

Taking Care of your Emotional Health in Peri-Pandemic times

Arpi Minassian, Ph.D.

Clinical Professor of Psychiatry

Psychologist and Chief of Psychology Embedded Services
University of California, San Diego

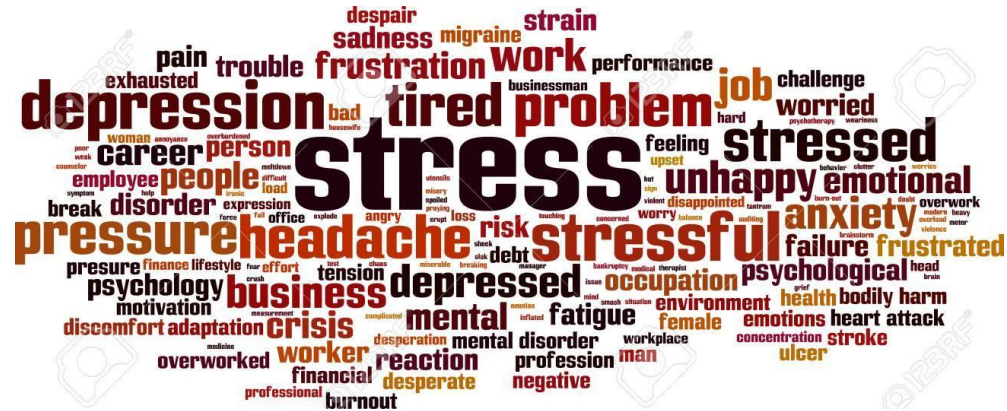
What we will cover today

- What is stress and where does it come from?
- Why am I feeling stressed, or more stressed than usual?
- Tips for coping with stress
- Questions/Discussion



What is stress?

- A feeling of mental tension or anxiety
- A normal reaction to life events
- Temporary stress is not a bad thing...
- Too much stress for too long can make us ill, or make our illnesses worse...and this pandemic is a great example!



The Pandemic Project: Our Readers Describe the Year of COVID-19

March 28, 2021, Psychiatric Times

[H. Steven Moffic, MD](#)

UC San Diego Health

Where does stress come from?

Environment:
everything out
there

Social: what
other people do
or don't do

Physiological:
our bodies and
symptoms

And... most importantly...our own **THOUGHTS** about these events have a big effect on our stress.

Examples of sources of stress

Environmental

- COVID
- COVID
- COVID
- Politics/news
- Weather
- Traffic

Social

- Loved ones not understanding your condition
- People disregarding COVID precautions
- People being too restrictive re: COVID

Physiological

- Dystonia symptoms
- Fatigue
- Pain

Thoughts

- “I’m going to get COVID and die”
- “Others can go out but I can’t”
- “My family thinks I’m disabled/an invalid”
- “People are uncaring”

These thoughts can make us feel...

Scared

Angry

Lonely

Sad

Worried

Hopeless

Helpless

Stress Can Cause Physical Symptoms, Thinking Problems, and Unhealthy Behaviors



Headaches
Muscle tension
Fatigue
Trouble sleeping
Stomach problems
increase/flare-up of symptoms



Problems concentrating
Difficulty making decisions
Forgetfulness



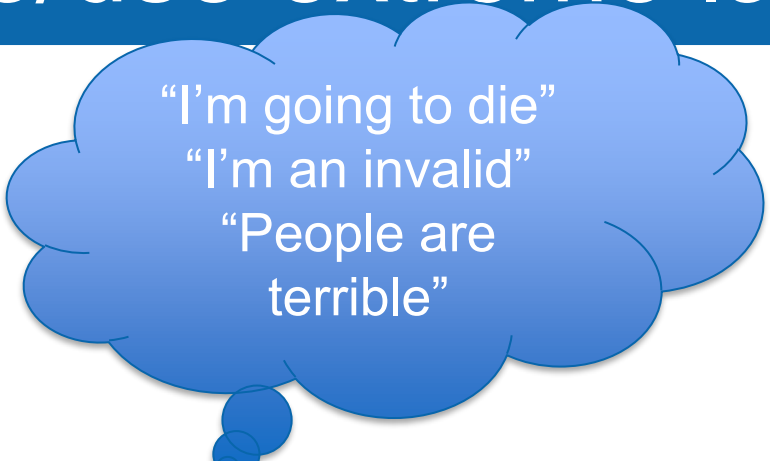
Overeating
Skipping meals
Drinking more alcohol
Smoking
Using drugs

So how can I manage my stress?

