

**Living in and Beyond COVID 19:
the Normal Psychosocial and Physical Responses to a Pandemic
(LIDÈ Foundation)**

When you are thrown into a crisis or exposed to it through what you hear and see from others directly involved, it doesn't matter if it is a natural disaster, a war, violent demonstrations or a pandemic, your mind has a *natural/normal* response that is meant to protect you. However, sometimes that response makes you feel like you are not "yourself".

Below are just some common and *normal* reactions that you may be feeling right now, the reasons why you have these feelings, and some ways you can cope with them and with the difficulties of this time.

Inability to Concentrate

You: "I can't think. I can't make decisions. I can't focus on my work."

Your Brain: When you live through a disaster, when you are surrounded by violence, or when you hear about a life threatening disease spreading into your community, the part of your brain where you do critical thinking, analysis, and logical reasoning, (the frontal lobe) basically shuts down. At the same time, your amygdala (where extreme feelings like fear are processed) becomes hyperactive, resulting in the fight, flight, freeze response that makes rational people do irrational things...or not be able to do *anything* at all. The normal effect of this is to feel like you cannot think or concentrate or make decisions.

What you can do:

- Do things in short spurts. When working or studying, work for 20 to 40 minutes then take a short break. This can be as simple as looking out a window for a minute or walking to get a glass of water. Then return to the work.
- Take notes in meetings and annotate what you need to read. It helps to keep you focused and also gives you a memory prompt...which you may need.
- Wait on making serious long-term life altering decisions.
- Talk things through with someone you trust so that you can hear your thoughts out-loud.

Difficulty remembering the little things

You: "I can't find my keys. Where did I put my wallet? Did I feed the dogs already? I can't remember anything!"

Your Brain: As life-threatening conditions become more important in your daily life, the less important things become less important to your brain and memory. To focus on the important (life-threatening) things, your brain stops focusing on things it normally uses short term memory to recall. A few factors create this effect. For one, as mentioned, your frontal lobe isn't functioning at full capacity and so the mental "rehearsal" that sometimes allows a short-term memory or immediate recall fails to take place. Another factor is that you are so focused on immediate and upcoming dangers around you that you cannot track or hold onto what has just passed. And your brain chemistry makes all of this worse. Cortisol, a stress hormone that is released in a crisis or traumatic experience, impairs the functioning of the hippocampus and the hippocampus is where a lot of our memory work takes place. Consequently, it is *very normal* to feel as if you can't remember things because...you *can't*.

What you can do:

- Write things down. Just writing them down helps you to remember. You might not even need to look at the paper once you have written the item down.

- Talk to yourself to tell yourself where you have put things. Speaking things out loud creates a more intentional memory.
- Tell others your plans. They may not need to remind you because just speaking them out loud helps you to remember.
- Forgive yourself for forgetting.

Agitation and Hypervigilance

You:

With the news of COVID 19, you find yourself thinking...

“I want to duck every time I hear someone cough.”

“I am afraid to go outside.”

With the past violence and unrest, you still also think....

“I feel like I am constantly watching for the smoke of burning tires, or listening for shouts or gunshots, or looking down every side-street that I pass.”

With hurricane season approaching, you worry...

“Is that wind bringing a storm?”

“Are those clouds building into a microburst?”

And with all of these factors, you find yourself saying...

“I can’t sit still.”

“I must keep busy.”

“I can’t sleep at night.”

Your Brain: The normal response to the abnormal condition of a crisis is for your brain to become be constantly on the alert for danger (hypervigilant). This is meant to **protect** you. So, before you even realize what you are doing, your brain is already monitoring for the next dangerous threat. And it can take several days or even weeks for your brain to figure out that you are safe. This is normal.

