

# 10 Ways Mentally Strong People Handle a Pandemic

Research reveals how you can reduce your anxiety and stress during COVID-19.

**Tracy S. Hutchinson, Ph.D.**

The Pulse of Mental Health

Posted Apr 19, 2020



The COVID-19 global pandemic and the systemic ramifications are not only unprecedented but harrowing.

We are all adjusting to new realities and grieving the loss of old ones. All of us are simply trying to manage our daily lives taking care of our children or parents, dealing with financial stresses, and adjusting to a new way to live.

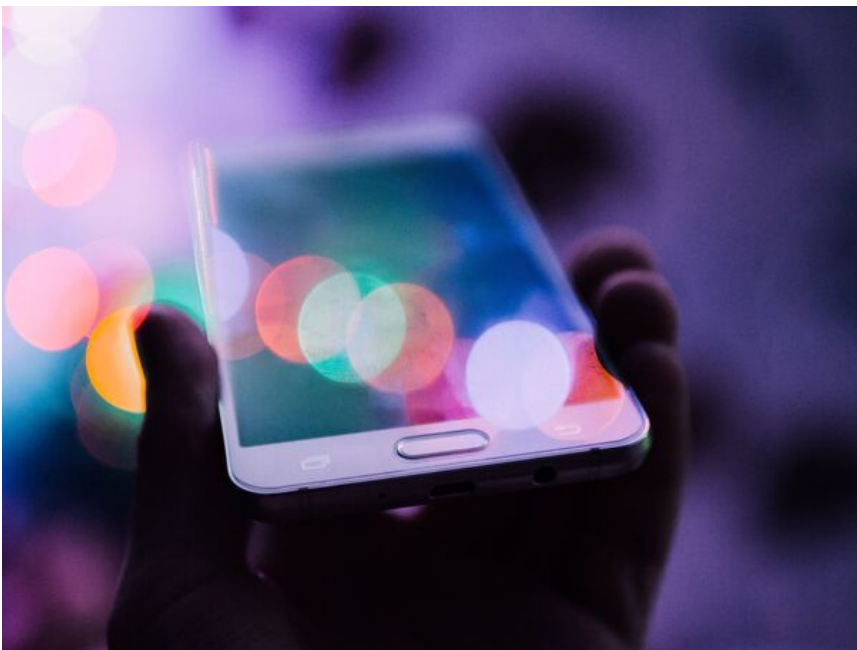
All stressors related to COVID-19 may likely result in a myriad of negative feelings such as depression, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This collective trauma that we are experiencing may feel bleak, but this isn't the first crisis in our history. For example, research investigations in crises such as the 9-11 terrorist attacks, Ebola, and SARS reveal how individuals respond to pandemics/crises in both adaptive and maladaptive ways.

Researchers have studied how the mentally strong may behave through adverse experiences. This information may help you reduce the likelihood of mental health issues resulting from COVID-19. Further, the mentally strong and resilient may eventually display post-traumatic growth versus post-traumatic stress symptoms. Post-traumatic growth is understood as positive psychological changes that result from traumatic and highly stressful experiences. Although we are in the middle of this crisis, individuals can rise to a higher level of functioning when the pandemic ends.

Most of us know the basics: It is vital to create daily habits, to exercise, and to connect with our social supports using virtual meetings and social media. However, here are some suggestions based on evidence of how mentally strong people respond to crises. They may help you not only manage the pandemic but decrease the likelihood of long term mental health issues as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

***1. They limit news and media exposure.***

Research suggests that there are two main predictors to how well a person will respond in a crisis (like a pandemic). The first is how vulnerable they were in their own lives before the crisis. The second is how much news they consumed during the crisis. Chronic news exposure may create vicarious trauma and PTSD.



Media exposure and the 24/7 news cycle can activate “fight or flight” responses, which can lead to traumatic stress. For example, in a study conducted after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, several hours of media exposure after 9-11 were associated with PTSD and new physical health issues 2-3 years later in participants. In another study conducted during the Ebola outbreak in 2014, daily media exposure was associated with increased distress and poorer functioning over the long term compared to those who limited their news and media intake. Mentally strong people limit their news exposure, choose reliable and responsible print/media, and limit exposure to distressful images shown on the news.

***2. They accept their feelings as normal.***

Mentally strong individuals accept their feelings as normal because this is a time for both personal trauma and collective trauma. A resilient individual understands that feelings such as fear, anxiety, hopelessness, anger, and sadness are normal because the information is too overwhelming to process at once. The American Psychological Association also accepts this from a diagnostic perspective.

Based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (APA-2013), the diagnosis of “Adjustment Disorder with Anxious or Depressed Mood” is applied to any person who is experiencing

symptoms and has had a major life event occur in the last 90 days. Naturally, this applies to all of us because we are amid a pandemic that has changed our lives: Whether the loss of a job, homeschooling children, the inability to attend a funeral or see a loved one in a nursing home or otherwise, these reactions are within normal limits.

***3. They carefully choose the leaders they follow.***

Mentally strong people follow those who display healthy leadership skills and mental health. Garfin et al. (2020) suggested that providers promote calm and rational action and limit watching media and individuals who undermine public health efforts to combat COVID-19. It is both confusing and psychologically harmful to watch leaders who publicly argue and misstate the facts and the research. As a native New Yorker, I find it useful to watch Gov. Andrew Cuomo as he states the facts in a cogent, evidence-based, calm, and thorough manner.

Further, Garfin and colleagues (2020) suggested choosing one or two trusted sources (e.g. Centers for Disease Control, World Health Organization) to stay informed of critical updates. Researchers also assert that since there are no drastic changes from hour to hour during a pandemic, choosing a reliable print media source one time per day is suggested. (Baruch Fischhoff, Ph.D.)



