

## Finding “Normal” During and After the Pandemic

“Normal” is the buzz word of the day. Our country is eager for a “return to normal,” but that won’t be so easy after all that we have experienced.

### Signs of Stress

#### Physical Reactions\*

- Insomnia, recurrent dreams, difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Fatigue
- Hyperactivity
- Pain in the back or neck
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations\*
- Dizzy spells\*
- Appetite changes
- Stomachaches or diarrhea
- Sweating or chills
- Tremors or muscle twitches

\*If symptoms persist, see a physician.

#### Emotional Reactions

- Flashbacks or reliving the event
- Excessive jumpiness or tendency to be startled
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Feelings of anxiety, helplessness or vulnerability
- Feelings of guilt
- Feeling depressed or crying frequently
- Feeling heroic, euphoric, or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything

#### Behavioral Reactions

- An increase or decrease in energy and activity levels
- A change in alcohol, tobacco or other drug use
- Worrying excessively
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty communicating or listening
- Having difficulty giving or accepting help
- An inability to feel pleasure or have fun

#### Effects on Productivity

- Inability to concentrate
- Increased incidence of errors
- Lapses of memory
- Increased absenteeism
- Tendency to overwork
- Feeling confused
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Having difficulty making decisions

The pandemic represents a chronic, long-term and on-going tragedy. When any tragedy strikes, normal human reactions follow a pattern called “crisis response.” This happens naturally in all of us and encompasses a range of both physical and emotional responses. Initially, our instincts take over and we experience “Fight, Flight or Freeze” reactions to threats or danger. In these moments, physical reactions include increased adrenaline, heightened senses, increased heart rate, hyperventilation, sweating, etc. We experience a variety of emotional reactions as well. These may include shock, disbelief, denial, anger, fear, sorrow, confusion, frustration, and guilt.

Looking at the pandemic through this lens, as a nation we have found ourselves in and out of crisis response for more than a year and a half. For health care providers on the front line, this is even more true. To put it mildly, this has been exhausting, both physically and emotionally. It is helpful to discuss what is happening in a supportive and safe environment. Validation of your experiences and acknowledgement of your emotional and physical reactions is helpful.

Most people show signs of stress to crisis. These symptoms are typically a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Some of the predictable reactions that may persist as we continue to face the pandemic, and even after it abates, are listed at left.

In addition, there are some pandemic-specific crisis response reactions people may experience: It can feel like there is an expectation to return quickly to pre-pandemic activities and responsibilities. This may be a welcome change, but there may also be difficulties and challenges during this process. After more than 18 months of being encouraged to stay home and avoid contact with those outside of your family or “pod,” you may feel uneasy about resuming activities like eating in a restaurant, attending a movie or performance, going to an outdoor festival or parade, traveling, or many other activities that have not been a part of “normal” life since early 2020. You may be ready to jump back into pre-pandemic life with both feet, but you may also feel anxious about doing so (or likely, somewhere in the middle).

Being familiar with these signs of stress in yourself and your loved ones can be helpful. These signs are normal and

should decrease over time. That said, it is important to know how to relieve stress in a healthy way and know when to get help. The first step is to prioritize self-care.

### **Keep yourself healthy**

- Eat healthy foods and drink water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol.
- Do not use tobacco or other drugs that have not been prescribed by your physician.
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.

### **Use practical ways to relax**

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities. Do a fun thing after a hard task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family.
- Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.

### **Pay attention to your body, feelings, and spirit**

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of handling this event and think of how you handled past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common after a traumatic event.
- Connect with other who experienced the pandemic in a similar way as you did.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer, or helping others in need.

It may take time to feel like you've regained control over your life. Be patient with yourself. Sometimes things become so overwhelming that you need help from a professional. If you are concerned about the changes you are experiencing, reach out to your Employee Assistance Program or a local behavioral health counselor. As a licensed health professional, if you are concerned about your own mental health and/or substance use, you may also be eligible for Oregon's Health Professionals' Services Program. Visit [hpspmonitoring.com](https://hpspmonitoring.com) for more information.

Also remember that those around you have experienced the stressors of the pandemic in their own unique way. You may be able to support them:

- Offer your assistance and show a willingness to listen even if you haven't been asked for help.
- Don't take stress reactions experienced by others personally.
- Spend time together.
- Reinforce at appropriate intervals that you are available for emotional support.
- Be ready to talk about what happened when you are both ready.

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), contact a member of your care team, or talk to a trusted friend.

As the pandemic continues to rage: Be patient with yourself, take extra self-care measures and reach out for help when you need it!