Do you always have to pay attention to your thoughts?

Our thoughts don't always tell us the truth!

Sometimes our thoughts exaggerate/use extreme language



“I’m going to die”
“I’m an invalid”
“People are terrible”

One way to manage stress is to not always believe our thoughts. We can also “talk back” to our thoughts.

“What are the chances I’m going to die today?”
“What would my best friend say to me in this situation?”
“What is the evidence that I am not an invalid?”
“How likely is it that I will die from COVID?”

Can we simply “watch” our thoughts come and go instead of believing every thought that comes in our head?



Pursed-Lip Breathing can help with stress....

Find a relaxed body position

Breathe in slowly through your nose 2-3 seconds

Purse your lips and breathe out through your mouth, a little longer than inhalation.

Let's try a brief awareness exercise...5, 4, 3, 2, 1



How awareness/mindfulness works

Your 5 senses



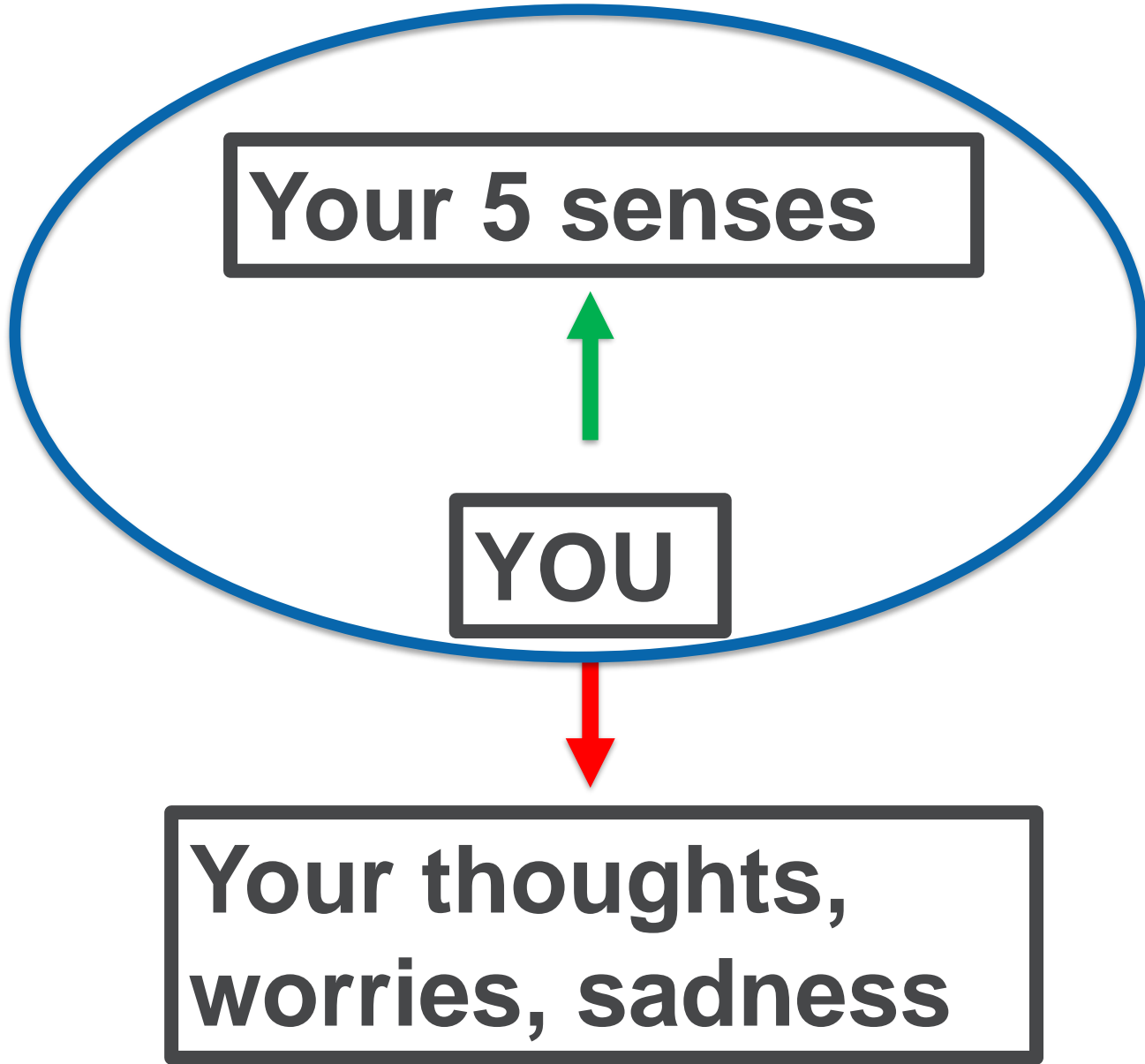
YOU



**Your thoughts,
worries, sadness**



Mind Full, or Mindful?

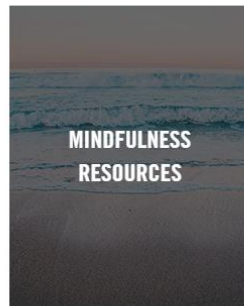
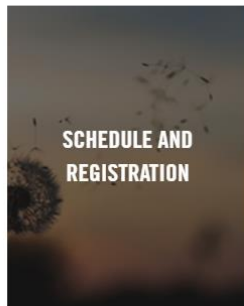


Learning more about mindfulness: Google “UCSD Center for Mindfulness”

Welcome to the UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness

Due to the current situation with the coronavirus (COVID-19) evolving rapidly across the United States, our Center, The Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion, and the Compassion Institute are working together to provide daily streams and recordings of mindfulness and compassion sessions to provide resources and online support to those affected.

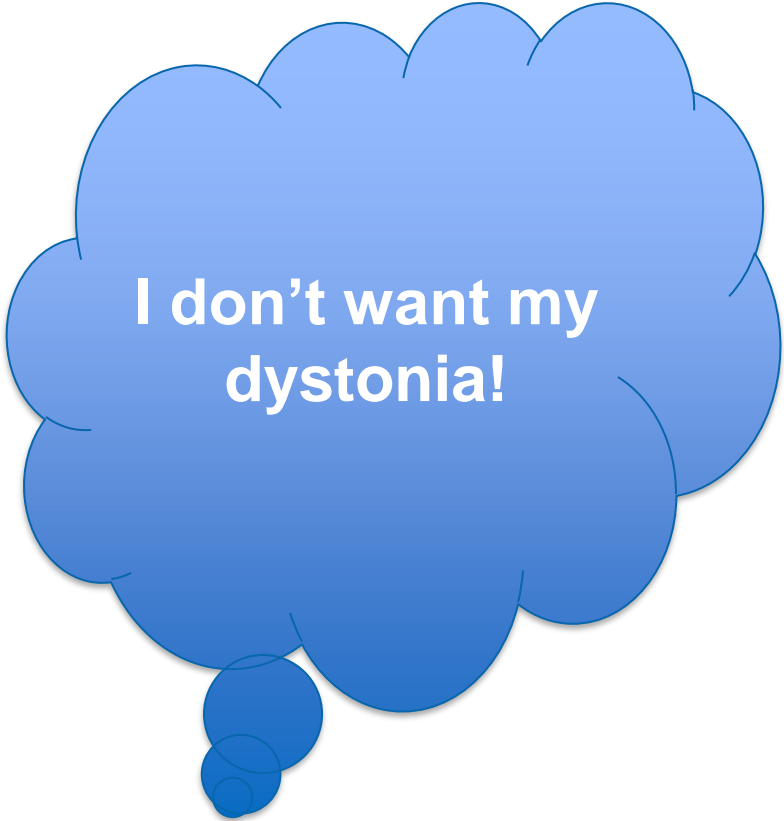
[FREE LIVE PRACTICE SESSIONS](#)