What you can do:

- When you notice yourself looking for danger, acknowledge that the reaction is normal, then instead of noticing only the dangers, try also to notice the things around you that are **safe**.
- Think about the things you can do and can control. Begin an action toward controlling something that will help keep you safe — wash your hands (to prevent disease), clear away debris or get water (to prepare for a storm) etc., get enough food to last a few days (for any of these crises). Even just one action can ease the feeling of being overwhelmed.
- When you notice your body tensing up (unnecessarily), take a deep breath.
- If possible, find a place in your home or office where you really do feel safe, and if you need to focus or work, do it in that safe space.
- Try not to spend the whole day checking for the latest news or rumor. Be skeptical of what you hear and see online.
- Talk to someone about what is true, and do not listen to what is rumor or not verified.
- Give it time. You will eventually stop looking over your shoulder...if the real threats over that shoulder go away.

Isolation

You:

“I feel so alone, cut off from others, cut off from ‘life’.”

“I am bored.”

“I feel trapped or like I am in prison.”

Your brain: Humans rely on others and our social interactions for healthy growth and thus survival. When we cannot be in contact with others, our brain interprets this as if we have been cut off from the relationships that protect us, educate us, nurture us, and help us realize that we matter — that we are alive. Social interaction also helps us at times when we need to adapt to change by giving us something secure — the relationship with another person and their reassurance that we will still have them beside us when everything else is different capable. For these reasons, isolation is much more than just feeling lonely. And is something we must take seriously.

What you can do: When the ways in which you usually socialize are taken away from you, try to find other ways to stay connected to friends and family. Some of these might include the following:

- Make a routine of calling to check on a friend or family member, or call one person, and suggest they call another friend, and then that friend calls another friend, creating a “phone tree” or ripple effect of people contacting people. If you have data, you can also text or send emails.
- Check on your nearest neighbor or someone you know who is elderly while keeping a safe distance. Say hello from the edge of the yard. Make a routine of visiting at a safe distance.
- If living with someone but cut off from others, talk to that person about things you normal don’t ask about. For example, ask a parent about his/her childhood or a childhood friend they had, ask a brother what his favorite place is to just feel at peace, ask a daughter what she wishes she could change in the world, or ask what they think of “big” concepts like justice, hope, truth, compassion, and what those would look like in their lives.
- If you have something to write on or with, keep a daily journal that is like a conversation with a friend about your day, including what you did, what you thought about, and your feelings.
- Create: draw pictures, paint, build or repair something, compose a song, cook, do anything that allows you to express yourself through that action.

Changes in Appetite and Digestion

You: “I am so worried...I just can’t eat.” or “I am constantly snacking and don’t even know I am eating” or “As soon as I eat, I feel sick.”

Your Brain (and its impact on your BODY): The part of your brain that controls emotion, including fear, (the limbic system) is triggered by a crisis or perceived threat. When this happens, that system prepares your body to run for your life. (Note that the limbic system is also where the amygdala triggers fight-flight-freeze). As part of the preparation to fight, to run-away, or to hide, the pituitary gland and hypothalamus tell your adrenal glands to produce cortisol — a stress hormone. Cortisol shuts down your digestive system so that your body can focus on more important things — like running. Consequence? Upset stomach, indigestion, sometimes vomiting, sometimes diarrhea, sometimes eating or not eating to try to get rid of the bad feeling in the pit of your stomach. And yes, perhaps cortisol is why we say “I have a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach” when we sense danger.

What you can do:

- Breathe. Just take a good deep breath.
- Meditate if you can, but the reality is that when you are in a state of a crisis, it is hard to slow down enough to do a sitting mediation. Mediation is simply anything that focuses your mind on the here and now instead of on worries about the future or regrets about the past. So try just focusing on *any* activity that you are doing — washing dishes or clothes, cooking, singing. The part of the process that helps is simply being in the present moment, that is to say, focusing on what you are *doing* and not focusing on your fears.

- Do something you enjoy that involves your body actively: walk, stretch, dance, clean. You can help the stress hormones move through your system and reduce them through physical activity.
- Listen to music and sing along...maybe even sing as loudly as you can. Again, it is about involving your body and your lungs.
- Do anything you enjoy that gets oxygen moving through your body or that lowers your stress

Heart, and Muscles — the Adrenalin Effect

You: “My heart is racing. I wonder if I am having a heart attack?” and/or “my muscles ache”

Your Brain: Along with cortisol (the stress hormone), the adrenal glands send out adrenaline in times of stress. This increases your heart rate and boosts your muscles to help them respond quickly and with super-hero strength, but it can make you feel like your heart is beating through your chest, or you can't catch your breath, or you are aching all over.

