

Resources for Nourishing our Nervous System

What Helps Soothe our Emotions?

During times of crises and uncertainty we may notice feelings such as overwhelm, fear and exhaustion arising. It is normal that we may be needing new supports or to strengthen existing ones to help ourselves face these very abnormal situations. As we begin to look for resources to help us navigate and tend to our emotions, we can think of it as the question of “what might help me cope with this emotion or moment” or “how can I nourish my nervous system,” “how can I help myself soothe” or “how can I buffer against the impact of trauma”?

We begin by bringing a compassionate curiosity to befriend our nervous system—to notice what we are feeling, thinking and sensing in our bodies. When we are aware of what is arising, we can ask what might be needed to bear the intensity of the feeling, to offer care and to look for ways to meet the need.

In the moment are you needing

- space for feeling,
- space for comfort,
- space for action, or
- space for distraction?

When we are able to identify what we might be needing, we can then intentionally choose options that best support our nervous system in that moment.

Where to Begin?

Coping takes a lot of emotional energy. We need to spend our coping energy wisely, so that the effort we put forth has the most impact.

It helps to have a realistic view of coping— we’re looking for what eases the distress, even a little bit, to support what we are experiencing. We’ll use a variety of different resources and tools each day and each week to help meet our needs. There is unfortunately no “silver bullet” that will soothe all our distress.

We need the tools we use to match the level of our distress. Higher level of distress means we may need more and/or stronger supports. Lower levels of distress may be managed by our daily self-care practices.

You hold insight and resources

Do what works for you. We’re all uniquely wired and different things will resonate with each of us on different days.

What might you already know about yourself: Is there something that offered support in the past that you have stopped doing? Could you try it or another variation of it now?

Just telling ourselves that everything is okay is not enough—our body has to feel the physiological shift.

Tending to our whole selves

Because we're embodied and relational creatures, we oftentimes will need resources on several levels:

- to attend to our daily rhythms
- support for our thoughts and cognitions
- nourishment for our values and beliefs about the world (may include spirituality)
- resources to respond to the information our body is giving us (somatic)
- support for our relationship with the people important to us

See if any of these ideas for resource might feel easily available and resonate with your needs.

Support for our Daily Rhythms

Engage with ritual and routine for the week

Notice what routine allows you to move into the work day and transition out of it back home.

Creating time stamps

Time feels slippery or wonky during the pandemic because we've lost many cues on the passage of time being shut indoors and on screens. We can help our brains and bodies orient by reminding ourselves what day it is and then tethering ourselves to the chronology of when things occurred. This creates the time stamp that our minds desperately need of how long things have been occurring and where we are in the process.

Schedule time for informal chats/collaborations with colleagues

Take 10 minute breaks to refuel

Deep breathing, a snack, a glass of water, stretching, grounding exercises or movement

Get fresh air-- open a window or door, sit outside, consider moving outdoors

Sit in the sun, which offers extra Vitamin D into our body, to support mood

Nourish yourself with **food the color of the rainbow**, even if small meals or snacks

Drink lots of **water**

Limit stimulants and depressants

Slow the pace down

- For those of us who might over-function in times of stress (a trauma response to speed up) are there ways to simplify your schedule and obligations; to slow down; to pause? Is there a way to prioritize nourishment, rest, and connection with safe and supportive people?

Sleep

-Create a rhythm of wake-up time, a wind-down time and a consistent bedtime to turn out the lights

-Reserve your bed for sleep. Don't allow yourself to work from bed. Limit bringing your laptop to bed to watch Netflix or a movie. If you're tossing and turning for more than 20 minutes get out of bed and try something relaxing with low light

-See the light: exposure to daylight (Vitamin D) plays a crucial role in regulating melatonin and our sleep rhythms. This can be opening windows and doors

-Be mindful of screen time due to the blue light produced that blocks the natural secretion of melatonin. Consider blue light blocking glasses

- Incorporate movement for 20 minutes a day to help discharge stress hormones
- Consider deep breathing, guided meditation, quiet reading or calming music before bed

Support for our Cognitions

Permission to feel

Reactions vary from person to person. Some of us may experience intense feelings while others experience nothing at all. There is generous permission to acknowledge whatever your truth is. It is also very normal for cognitions, emotions and sensations to ebb and flow in any given day.

Realistic expectations

The multiple crises are still unfolding and on-going, the challenges are regenerating themselves each week with a new manifestation of trauma. These events are not complete yet, allowing them to be relegated to the past. Making space for compassion, potentially allows more realistic expectation of ourselves that this is a marathon that requires even more tender care and attentiveness to what helps us soothe.

Mindful Connection

Bring intentionality into where and for how long you are exposing yourself to activating interactions, situations or news consumption. Check-in internally to notice if a fight, flight or collapse response is being intensified. Consider setting boundaries that protect your energy and time.

Notice your thoughts

Tune in to what we are focusing on. Be aware of the protectors of catastrophizing, black and white thinking, generalizing, jumping to conclusions, reductionism

Stay in the present moment as much as you can, remembering experiences in which you coped well in the past. What was helpful then?

Partializing

We can't digest the on-going trauma in one big meal. We have to take it a bite at a time.

Partializing is the process of coming into contact with what is happening (the pain), then going away and doing something else to cope or distract or soothe, and then coming back to the information about the reality of what is unfolding.

