



Islands Community
Medical Services

Our Medical Center

Coping with Corona

We are living through unprecedented times. We would have to talk to our grandparents or great grandparents to speak with someone who has been through anything like this. We are all frightened about what might happen: getting sick ourselves or having someone we love get sick, not being able to earn a living and worrying about paying our bills, feeling anxious, lonely, and maybe even depressed.

In a crisis like this, we automatically go into a fight or flight mode. That's a good thing, it helps us gear up to face danger. Being scared helps us stay safe. The problem is that in a fight or flight situation everything else shuts down, like the soldier who starts shaking uncontrollably after the battle. Other less essential processes like clear thinking, other emotions like sadness, and the ability to take good care of ourselves shut down in the service of facing the danger.

It goes against the grain to pay attention to our own needs in a crisis. I doubt if the first responders after 911 were paying much attention to self-care. They were focused on doing their duty, not taking care of themselves. But this is a different kind of crisis. We can maintain this kind of high alert status for a surprising length of time, but not indefinitely. None of us will be able to maintain this level of high alert indefinitely in a crisis where there is no clear end in sight. Vinalhaven is well known for its sense of community, for the ways in which neighbors look out for each other and reach out to lend a helping hand. In an extended crisis like this we will all need to be more intentional about taking care of ourselves as well as caring for our neighbors.

Here are some of the most important ways we can all take care of ourselves during these challenging times.

1. **Sleep.** During difficult times, sleep is often one of the first thing we neglect. The fact is that most of us don't function well without at least seven hours of sleep a night, preferably eight. During stressful times like these it is more important than ever to practice good sleep hygiene.
 - Try to go to bed and wake up around the same time every day
 - Start winding down and relaxing at least 30 minutes before you go to sleep. Stop using screens because they lower your levels of melatonin and interfere with sleep.
 - Don't lie in bed for more than 15-20 minutes if you are anxious and having difficulty sleeping. If you can't sleep, get up and out of bed and read until you are tired, and then go

back to bed. Try not to worry about not getting enough sleep. You'll be tired the next day and can go to bed earlier to catch up.

- If all else fails, use prescribed medication. Sleep is more important than concerns about habituation in short-term crises.
2. **Move your body.** It doesn't matter how you do it; walking, exercising, doing calisthenics in the home. Moving your body is as effective as medication for mild to moderate anxiety and depression. Any kind of aerobic activity increases your immune system functioning, which will help you avoid getting sick.
 3. **Eat well.** I know that we can't get to the store, but do what you can to eat a balanced diet. Avoid drinking excessively. It lowers your immune system, tends to isolate you, and lowers your mood.
 4. **Reach out to others in need.** When we feel deprived or short changed ourselves we are less likely to reach out to others, but reaching out and helping others from a safe distance is one of the most effective ways to help yourself feel better in times like these.
 5. **Consider developing a regular daily time you set aside for self-care.** Kelly Richards has two weekly stress groups online that are free of charge , one group for friends and neighbors that meets on Zoom on Mondays at 5:30 and another for parents and kids that meets on Wednesdays at 5:00 pm. Email Kelly for information about how to log on. Kelly.paideia@gmail.com
 6. **Lastly, and perhaps most important, is to stay connected to people you care about.** It's not just a luxury, being close with other people is an essential part of life. Being connected with other people helps keep your immune system healthy. In a study of people exposed to a virus (not Corona) those that had fewer connections with other people were four times more likely to get sick.

People are finding creative ways to stay connected.

- Spending more family time together than usual, interacting more with games, puzzles, etc., rather than just watching TV.
- Talking to friends and loved ones online or by phone.
- Holding get-togethers online or by phone.
- Socializing with neighbors, porch to porch.

These are some of the most challenging times that any of us will ever live through. We can all get through it together if we look out for each other and take good care of ourselves. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to be in touch. Dr. Avrum Weiss is a clinical psychologist who consults with Islands Community Medical Services. You can reach him at aweiss@icmsvh.org.