

REFLECT & CONNECT

NAVIGATING LIFE AND WORK EFFECTIVELY IN CHALLENGING TIMES

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

When you are experiencing extreme stress or trauma, it is likely that your fight-flight-freeze response will be activated. When this happens, you may lose access to your brain's "logic center" which impacts your ability to focus, concentrate and problem-solve effectively. You may also have trouble accessing your coping skills. The very first thing that helps is to calm yourself and help yourself return to a more relaxed state, so that your prefrontal cortex can come back on line. Here are some suggestions for helping you calm your physical and emotional experience.

Deep breathing: Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 8 counts. Repeat several times. You can also breathe in deeply and release the breath with a big sigh. Repeat this process several times.

3-breath rest: Take a first breath and bring all your attention to how the air is coming into your body. Exhale and keep your attention on the breath. On your second breath in, bring your awareness to the tension in your body and on the exhale, release the tension. On the third breath in, think of something or someone you are grateful for and when you release your breath, send this gratitude into the space around you.

Move your body: Take brisk walks for at least 5-10 minutes. Get your heartrate up several times each day.

Make steady choices: Eat regularly (even if you don't feel like it). Avoid excessive caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. Get adequate sleep. If you can't sleep, allow yourself to have "awake mental rest." Listen to music, or try a guided imagery or a simple meditation. There are many apps you can download to your phone to help you with this.

Find a self-soothing gesture: Another way to help yourself calm down is to use a self-soothing gesture. This can be as simple as putting your hands on your heart, rubbing your arms, or rocking back and forth. While doing this gesture, see if you can let yourself relax just a little. Talk to yourself in a calm and gentle manner.

Take a self-compassion break: Notice when you are criticizing yourself, judging yourself for having a hard time, or comparing your functioning to someone else. Self-compassion researcher, Dr. Kristin Neff offers this self-care mantra for you to help re-center yourself: "This is a moment of suffering. Other people feel this way too. May I be kind to myself."

Talk it out: Spend time with people who understand your deep upset and concern. As Dr. Brené Brown suggests, "Share your story with someone who has earned the right to hear it."

Make space for your emotions: Life is hard and includes a full range of emotions. It is important to see that every emotion has a purpose and often a message. Make space for your emotions. Witness, name, and acknowledge what they are. By noticing, naming, and acknowledging your feelings, you can honor them without getting swept up in them and acting out of them.

Find community: Limit time with people who need to debate, deny, or who are threatened by your experience. Build a connection network – people you can have authentic conversations with and get support from. Be intentional about spending time with this network. Make a plan and honor that plan.

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS AT WORK

When we experience many stressful events in a short amount of time, we may not have a chance to recover from one before the next one comes. Both chronic stress and critical/sudden stress can impact productivity, reduce clarity, lower the energy you have available for work, and can lead to emotional upset in work relationships. Here are some suggestions for centering yourself and helping yourself return to a state of mind that supports high performance.

Make yourself the priority: If you know you are not in a good space, reduce your schedule long enough to have some quiet down time. Once you feel more settled, use your creativity and common sense to make the best new plan of action possible to meet your responsibilities.

Unplug: Allow yourself to take a break from technology several times a day. Consider taking the night off from social media and online activities to allow for deeper rest and reflection. The world will be there waiting for you when you are more rested and have a deeper sense of perspective.

Connect with nature: Spend time in your favorite outdoor space and allow yourself to really be there. Don't wait until you get home to do this. Take advantage of Michigan State's beautiful campus and have some mindful moments in your favorite MSU spot. This is not wasting time. This is acknowledging the simple truth that you need a moment to reset. Letting yourself have these moments when you need them is a work habit essential for sustainable high performance.

Witness your energy: Notice if you feel tense and brittle. You may feel irritated, intense, jittery, skittish, or angry. When this happens, you may be in a low mood and may be experiencing low mood thinking. Allow yourself to “go gently.” Be cautious in your discussions with others. You are more likely to respond in an intense, negative manner when you are in this difficult emotional space. Wait to respond until you feel yourself drop back into a steady emotional state.

Connect with a specific task: Pick a task that needs to get done. It can be a routine task, a required task, or even an unwanted/unpleasant task. Bring all of your sensory attention to this task. Tune into every aspect of this task with your senses. Allow your total focus to be on just this one task. The more details you take in, the more effective this practice will be. While connecting with this task – take deep breaths and allow yourself to relax. You can effectively move through this hard time one task at a time.

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For more information, or to schedule an appointment, contact the EAP:

Email: eap@hc.msu.edu

Phone: 517-355-4506