

5 Healthy Habits to Get Through Tough Times

Positive, incremental changes and a commitment to self-care can help you boost your endurance and reduce your stress.

by NEA Member Benefits

Teachers are known for their selflessness—always putting other people first. But keeping yourself strong both mentally and physically in challenging times is important. One way to do that is to develop and stick to healthy habits that focus on your own well-being.

“Times of uncertainty demand discipline, and doing hard things during hard times gives people a mood boost that creates confidence,” says Caroline Miller, MAPP, positive psychology expert and author of “Creating Your Best Life” and “Getting Grit.” She recommends starting by choosing a simple habit that can set you up for a good day, such as journaling for 20 minutes or having a moment of gratitude before a meal.

Incorporating new actions into everyday routines is key to helping them stick and reaping the benefits, Miller says: “Tying these small habit changes to another event that is already anchored into your day—waking up, eating a meal, brushing your teeth, doing laundry—can make the creation of healthy habits easier.”

One habit that’s top-of-mind for everyone now is regular, thorough hand-washing. Scrubbing your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, and then being mindful of not touching your face, is a simple but very effective way to help reduce your risk of introducing germs and viruses into your body.

Try to create the habit of washing your hands whenever you return home. When you’re out and about, frequently use a dab of hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol to reduce the spread of germs.

Now that “social distancing” and “self-quarantining” are becoming a new way of life, our normal routines have been disrupted, but it’s still important to maintain—and even create—healthy habits.

As you’re consciously adjusting your daily actions to be more vigilant about your health, take some time now to adopt habits that will sustain you in the days to come. This is especially important for educators, whose attitudes and actions have a big impact on their students, says Miller.

“We underestimate the impact of anxiety on our moods, which are contagious, so teachers need to be especially careful around what they talk about, focus on and choose to do in their free time,” Miller says. “Behaviors that are known to improve well-being and that give you a sense of mastery and competence in times of overwhelm and helplessness include exercise and giving to others.”

“Self-care in terms of nutrition, fitness and mental resiliency is crucial to your performance level,” says Amy Hendel, PA, founder of healthgal.com and author of “The 4 Habits of Healthy Families.”

To start, try focusing on these five important self-care habits:

1. Get enough good sleep

Nearly two-thirds of Americans report their sleep needs aren't being met during a typical week. And as fears mount about the medical and financial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, you may be tossing and turning all night worrying.

Getting sufficient shuteye may be a challenge for many people now, but experts agree that it's as important to health and well-being as diet, exercise and stress relief. In fact, more and more research links poor sleep habits with an increased risk for heart disease, diabetes, obesity and impaired immunity.

Another reason to sleep more: Getting "more than 'rest and recharge,' sleep actually allows your brain to imprint and store information you're exposed to during the day," Hendel says.

Miller says that taking some time in the evening to do a gratitude exercise—listing three things you're grateful for and why they happened to you that day—can have a positive impact on your mood and help you fall asleep.

She also recommends listing your goals for the coming day. "That can prevent anxiety because it gives you something to focus on and organize, which reduces 'cognitive load' and makes sleep easier," she says.

Sleep goal: Aim to get 7-9 hours of sleep each night.

Baby step: Establish good sleep hygiene by waking up and going to bed at the same time each day—even on weekends. For more tips on getting better sleep, read our article on [how to solve the four of the most annoying sleep problems](#).

2. Eat healthfully

Stressful times can induce [bad stress-eating habits](#), so it's more important than ever to focus on eating well.

"Don't use this period as an excuse to feed yourself with anything you can find or desire," Miller says, who notes that poor food choices now can have a negative impact in the long term. "Try as hard as possible to stock up on vegetables that you can learn to cook healthfully, and experiment with recipes or cooking devices like an Instapot that can make the task easier. It's also a good time to plant a vegetable garden, which can produce some things like lettuce within weeks."

Your body and mind need a steady supply of fuel (i.e., glucose) to function at its best. How you manage your diet dictates whether you stay energized throughout a challenging workday, or if you'll face insurmountable slumps when you need energy.

