow and circulation to areas of your body helps promote cell growth and organ function. Your skin also benefits from an increase in blood circulation. Healthy skin is better able to fight off bacteria and infection that it may come in contact with. When your heart pumps at full force, your heart rate lowers, heart muscles relax, and your blood pressure flows evenly and smoothly. Try some simple exercises at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=6olorMntw5g

We trust that you will manage to go through this period without too much stress. Stay safe and healthy and in case you wish to have more tips about how to manage your time while staying at home, have a look at this comprehensive guide <https://www.forestco.co/pandemic-guide>

References/Further Reading:

8 Timeless Skills to Learn Now in Under 8 Hours to Change <https://medium.com/skilluped/8-timeless-skills-to-learn-now-in-under-8-hours-to-change-your-life-forever-75e7b339373a>

Build Your Resilience in the Face of a Crisis. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/build-your-resiliency-in-the-face-of-a-crisis>

When Life Feels Chaotic And Uncertain, Think Like a <https://medium.com/mind-cafe/when-life-feels-chaotic-and-uncertain-think-like-a-philosopher-94db41e819aa>