

COVID-19

A GUIDE TO STAYING RESILIENT IN TIMES OF CRISIS

This information is also available online at hprc-online.org/total-force-fitness/hope-those-covid-19-frontline/featured-resources/guide-staying-resilient-times.

Managing the psychological toll of being called on to respond to crisis situations can feel extremely challenging, even if it's what you've trained to do your whole life. Understanding how to deploy particular psychological health and performance tools during specific time points—preparation, action, and recovery—might help you more effectively manage the situations at hand, and come out stronger on the other side. Learning how to use the tools during calmer and less turbulent times can proactively prepare you for high-intensity and demanding situations that lie ahead.

PREPARATION: MANAGE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE THINKING

When a situation you're in or will encounter in the future is high-stakes and high-pressure, it can be really tough to manage your thoughts and feelings. You might find yourself thinking about worst-case scenarios, or just focusing on all that's bad, and feeling stuck beneath the weight of negative emotions. It's important to remember these thoughts and feelings are normal, and human, and you're not any less prepared or capable because you feel them. To have some skills to process what you're thinking and feeling can help in situations like this, when you're ready to explore them.

- You might feel buckets of anxiety, which often stems from uncertainty about what the future will bring, and from dealing with volatile situations. When you find yourself catastrophizing—stuck in the emotions

of anxiety and unable to take action because you're thinking about the worst-case scenarios—you can **escape the downward spiral of anxiety** by putting some distance between you and your thoughts, or taking a mental break and seeking a dose of positive emotion. Use these same strategies to help others slow down catastrophic thinking.

- Feeling stuck in a spiral of hopelessness and helplessness about all that's happening in the world around you? Cultivate hope and reduce **“always” and “everything”** thinking traps by asking yourself how to isolate the impact of this circumstance, and consider where you have control and influence.
- If you're overcome with strong emotions that don't make sense, or find yourself in a pattern of feeling a lot of a particular emotion, **grab control of your feelings** by asking the right kinds of questions to dig deeper into your beliefs. Focus on questions about the accuracy of your beliefs, the productivity your beliefs drive, and the best next steps to take.
- If you're stuck in the future and thinking about what's coming next, it might help to refocus on the present by tuning into what's happening now with **mindfulness**. It's a skill to train your brain to stay in the present moment. Practicing mindfulness can help you relax, lower your blood pressure, sleep better, become more focused and alert, “tune in” to your body to perform better, and improve your relationships.
- It's OK to not be OK. And sometimes it can be too much to manage on your own. HPRC's **resources for coping with anxiety and depression** can help con-

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nect you to other ways to cope and find providers to help support your journey.

ACTION: MANAGE ENERGY EFFECTIVELY

Energy activation

While you're in the heat of handling a crisis, it can be hard to know how to mobilize or conserve your own energy reserves, so you can execute essential tasks efficiently. The cognitive, emotional, and physiological strain means you have to be intentional about how your resources are used. When internal and external resources are limited, learn how to deploy energy effectively. Start by taking time to learn about and **understand your stress-response system**. You can gain insight into what your brain and body do to mobilize resources to meet challenges. Once you know you can influence how this system impacts you, then you can experiment with how to connect energy activation to performance.

Brain-based approaches:

- If you're feeling the physiological consequences of anxiety in the moment, **leverage that energy to improve your performance**. Instead of thinking your body can't handle stress, tell yourself your body and brain are mobilizing the resources needed to meet this challenge effectively. Reframe your physical and physiological sensations to help reroute the energy generated by stress and positively boost your performance.
- Your beliefs impact your behavior in ways that can **become self-fulfilling prophecies**. If you think of a situation as "all good" or "all bad," that you "have it" or you "don't," or that you just need to leave things to fate, you might have to challenge some of your beliefs because they might be undermining your performance.
- What you say to yourself, especially during trying times, can improve your performance or work against you. Use self-talk to **motivate yourself and guide skilled actions**. Motivational self-talk can boost performance by boosting confidence. And instructional self-talk can help you break down complex tasks, so you can focus. You can also leverage **optimistic thinking** to keep you energized, motivated, and focused on the things you can control.

- Create a **performance routine**, so you can prime your body to show up and help you focus when you need it the most. Routines create and reinforce mastery in movements, thoughts, and feelings. This enables you to deploy intention focus and integrate what you know into new situations and challenges.
- Focusing on what you're good at is a good place to be—in a crisis and beyond. Leverage your strengths because **they energize you**. To feel like you're doing your best and showcasing your skills can fuel positive emotions and energy during hard times.

Body-based approaches:

- Make healthy food choices to keep you energized for long shifts. Choose **high-performance foods** to fuel your mind and body and make your calories count.
- What you eat affects **your mental performance**, which is crucial during mentally demanding situations. Focus on a balanced diet rich in fruit, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, lean meats and fish, eggs, nuts, and healthy fats.
- If the energy within you just simply isn't enough, learn how to **leverage caffeine** for your physical and mental performance. Also, get the **caffeine facts** about sources and amounts of caffeine in different drinks.
- Finally, it might seem counterintuitive to look for time to exercise when you're already low on energy. But even just a few minutes of **physical activity** every day can help you feel more alert and focused, as well as support your tolerance to stressors.

Rest and rejuvenation

For goal-driven and performance-focused individuals and teams, it can be hard to go from high-optempo environments to intentional rest. But rest and recovery are critical for resilience. Making the best of the limited time you have to recover is important for restoring energy reserves too. There are strategies that can help you be at your best, and recover when you need it the most.

- Activate your relaxation response to balance out stress. Take a look at HPRC's overview of several **relaxation techniques and resources** you can use to pump the brakes on your stress when it becomes unhealthy.

- The pathway to quick relaxation response activation is through **belly breathing**. It's a powerful tool to help manage strong feelings in a moment, and to optimize recovery after. And like any other muscle, the more you practice this skill, the more responsive and adaptive your body can become to stress.
- Engage in other mind-body techniques such as **yoga**, **guided imagery**, meditation, and **progressive muscle relaxation**.
- When you can't get the sleep you need at night, think about ways to **nap strategically**. Brief, well-timed naps can help restore focus and energy when reserves are low, and ward off performance deficits until a good night's sleep is available.
- Strive to do the best you can at **managing your sleep debt**, so you set yourself up for success day and night. Try combating sleep debt by tweaking your environment and routine.
- Connecting with loved ones can be a source of recovery, yet it's important to be aware of potential **challenges to communicating** with a partner or family member while apart. When possible, plan ahead, make a backup plan, and think creatively about ways to stay connected during challenging times.

RECOVERY: GROW AND THRIVE AFTER CRISIS

Crisis situations typically last for brief periods of time. In the calm after the storm, there's a rich opportunity to reflect on what kinds of strategies helped you manage those situations more or less successfully.

- Tune into what you learned about your own capacity to manage through crisis, and what you learned about how others helped you through the process. This information can help you to shift your **beliefs about stress** and feel more confident and prepared next time you have to meet a crisis head-on.
- Cultivate a sense of appreciation to help reflect on what kept you grounded through crisis. **Feeling grateful** can boost your well-being, positive emotions, and happiness, and enable optimal performance in the future.
- After **experiencing a trauma**, it's possible to find a "new normal" that's different in a positive way. You might find new personal strengths, enhanced relationships, deepened meaning and purpose, or an advanced appreciation for life after a stressful experience.
- Your beliefs about the world affect how you make sense of problems and address them, what you notice, and what you might miss. If you find yourself wondering **if everything happens for a reason**, you might benefit from adjusting your thinking to everything can happen for a reason.