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ARTICLE STRESS

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by Whitney Johnson and Amy Humble

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To Take Care of Others, Start by Taking Care of Yourself

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As businesses and schools are shuttered, economic uncertainty encroaches, and a pandemic rages worldwide, there is plenty of anxiety to go around. We're watching our healthcare system be pushed to its limits, but the [grief](#) and trauma we're seeing presages a second wave of need: Before long, our mental healthcare system is going to be stretched to the breaking point as well. As physical distancing continues, we need to make sure that we help alleviate the isolation, [loneliness](#),

depression, anxiety, and other mental health impacts that will result, driving a potentially system-overwhelming curve of their own. And now is the time to head off this second crisis.

Most of us are not on the overtaxed frontlines of the healthcare battle, but all of us can be first responders to the need for emotional support. The need exists in every industry and economic sector, among physically healthy people as well as those who are sick or whose loved ones are sick. There are needs in our families, extended families, congregations, and communities, as well as within our network of professional associations. Almost everyone needs connection to others and the opportunity to give and get support in the abnormal new normal of deep uncertainty and the fearful specter of a pandemic.

As executive coaches, we think a lot about how to maximize mental health resources — that’s a big part of what we do every day. So, how can you shore up your mental health and deepen your own emotional reservoir? Here are some suggestions:

1. Start with self-care.

We can’t share with others a resource that we lack ourselves. The critical starting point is to take our own mental health temperature. How am I doing? What will help me combat anxiety? Am I drinking, eating, or sleeping, or crying too much? What do I need to do to stay connected?

Follow up with a plan. Begin with keeping to your normal routine as much as possible. Take a shower early in the day. Brush your teeth. Put on clothes that you feel good in. One of the best ways to manage through chaos is to anchor yourself in routine. Schedule regular exercise, which has well-documented mental health benefits. Try taking up a regular meditation, if you haven’t already — there truly is no time like the present. Scheduling when you read or watch the news can help keep your consumption measured. If it triggers adverse emotions and bogs you down, skip it for a while, or only consume enough to be current on your local developments. *Do not* follow the stock market every day, unless you’re thrilled by emotional roller coasters.

Next, think of ways to be mentally engaged either through work or activities such as crossword or jigsaw puzzles, games, reading, or writing. Start a journal or blog. Self-reflection will allow you to make meaning of what is happening. Use technology to remain connected with family and friends. If possible, pursue your hobbies. One of our colleagues Julie Carrier rides her bike around her neighborhood each day, waving and saying hello to as many people as possible (from a safe distance). This not only gives her fresh air and a change of scenery but an opportunity to be with people.

2. Ask for help when you need it.

Caregivers, [parents](#), coaches, therapists, and even you need help. We all do right now. Don’t hesitate to seek and ask for it. In many cases we can find the support we need from partners, parents, children, friends, and others close to us. There are professional resources to access if necessary, but again, if we can get adequate help elsewhere, we will conserve those resources for those who can’t. You are going to need support. If you don’t ask for that support, the need for it will be revealed in

ways that don't serve you. Speaking from experience, either your *resent-o-meter* will spike, or you will find yourself holding grudges, being unkind and ungenerous in unexpected moments — often to the people who you most care about.

The flip side of this is making yourself available to others who need help. While it's important to keep your own emotional state in mind, remember that practicing self-care doesn't mean being self-centered. One of the best ways to lift your mood is to encourage, support, and love others. During the last few weeks we have seen countless acts of people stepping up and answering the call to serve: a Costco run for an elderly neighbor, a medium-size business offering more favorable terms to a small business client to increase their cash flow (which resulted in them keeping their staff), donations to local charities to get PPE to local healthcare workers, and the list goes on.

3. Ask others, “How are you?”

Most mornings, when we hop on a Zoom call with business partners, we dive into the most pressing issues of the day. It is easy to jump straight to the to-dos and brush off the “How are you?” with a casual “I'm fine.” On routine days, this is often a *pro forma* question, but there's nothing routine about these days. This is the question that helps us take the mental health temperature of others, which means we really listen to the answer, even though that may not be our habit. [Everyone is grieving](#). Everyone is experiencing trauma and needs other people to talk to. We need to feel heard.

When you're talking to friends, colleagues, whomever, take time to listen to their full answer and walk through your personal COVID-19 rollercoaster ride. You don't need to ride the emotional rollercoaster with your colleagues, but it is important to listen to how their ride is going. Be willing to wait for people to be honest. Be comfortable in silence if someone searches for words or has to collect their emotions. We are all overtaxed.

4. Look for the positive and say it aloud.

We may usually be a little sparing with praise. Maybe we think that someone who criticizes us is smarter than we are, or that praising others feels like an acknowledgment that we are inferior, so we demur. The temptation to withhold support can increase when we are experiencing feelings of scarcity, which can foster competitiveness and even enmity. Now is not that time. Now is the time to have the courage to be enthusiastic. Express appreciation, give compliments, and call out triumphs, no matter how small. If you see something good, speak up.

Big wins may be in short supply, but everyone continues to need positive feedback. With work associates, encourage your subordinates, peers, bosses, and also rivals, competitors, past partners. If you admire someone, tell them (and if you think they could not possibly need support from you right now, you're likely wrong).

We still have a long, hard path to get through this pandemic. But doing our best to manage the toll it takes on our mental and emotional health will make it easier to ride out the coming ups and downs. We've made great strides in recent years addressing mental health in the workplace and more

generally. We need people on the frontlines rescuing the physically afflicted, but the emotional aspect will affect everyone. All of us need emotional first responders. Take good care of yourself. Because we need you.

Whitney Johnson, CEO and founder of boutique consultancy WLJ Advisors, is one of the leading management thinkers in the world (Thinkers50) and author of the award-winning *Disrupt Yourself* (Harvard Business Review Press). You can download her free list of books and podcasts for finding calm in times of chaos [here](#).

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