

# Finding peace during the pandemic

## 5 ways to manage anxiety in the age of the coronavirus

By Lisa Reisman 4/3/20

REGION — For many of us, it's the small routines in our daily lives — working out at the gym, meeting up with a friend for coffee, or even our morning commute — that help create a sense of normalcy. Those very daily routines help us escape whatever stress or anxiety we're experiencing.

That's according to Marissa Gelband, a licensed clinical social worker in Branford.

And that was before the second week of March.

While hunkered down inside, either working from home or out of work due to the effects of COVID-19 on the service industry, we all need coping mechanisms to take care of our mental health.

The ShoreLine Times spoke with Gelband, as well as two other esteemed local therapists, who offered five pieces of advice on managing anxieties and fears at this unprecedented time.

### 1. Accept that it's normal to be stressed out right now

According to Guilford psychologist Gloria Small, the first step to coping with anxiety is recognizing that it's a normal response.

Symptoms of stress, like elevated heart rate and racing thoughts, evolved as the body's way of signaling to your brain that you're at

risk — a survival mechanism known as "fight or flight" that can be activated by less tangible or immediate threats, like uncertainty about the future.

"Anxiety really is a signal to us to protect ourselves because there's something threatening out there," she said.

It might even be a useful response, according to Dr. Michael Nelken, a psychiatrist practicing in Hamden.

"It's very important to recognize that this is a situation where anxiety is helpful if it keeps you home, if it keeps you from touching your face, if it keeps you six feet from the people you meet," he said.

### 2. Focus on what's in your control

As much as stress tells us something is off, and we have to adjust, it's also uncomfortable, according to Gelband.

"Our temptation is to get rid of it, but from a mental health perspective, we're trying to recognize it and manage it," she said.

One way to manage stress is maintaining a routine.

"There is something about the need for ritual and schedule and ordering the day which tends to give people some degree of control in a world that seems out of control," Small said.

Having endless free time actually creates stress, it seems.

"Everyone needs some structure, and some daily goals, it's what makes us all feel safe and comfortable and productive and

like we're being efficient," Gelband said.

What's challenging in our current circumstances is that "we're having to use a part of our brain that we've never used before to muster up internal motivation because we don't have external pressures on us."

Within that structure, Gelband said, her clients are maintaining a sense of control by finding something productive to do.

Some are reorganizing their closets, doing chores around the house, or starting a garden. Another client always wanted to paint.

"She ordered paint supplies and is no longer worrying about the final product because she now feels she has time and if she doesn't finish the painting today, she can finish it tomorrow or the next day," she said.

### 3. View this crisis as an opportunity

In the Chinese language, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters, one representing danger and the other, opportunity, Small said.

To her mind, the pandemic offers possibility for people "to come together and help each other."

That happened, on a smaller scale, to one of Gelband's clients.

"A father said he would never have had a conversation with his teenage daughter if this wasn't happening right now and that's led to a real shift in their relationship,"



Gelband Nelken Small

she said.

### 4. Just the facts, ma'am

As important as it is to stay informed about new policies being implemented and updated guidelines to be followed, the best coping mechanism is to restrict your viewing of information to the experts — the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or public health agencies, for example — and to no more than a half-hour a day, according to Gelband.

"It's very easy to spiral into this mindset of following the news as a way to get a handle on what's going on, but limiting exposure" to the constant stream of information and rising case counts "can be quite helpful in decreasing anxiety," she said.

Among the reasons: "one of the things anxiety tends to do to us is to make us seek out information to confirm our fears," Nelken said, even if it means searching the web for any and every kind of story.

In short, focus on the facts.

"While you don't know if you'll get the virus, you do know that the majority of people who get COVID-19 have symptoms that are minor and manageable," Small said. "Or, you don't know when the crisis will be over, but you do

know there is unprecedented global cooperation among scientists racing to find vaccines and treatments. Or, you don't know when you'll see beloved family members, but you do know you can stay connected with FaceTime and the like."

### 5. Have fun and be grateful for what you have

It's a serious situation, but taking time to do the things that bring you joy can enhance daily life and relax tension.

"Get outside and into the spring air," Nelken said.

Then there's humor, Small said, referencing a poem, "Ode to Toilet Paper," composed by her son, and the video of a song-and-dance routine performed by a young family friend in quarantine.

"Laughter is a symbol of hope, and it becomes one of our greatest needs of life, right up there with toilet paper," she said. "It's a physical need people have. You can't underestimate how it heals people and gives them hope."

Gelband focused on the small joys in the situation, like getting to spend more time with loved ones, cooking, or watching funny movies.

"As much anxiety as there is out there, and understandably so, people are feeling less external tension about things like peer pressure or academic performance or climbing the ladder at work," she said.

They're finding peace in the pandemic, it seems.