Overview

Today’s wild turbulence has brought all of us to heightened stress, many of us to high anxiety and some of us to near-panic. Anxiety is universal, and essential for survival. But as with the immune response, we can have too much of a good thing and in times like now, we must soothe it into to manageable levels. Because we are working against instinct to do this, purposeful practice is key. In a time of heightened stress, practice heightened coping.

Relaxation Practices

Our “fight or flight” stress hormones stimulate the autonomic arousal that we’re all familiar with. The resulting sense of alarm then affects our thinking, as bodily sensations signal the brain to activate vigilance in the form of excessive worry. It also triggers our inevitable tendency to overestimate danger and underestimate our own ability to cope and respond. All of this is functional when there is a tiger in the forest, but rarely in the modern day-to-day. Some high-yield practices include:

- **Controlled breathing** may be the single most effective measure. There are many variations, but the essential components are a slow rate – slower than you normally want, and diaphragmatic – breathing fully, as if down to the belly. It is not a silver bullet; in fact, it may feel initially as if you are slightly more vulnerable. This is in fact partially why it works, when we experience a benign outcome from a passive-attentive practice. To be effective, continue for a full minute twice a day, plus every time you think of it.

- **Physical activity** or exercise is the overlooked powerful medicine. Think of it as a way to leverage your adrenaline and cortisol to good use. The smallest amount is better than none, and a little something nearly every day is better than occasional.

- **Enjoyable activities** are critically important. Apart from our many hours of work, we need a balance of low-consequence pleasure. This reduces anxiety and depression both, just as protein reduces hunger. Schedule at least one thing every day, and also pay attention to tiny, momentary pleasures. Remember - because relaxation in the face of stress is literally counter-instinctive, scheduled, purposeful effort is needed.

Reduce Worry

This is another counter-instinctive challenge. Rather than trying to directly limit worry (you can’t not think!), make an end-run. In other words, confront “What is the worst that might happen”? In a sense, this allows your mind to do what it is trying to – jump to catastrophic assumptions. It is better to meet and respond to fears than try to push them out. Then, you can form responses:

- “If my worst-case scenario should really come to pass, how will I cope?” List all that you can do, including what we all hope for on the eventual day we take our last breath – peaceful acceptance.

- “Meanwhile, what can I do today to avert the worst chain of events?” Among the many the responses to this question, panic and sedation are never on the list.

Damage Control

Take care not to fan your own flames with high-consequence coping. The over-use of alcohol and other chemicals is a clear example. Social withdrawal and sometimes the opposite – taking no moments for rest and privacy - is another. Over-consuming inflammatory news is one for some of us. What do you need to guard against?

Name it and Tame it

Because anxiety “shouts”, it displaces the other emotions. Recognizing the softer ones helps balance the amplification. This needn’t be an awkward project. Simply try employing your whole vocabulary, e.g. with this list - [https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory](https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory) - to find exactly the word to identify what you feel at any moment.
Values-Based Pursuits
What would you do if anxiety wasn’t occupying your energy and bandwidth? Whether it’s home relationships, community, religion/spirituality, exercise, study, arts or whatever values you hold high, don’t give anxiety the power to take you from them.

Discover Opportunity
Highly disrupted times are often when communities coalesce. Amidst stress, pain and wrenching loss, our shared purpose in confronting adversity also gives rise to sudden leaps of innovation. We may experience profound collaboration and witness – or model – grace, citizen leadership and quiet acts of unsung heroism. This is such a moment, when we may seek and seize our opportunities to shine.

Resources
➢ For a very short video to make sure your breathing practice is right, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UB3tSaiEbNY
➢ A good app for breathing and relaxation is Breathe2Relax: http://t2health.dcoe.mil/apps/breathe2relax
➢ For a “Relax in a Hurry” see http://www.mbmi.org/basics/mstress_RIAH.asp
➢ The Corona Virus Sanity Guide: https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide