

Addressing Your Stress During COVID-19:

PART 1

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to elevated stress and a change in routines for Canadians in how they live, work and socialize. As medical laboratory professionals, you are experiencing even further pressure and strain from the demands of increased and ongoing testing which is vital for the management and identification of cases. You are Canada's frontline in health care, and your work is even more important during these pandemic times. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to invest in and prioritize your mental health and emotional well-being. This article offers some strategies and tips to manage your stress levels.

LET'S TALK ABOUT STRESS

Stressors, which may be physical (cold or hot temperatures, chronic pain) or psychological (events, interactions with others), are external situations, activities, or events that cause stress on our body. Stress is the body's response to real or perceived threat; it often manifests as cognitive, behavioural, physical or emotional symptoms. Issues with memory, trouble concentrating and consistent worrying are a few of the cognitive symptoms that occur with stress. Behavioural symptoms are generally shown, with changes in eating and sleeping habits. Physical symptoms range from aches and pains to racing heartbeat or chest pain, as well as issues with digestion. Emotional symptoms encompass changes in mood, increased feelings of irritability or being overwhelmed, and may include an inability to relax.

HOW DO I REACT?

Prior to engaging in any strategy, I would strongly encourage you to complete some self-reflection and to think about the last three to five times you experienced stress. How did you feel when you experienced stress? Do some of the symptoms in the above mentioned paragraph sound familiar to you?



HOW DO I BEGIN TO DEAL WITH STRESS?

1) Identify and acknowledge your emotions.

- How are you feeling? Rather than only saying, "I feel stressed," examine the feeling.
- Where do you feel your emotions? (For example, do you feel them in your heart, in your neck or in your shoulders.)

2) Rather than immediately pushing those feelings away or dismissing them, are you able to acknowledge them?

- Can you sit with the feeling? "I am feeling anxious right now."
- If you are unable to hold onto the feeling, can you write it down to process later? Or are you able to allow yourself to let the feeling go?
- Try a body check-in: Practice deep breathing – in through your nose and out through your mouth. Unclench your jaw. Relax your shoulders.



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Visit the **Learning Centre** to view Rosina Mete's full presentation and access additional resources.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MY OVERWHELMING THOUGHTS...?

Of course, when you experience stress during COVID-19, it may foster more negative thought spirals or "what if?" thinking. I often refer to a concept of "flipping the script" as a move towards neutral and realistic thinking patterns. An example of this concept would be: Experiencing stress and thinking, "I'm having a horrible day; I can't do anything right!" and adjusting the thought to acknowledge your emotions but also use perspective: "Today is stressful. I am doing the best I can."

The following strategies are from cognitive behavioural therapy which examines how our thoughts impact our emotions and behaviours. These are a few strategies for moving towards neutral realistic thoughts and flipping the script.

- 1) Challenge the thought. What is the best, worst or most realistic outcome?
- 2) Is this thought helpful or useful to me? What would be a more helpful or useful thought?
- 3) Replace the thought. What would you tell a friend or loved one?

A FINAL NOTE

I also want to acknowledge that implementing these strategies does take time, effort, and energy. I would encourage you to treat yourself with kindness and patience as you try out strategies.

However, if implementing a more compassionate viewpoint is challenging, then the next article will provide some great guidance and ideas. Further important components of addressing your emotional well-being include fostering self-care and the use of affirmations, which will be featured in my article for the next issue of the *CJMLS*. ■



HELPFUL RESOURCES

Additional information and resources can be found in the CSMLS Mental Health Toolkit, available at mentalhealth.csmls.org

The Mental Health Commission of Canada has a COVID-19 resource hub regarding topics and services for the general public, workplace, children/youth and seniors. It is bilingual and can be found at www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/covid19

Anxiety Canada has resources for adults, youth and children, which can be accessed at www.anxietycanada.com/covid-19/



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