These movements back and forth help our nervous system regulate by giving us space to metabolize the pain. It's an inherent wisdom of the body that we may already be doing naturally.

If we've experienced previous overwhelming events we may get stuck in one of these movements (either in the pain or avoiding the pain) and retreat into styles of coping that can help us survive in the short-term but can be costly in the long-term if we get stuck there.

Bring your attention back to the certainty of what is known and in our control

Our brains are prediction machines that mostly want to survive. Uncertainty increases a sense of dysregulation. Return focus to what is within our control and what is within the next 48 hours.

Make space to engage with the possibility of a positive future

Bring curiosity to moments that don't feel quite so hopeless or helpless. Is there any space to contemplate a positive future?

Support for our values and beliefs

Protectors, Nurturers

Reflect on people (either in your life, from spiritual beliefs, or from inspiring fiction/poetry/movies) who convey a sense of strength, comfort and protection.

Are there people in power who share your views and can offer support, even if proverbially or from a distance? There's lots of really smart people all around the world working on all the layers of the pandemic.

Anchor points

Reflect on your personal values and internal qualities—what are the known stable, core truths about you (and/or you and your family)? Are there practices you can engage in to connect more strongly with your values?

Support for our bodies

Orienting

A variety of practices that can offer gentle cues of safety by orienting to the present moment. This can help our systems hold the duality of on-going threat and current safety.

- **Bring ourselves back to what is true in this moment** by reminding ourselves of the date, time, where we are, who is with us, what was just happening and that we felt x, y, z. If we are in a safe place, allow yourself to say that "In this moment, I am safe."
- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Exercise**

<https://insighttimer.com/blog/54321-grounding-technique/>

Engage smells that are calming and soothing

Olfactory inputs, unlike the other basic senses, are sent directly to the part of the brain that processes our sense of alertness and/or relaxation.

As such, smell can be a powerful factor in both activating past overwhelm as well as anchoring ourselves to calming and grounding self-states in the present. Identifying pleasing smells, be they in the form of a candle, tea, food, or essential oils, and accessing these with consciousness, can be a significant resource to bring us back into our bodies.

Breathe deep

When facing many unknowns and uncertainties, one of the most powerful tools we continually have access to is our breath. By noticing our breath and bringing intentionality to how we breathe, we are literally able to help calm our nervous system and allow an opportunity for regulation.

Some options to consider are incorporating breathwork practices such as:

-The 4-7-8 breath: <https://www.drweil.com/videos-features/videos/breathing-exercises-4-7-8-breath/>

-Square breathing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgzhKW08bMQ>

-5 finger breath: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqariSXiSvs>

Some of us may find that guided meditations are supportive. Many apps offer free guided meditations and breathwork, such as Calm, Headspace and Insight Timer.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Our muscles and sinews respond to the neurochemicals released when we are in situations of high stress, and can either become overly tense or too loose. Bringing focused attention to the major muscle groups allows the muscles to re-set which offers regulation. An audio recording of this exercise is available on UT's CMHC website: <https://cmhc.utexas.edu/mindbodylab.html>

Legs up the wall

A posture from yoga that can offer regulation and relaxation is lifting our legs above the heart, by putting them up a wall. There are many adaptations of this position that can be modified for different abilities.

<https://www.drweil.com/health-wellness/balanced-living/exercise-fitness/legs-up-the-wall-pose/>

Cold showers or running hands under cold water

Creative expression through coloring, writing, cooking, baking, and/or art making

Affection

Laughter, play, levity

Discharge Energy

Find ways to move your body and exert physical energy, go for a 20 minute walk or run. Yoga or qigong, cardio or walking on hilly terrain or up and down stairs. Consider dancing or moving to favorite songs in your living room. Many gyms and yoga studios are offering online classes or short workouts.

Increase proprioceptive input

Proprioception is the brain's map for where the body is in space. When we are feeling more out of our bodies, it can be difficult to sense our own tissues. More specifically, passive proprioceptive input can be offered through the addition of weight or compression, such as a weighted ball or blanket, rolling on a foam roller, or wearing compressive clothing such as T-shirts or leggings with a high spandex-like "squeeze" factor.

Other ways to activate proprioception are by drinking through a straw or chewing gum, doing heel drops or wall push-ups

Support for our relationships

Since we are relational beings, we rely on nonverbal and social cues to support our nervous system's social engagement system. This system helps to promote resilience, nourishment to our nervous system, support for our immune system and is responsible for providing us with rest.

Ways we can begin to take in cues of relative safety and connection are:

Consider making eye contact, if that feels welcomed

Waving and acknowledging others

Smiling with our eyes

Becoming aware of open, relaxed and calm body postures

Avoid multi-tasking on Zoom, Teams or Skype for Business to allow ourselves to notice and take in the other people on the call with us

Noticing acts of kindness in our neighborhood, community or around the world

Pausing to appreciate different expressions of human compassion and empathy

Questions you can ask yourself to nourish your relationships and increase your sense of connection are:

Who are your people? The community you feel safe with— where you feel seen, heard, known?

What can you do with these people to maintain the connection?

Who might you like to invite into connection?

Who might you be able to check in on today?

Who might you benefit from connecting with?

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