

# Coping with Crises Through Mindfulness

*Many healthcare workers are extraordinarily stressed from the surge of Covid-19 cases.*

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EINPresswire.com/ -- I sit forward in my chair and listen intently as my client, an ICU nurse, describes her day. With a tremulous voice and misty eyes, she speaks of standing by a young woman's bedside in the hospital. The woman, in her 30s, was dying of Covid-19. The nurse held the woman's hand and called the family, making a video call on the cell phone as requested by her patient. As the family's faces appeared, the nurse's heart felt like lead in her chest. Two young children stared back at her from the screen with confused expressions. The woman's husband and parents rushed to join the call. Their eyes stared pleadingly at the nurse, haunting her even before she shared the tragic news.

The nurse explains that she loves her job. Nursing, she tells me, has always been her calling. Lately, however, she is feeling burned out due to the extra burden of so many coronavirus patients. And there is an additional burden, she tells me. Family members had previously been allowed to visit in the ICU, so she did not have to act as the person who made contact. Now, however, this sorrowful obligation falls on the healthcare staff's shoulders. She tells me how hard it is to perform her regular duties and keep the families informed.

“

Let us be gentle with one another in this brief time, for we shall die in exile far from home.”

*May Sarton*

“I was the only one with her when she died,” the nurse whispers, referring to that patient; I hear the sob she strangles in her throat.

As her psychotherapist, I want to help this young nurse. I wish I could change her workload. I wish I could change the

fact that families are not allowed to visit. I wish that the young woman who died had gotten the vaccine and had given herself a fighting chance. Yet I cannot alter any of these things. My job is to help this nurse deal with her feelings and brace against reality. I admire her, stooped in her



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chair and burdened by her worries; I do not know if I could summon the physical stamina to do what she is doing every day. She is a healthcare hero.

Many healthcare workers are extraordinarily stressed from the surge of Covid-19 cases. And it's not just these individuals who suffer; their family members and many in the community are also affected by the situation. In my experience, it is essential to combat such stress—and the sooner the better.

Fortunately, there is a trove of research showing how mindfulness practices can help people restore and maintain their calm and equanimity in difficult situations. These are the practices I call upon and share with my clients so they can recover their hope and serenity. Below are a handful of such practices. I recommend them to you or anyone else who is suffering from stress, anxiety, and sadness during such troubling times. Try them out; share them with your family and friends.

### Loving Kindness Prayer

Let the words echo through your mind, and consciously think of what they mean.

Tell yourself:

May I be healed

May I be at peace

May I be filled with loving kindness

Direct these thoughts to a patient or someone who is suffering:

May you be healed

May you be at peace

May you be filled with loving kindness

### Healing Imagery

Practice deep breathing. Inhale with the word “be” and exhale with the word “calm.” Conduct mental “body scans” regularly throughout the day. This practice involves stopping to mindfully feel tension in your body. Notice where you are holding tension—a stiff neck, an aching back, a curled fist, etc.—and loosen the muscles by envisioning yourself sending internal rays of light and peace at those areas. Take deep, healing breaths.

## Be Kind to Yourself

We can train our brains to be kinder to us and others. Eric Kandel, winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine and a keen scholar of the biology of learning, notes that we can learn to notice and redirect negative gut reactions into moments of comfort for ourselves and others. Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff have researched the importance—and success—of treating ourselves with kindness to lower sympathetic nervous system arousal, increase the parasympathetic system, and effectively self-soothe. They've found that the activation of the vagal system leads to greater heart-rate variability and increased feelings of calm, while the regulation of the amygdala (the “emotion center of the brain”) provides better emotional control. Treat yourself as you would treat a friend.

## Focus on the Here and Now

Train yourself to fully experience the present moment and avoid dwelling on thoughts of the past or future. Years ago, a group of terminally-diagnosed cancer patients showed me how to embrace the moment. They taught me not to wait to fully experience life. Focusing on the present moment with kindness and acceptance through mindfulness practice can literally change the structure of the brain, according to Susan Lazar of Harvard. The brain's amygdala literally shrinks after six weeks of regular mindfulness practice, enabling the frontal cortex to gain volume—meaning there is a better ability to balance thinking and feeling.

## Choose Your Story

I remind my client that her job is hard enough without harsh self-judgement. By catching herself when she is thinking should of, could of, would of thoughts, she can better balance emotions and critical thinking in the present moment by noticing toxic thoughts and choosing to replace them with healthy ones.

We all tell ourselves stories; many are based on past experiences and no longer serve us. Ask yourself each time: “Does this story make you bitter or better?”

If you are bogged down in anxiety and depression and cannot redirect negative stories, you may want to seek the help of a mental health professional.

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