What you MUST do:

- Never ignore these symptoms. Yes, it can be a result of the adrenaline, but it also could be a true heart condition. Always seek medical attention or advice if you feel these symptoms and they are impairing your ability to function. If after assessment, it is clear that there are no heart related problems, know that it is a truly *normal* and truly “real” sensation in your body.
- If you know it is just the adrenalin and/or anxiety about the situation and your future, follow the steps for hypervigilance:
 - Breathe (count slowly to 3 with a breath in, and count to 3 with a breath out),
 - notice what is safe,
 - breathe again,
 - go somewhere safe, and
 - breathe...again!

Inability to Control the Situation and guilt

You: Or “I have family in a place where things are really bad, and I can't get to them. I feel like I am going insane with worry.”

Your Brain: One of the things that humans seek in order to feel a sense of stability and wellbeing is control. When we are in control, we feel less fear. Fear can even grow or come out of the sense that we have no control over a situation.

Control is often closely related to feelings of guilt:

“I should have...”

“I could have....,”

“If only I had....”

In a sense, we sometimes feel guilty about things we had no control over but believe we did. “I survived. But she died.” Sometimes, there is **no** controlling that.

What you can do:

- Acknowledge what you cannot control (Example: the development of a disease in a community far away, 100 people marching up a street, a roadblock preventing you from driving, a category 5 hurricane)
- Identify the smaller things, sometimes inside that bigger uncontrollable thing, that you *can* control, taking preventative measures to not get sick, preparing for a storm or lockdown, etc.
- Take small actions that *are* within your power and ability (and safety) to take such as such as keeping distance from others, washing your hands, buying enough rice to last 2 weeks, clearing debris from around your house, strapping down your roof, calling friends and family to make

sure they are safe, moving out of the way of an angry crowd. You might not be able to stop whatever danger it is from approaching, but you can make sure you and your family are somewhere safe and have enough food, water, and other necessities to survive.

- Remind yourself that you cannot help someone if you have put yourself at such risk that now both of you might be harmed. A shaking hand to weak to hold a pitcher of water cannot pour water for someone who is dying of thirst. You need to take care of yourself in order to take care of others.
- Turn feelings of guilt into lessons and actions: What did I learn from this? What might I be able to do differently next time? How can I better plan and prepare? What can I do now? Then *do* that.

Grief and Loss

You:

“Someone I love died.”

“Seeing the death and destruction just makes me feel like life won't move forward ever again.”

“I don't personally know the people who were died, I only read about them, so why does this hurt or worry me so much?”

“I haven't been able to work/go to school in days/weeks. I feel lost and don't know if I have a future anymore.”

“It feels like all the effort I have made in the past simply doesn't matter anymore.”

“I wasn't hurt, my neighbor was. Why? Why was *I* so fortunate? Why them?”

“I should have done something to stop this or to prevent this or to help someone.”

Your Brain: Grief can feel like the world has suddenly stopped. Indeed, the world is forever different when one of its members leaves this life. And grief is not just about the loss of life. We grieve for the loss of things that are the symbols of our lives: we grieve for the loss of dreams and the future that might have been; we grieve for the loss of feeling safe and for the loss of a peace that we had come to believe in; we grieve for the loss of the material things that represented a lifetime of work.

And these losses, even if they are not directly our own, can when we are close to them, trigger past losses we have experienced. I look at the smoke billowing up into the air today, and I feel the sadness and hopelessness of a history of violence. I see a youth killed, or a sick person die and the grief I didn't allow into my life years ago when a loved one died suddenly overwhelms me.