"Studies show when you start the day with the right proportion of protein, fats and complex carbohydrates, your blood sugar rises steadily, making it easier to be alert and awake," Miller says. "The body works best in 90-minute spurts of intensity and rest, so have a few small snacks to help you through any mid-morning and early afternoon dips (think bananas, trail mix and fiber-rich snacks)."

Nutrition goal: Eat a [power breakfast](#) every day. Studies show that eating breakfast improves memory, problem-solving ability and mood.

Baby step: Munch on trail mix before hunger pangs strike. “Nuts and seeds plus a fruit or veggie, or a hard-boiled egg helps boost energy levels without the typical blood sugar slump that comes after consuming the standard processed carbohydrate snack,” Hendel says.

3. Get active

Experts claim exercise is medicine for both body and mind. Studies show physical activity improves circulation, boosts energy and reduces stress. Plus, research suggests that exercise, particularly interval training, is an optimal way to enhance mood and build endurance—both of which help educators excel at the head of the class. The benefits of even a simple workout can last for hours.

Even though you may not want to (or be able to) go to the gym, don't let that stop you from staying active now. See if you can carve out a little bit of [space at home](#) to do weight-bearing exercises that require little or no equipment. There are a lot of good, free workout videos online that can give you guided inspiration. [Going for walks](#) also is recommended; just be sure to keep a reasonable distance from other people who are out enjoying the sunshine.

Exercising also can help you improve your sleep quality, too. “Exercise that uses the biggest muscles in the body—the quadriceps—can make you particularly tired at night, so walk hills or stairs during the day, and make sure that your body is as tired as your mind,” Miller says.

Note that if you haven't been exercising regularly, don't jump in all at once. Start slow, and build up your stamina. And of course, if you feel under the weather, opt to take it easy that day instead.

Activity goal: Exercise for at least 30 minutes, 5-7 days each week.

Baby step: Take every opportunity to move. Park at the end of the grocery parking lot. Take the stairs rather than the elevator. Wash your car in the driveway instead of hitting the car wash. Do lunges while you brush your teeth.

4. Focus on your breathing

Stress is one of the greatest risk factors for chronic disease. Although our bodies are remarkably capable of bouncing back from short bouts of stress, chronic stress launches a negative chain reaction that leads to poor habits.

Meditation can help break the cycle. Research shows that daily meditation not only reduces stress, lowers blood pressure and promotes well-being, it also creates a surge in mood-stabilizing chemicals and feel-good hormones like serotonin.

Stress management goal: Meditate for 10 minutes daily. According to a University of Pennsylvania research study, daily meditation improves the ability to prioritize and manage tasks and goals, re-focus attention, and stay alert to our environment.

Baby step: When you're feeling stressed, take three deep breaths. Even one deep centered breath can lower blood pressure, ease muscle tension and release stress.

5. Envision success

Visualizing a desired outcome is a great tool on the pathway to success. According to research in positivity, changing the output of your body requires rewriting the software in your mind. This intimate

connection between mind and body explains why people who see the glass half full tend to be healthier than their glass-half-empty counterparts.

“Simply generating positive emotions is the equivalent of hitting a ‘reset button’ when it comes to stress,” Miller says. Dubbed the “undoing effect,” creating emotions of pleasure, joy and contentment can undo the cardiovascular stresses initiated in the body.

That positive feeling can be transferred to others, as well. Not only will you undo the impact of stress on your own body, you’ll also create an energetic environment that helps your students learn.

Positive thinking goal: Actively reframe your thoughts to support your desire for happiness and success. Not only are you more likely to accomplish these goals, but your stress levels will decline, too.

Baby step: Every morning, visualize yourself accomplishing a small goal, such as meditating when you get stressed.

The more consistency you bring to changing your actions early in the process, the more likely your new habits will stick. Manifesting good habits takes time, but it’s worth the effort, Miller says. “Depending on the difficulty of the habit being created, and the support system on board to make the change, it can take anywhere from four to 10 weeks to make lasting changes,” she says.

Once you’ve had a chance to focus on centering yourself and creating some good habits, you’ll be in a good space to help others—from your students to the needy in your community.

“Take care of your body, and then see what you can do to positively impact the lives of those who are less fortunate,” Miller says. “Organizing or being part of a neighborhood brigade to deliver meals or read to the elderly via Zoom would bring many flourishing benefits.”

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