What Mentally Strong People Do During a Pandemic  
Source: Unsplash

#### ***4. They limit social media and exposure.***

Mentally strong people understand how social media operates and limit their exposure. They know that social media platforms like Facebook are unofficial news channels and deliver news tailored for you (some of it fake) based on your behaviors and preferences gleaned over the last decade. Algorithms are used to give you the news that you will most likely consume, and that the news skewed toward your preferences. This increases bias and the propensity to start rumors that increase distress.

For example, in a study conducted with 3,890 college students under a campus lockdown due to an active shooter, researchers found that regular substantive updates were vital during a crisis. They also stressed the importance of monitoring social media use during

a crisis to mitigate exposure to rumors and subsequent distress (Jones et al., 2017).



Maslow Hierarchy of needs Source: istock

***5. They display self-compassion for lack of productivity.***

There may be self or societal pressure to “be productive” with the increased time you may have at home. The question to ask yourself is, "Is it reasonable to be productive when we are at war?" It is important to understand that lack of focus, concentration, and overwhelming feelings are common during this time.

Abraham Maslow, Ph.D., used his seminal framework “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs” to describe stages that we must pass through to achieve the high levels of self-actualization and creativity. The idea is that we

are not able to reach the higher levels of the pyramid without a strong foundation. During a pandemic, most of us are temporarily housed in the first two levels of the pyramid; physiological and safety. Mentally strong people realize that when their physiological and safety needs feel threatened—such as during a pandemic—they don't put pressure on themselves to produce or achieve.

***6. They focus on facts.***



Mentally strong individuals are acutely aware of when their emotions are "getting the best of them." According to Marsha Linehan, Ph.D., creator of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), we all have three states of mind: an emotional mind, a rational mind, and a wise mind. Our emotional mind is where emotional statements rule; the rational mind, where facts and logic prevail; and our wise mind is a blend between the two. Being emotional is natural during



times of crisis, but consciously moving to a rational mind by listing facts and logic can decrease unnecessary negative states. For example, if someone is catastrophizing—i.e., “I am going to catch COVID-19 and die”—a rational mind approach would list the statistics and the evidence of the low percentage of individuals who die from COVID-19. Other rational statements may include “I have a low likelihood of contracting the disease because I am following stay-at-home orders, wearing a mask,” etc.

### ***7. They meditate.***

The benefits of meditation include anxiety reduction, reduced stress, increased attention span, decreased depression, and improved emotional health and well being. Studies have found that long term meditators are able to return to baseline quicker (state of calm) versus non-meditators after exposure to stressful stimuli.



### ***8. They limit toxic people.***

Mentally strong people understand toxic people and behaviors and limit their time with them. Behaviors such as gossip, chronic lying, being demanding, being self-centered on their needs vs. yours, are quite negative and take a toll on your well being. While you may be able to tolerate some toxicity with friends, family, and colleagues during non-pandemic times, eliminating toxic energy is vital when you are in survival mode during COVID-19.

If it is a **toxic family member**, think about limiting exposure or using email or text to communicate. As mentally strong people choose leaders to follow, it is just as important to choose to spend time with loved ones who display healthy behaviors and add to your well-being, not detract from it.

### ***9. They focus on self-care.***

Mentally strong people consistently use self-care and attempt to be flexible with new routines. As many gyms are closed, they may choose other exercise options while remaining socially distanced, such as running, walking, biking, and doing **yoga**. They prioritize things that will help them through the pandemic such as raising their vibration with laughter and connecting with their family and friends, coupled with rest and good sleep hygiene.

## ***10. They know their personality needs: introvert vs. extrovert.***

Mentally strong people know themselves and what they need to feel supported. Those that are introverted focus on internal states of being and small gatherings versus external sources of stimulation (a lot of socializing). Introverts often feel drained after heavy socializing and need to recharge their energy in solitude. Conversely, extroverts gain energy from other people and enjoy many social activities. Introverts realize they may have a need to connect virtually, using Facetime, Zoom, Skype, and Google hangouts, but may do so in small groups and less often than extroverts. Both personalities may have different needs to promote well being.

**This article was originally published on [drtracyhutchinson.com](http://drtracyhutchinson.com).**

**Copyright Dr. Tracy Hutchinson, Ph.D.**

### **References**

- Ahern, J., Galea, S., Resnick, H. (2002). Television images and psychological symptoms after the September 11 terrorist attacks. *Psychiatry*, 65, 289–300. doi:10.1521/psyc.65.4.289.20240
- Garfin, D. R., Silver, R. C., & Holman, E. A. (2020). The novel coronavirus (COVID-2019) outbreak: Amplification of public health consequences by media exposure. *Health Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000875>
- Holman, E. A., Garfin, D. R., Lubens, P., & Silver, R. C. (2020). Media Exposure to Collective Trauma, Mental Health, and Functioning: Does It Matter What You See? *Clinical*

Psychological Science, 8(1), 111–

124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702619858300>

Jones, N. M., Thompson, R., Dunkel Schetter, C. & Silver, R. (2017). Distress and rumor exposure on social media during a campus lockdown. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114 (44) 11663-11668.

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708518114>

Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Trauma, recovery, and growth: Positive psychological perspectives on posttraumatic stress*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Thompson, R. R., Jones, N. M., Holman, E. A., & Silver, R. C. (2019). Media exposure to mass violence events can fuel a cycle of distress. *Science advances*, 5(4), eaav3502.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aav3502>