Grief does not have an expiration date, nor is it confined to only the human lives around us. Grief is large — it can appear in our lives as shock, denial, bargaining, anger, sadness, guilt, acceptance, and these can be felt in combination, all at once, and in random order. When we push grief away, or don't make space for it, it becomes even larger, taking its space in our lives whether or not we allow it. If we acknowledge the painful parts, we will be able to step forward toward acceptance.

What you can do:

- Reach out to someone you trust or love and talk to them. It is important to feel connected to loved ones when you are experiencing any type of loss.
- Do not be afraid to talk about the person who has died or the loss you have experienced. Saying the person's name doesn't make the pain worse, instead, it makes their life matter.
- Acknowledge the loss. Loss is real and it is sad. We move forward, but we move forward differently — changed.
- Look inside yourself and the loves of those around you for the ways in which that person's life and what they did continues on. You might even ask yourself, “What would they have wanted

for me and for my future?” or “How can I give more purpose to my life in order to help their life to have had meaning?”

- If needed, seek the support of a professional or support group, or create your own group of supportive people — this can be done at a distance, over the phone, or online.
- At times when many people are dying, this is all more difficult. Like with individual loss, we need to acknowledge the pain of what has happened, while still moving forward with living. We get up and take a step. We cook a meal. We talk to a friend. We live....differently, and with something missing, but we live.

Discouragement

You:

“Not again. Not another crisis. I haven't even recovered from the last one. Will this ever stop?”

“I feel as if I am in the ocean trying to come up for air, but each time I do I am hit by another wave that forces me beneath the water,”

“Why bother with my plans for the future when they keep getting destroyed?”

Your brain AND your body: When one disaster brings on other challenges (example: an earthquake leads to homelessness, which leads to poor health and vulnerability to violence; a pandemic shuts down commerce and people cannot pay for food or water), or when disasters pile up such as when an earthquake is followed by a tsunami, or a hurricane is followed by a flood, or a community faces a pandemic that also leads to food insecurity, closure of schools, and loss of livelihoods, it is called *cascading disasters* and sometimes leads to chronic long term severe stress or trauma.

These accumulating stresses make even the slightest little problem feel overwhelming. A person might hold themselves together during a hurricane and a flood, only to fall apart in a flood of tears when the only dish that survived suddenly breaks or when the car won't start. This is normal. The stressors have exceeded your mind's threshold for coping. Imagine an 8oz glass. If someone pours 7oz of water into the glass, you could probably carry it without spilling if you are careful. Fill it all the way to 8oz and you will probably spill some as you walk. But cascading disasters are like filling that glass with more and more water each day without any chance to drink any of the water away. It overflows and overwhelms your system. As mentioned before, this is chemical/physical and not just imagined. It triggers the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis, which pours stress hormones into your body. The

Research also has proven that over activation of the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis causes has negative impacts on your physical health. In stress conditions, along with cortisol and adrenaline, your body increases a type of cell that causes inflammation. When you do not have a break from stressors, this cycle of hormones triggering inflammation lowers immunity.

What you can do

Follow all of the guidance in the other sections above and...

- Be kind to yourself.
- Talk to friends and family or get professional support to help you through or start a support group on your own.
- Take breaks.
- Notice each positive action you HAVE taken.
- When you feel discouraged, take one more step forward — it does not matter how seemingly large or small it is, how seemingly significant or insignificant because any step forward is movement and any action is significant when you feel as if the world is bringing wave after wave over your head.

- Don't let anyone tell you it is easy. It *is* hard. But you still can do it. You can survive. You can move forward...differently, but forward.

Closing thoughts... (or maybe Beginnings)

At LIDE, we help girls work through these experiences by building resiliency, and we build resiliency by strengthening three things:

1. Connection to others and a sense of belonging
2. Adaptability in behaviors and flexibility in thinking
3. A sense of purpose and hope

For those experiencing this crisis directly or indirectly, the sudden disruption to your life is real. You will move forward, but it will be in a different way. Our hope is that you will find support from those around you, find pathways to getting through this time, and maybe even allow it to bring a new purpose to your work or life, in order to bring hope to you and to others.

This is not easy. But we are in this together.