We talk a lot about “acceptance” as a way to cope with challenges in our lives. But acceptance is a difficult word...



**I have to
accept my
medical
condition.**



**I don't want my
dystonia!**

“Wanting” versus “Willing”

Even though I didn't want my dystonia, am I willing to do what it takes to live a meaningful life?

Do I want to do my stress management skills today?

What else am I willing to do in the service of my emotional health?

Am I willing to do them in the service of what's important to me?

More tips for taking care of your emotional health

Keep Moving, and Get Outside if you can

Physical activity is not only important for your physical health, but it reduces stress hormones

A study found that decreased physical activity and increased screen time during the pandemic worsened mood and loneliness

Smartphone app: Stand Up! The Work Break Timer



Can you take a walk, even a short one?

Natural sunlight helps regulate our mood and sleep



Plan your Day

Keep a regular routine: meals, bedtime, wakeup time, physical exercise, time outside

Get creative: is there a hobby you'd like to try? Or an old hobby you'd like to try again?


Learn something new: learn how to use technology that's new to you

Plan/schedule time for relaxation, mindfulness, and/or prayer

Stay Connected to Others



Are you feeling stressed and overwhelmed by news and current events?



Set a time limit for how much news you listen to, or how much time you spend on social media

Make sure you're getting news from trusted sources

It's OK to want to stay informed

**Trouble sleeping?
You're not alone!**

Sleep Tips

Tip	Why?
Eat a light bedtime snack	Avoids awakenings from drop in blood sugar at night
Sleep in a quiet, dark, cool bedroom	Noise and light cause awakenings. Light tells our body it's time to wake up!
Enhance sleep environment	Comfortable temperature, good mattress
Avoid "trying" to sleep	Reduces anxiety/worry about sleeplessness
Limit/avoid napping	Napping reduces nighttime sleepiness

More Sleep Tips

Tip	Why?
Reduce time in bed	Too much time in bed can lead to “broken” sleep
Keep a regular sleep schedule (especially wake up time)	Stabilizes your body’s rhythms; limits time in bed
Eliminate the bedroom clock	Watching the clock can lead to worry
Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol	All can disturb sleep. Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants. Metabolism of alcohol disrupts sleep later in the night.

Consider an eye mask, white noise machine or ear plugs





Keep a gratitude and compassion journal

At the end of the day, write down, type, or audio record at least one:

- Something that you're thankful about
- These can be small things!
- A pat on your back for yourself ("my hurray")
- Did you do a healthy behavior that day?
- Did you not do an unhealthy behavior?
- A moment of kindness or compassion that you noticed in someone else
- Notice that some people are kinder during times of crisis

Know when to get help

- Feeling depressed or down most of the day, almost every day for weeks
- Feeling anxious or worried all the time
- Thoughts of hurting yourself
- Increase in unhealthy behaviors like drinking alcohol, using drugs, or over-using prescription medications
- **Please call your doctor right away**
- **Go to the emergency room if you have thoughts or plans about hurting yourself**



In summary...

- Stress is a normal part of our lives, but it's been an exceptionally difficult time
- You can learn to recognize where your stress comes from, especially your own thoughts/reactions to what's happening around you
- There are many things you can do to manage your stress and continue to live a meaningful and valued life
- Are you willing to try them in the service of your health and well-being?

Thank you, and good
health to you.

Questions and
Discussion