



**For Immediate Release**  
**March 29, 2020**

**Psychologists Supporting Emotional Wellbeing amid COVID-19 - Coping Strategies, Telepsychology, and Pro-bono Services**

The residents of the State of Hawai'i are strong, as has been proven many times over the years. But we are facing a challenge, unlike anything we have ever experienced. We are not only faced with the COVID-19 virus, but we are also witnessing viral panic and increasing social isolation. When the unknown approaches, it can be very frightening and anxiety-provoking. It is normal to feel this way, and, in some cases, ongoing anxiety can lead to excessive worry, which can lead to unhealthy behaviors. Sustained anxiety is literally bad for your health: The more you panic, the less functional your immune system becomes.

The Hawai'i Psychological Association would like to help those in Hawai'i who are experiencing distress due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Psychologists are experts in stress and anxiety management who encourage all of our residents to breathe deeply and follow these simple steps to ease your mind and promote health for your body with the coronavirus. We encourage everyone to channel your "nervous energy" into more adaptive and functional thoughts and behaviors:

- **Maintain perspective.** The virus is a real threat and something we cannot control, but there are many things we can control, focus on those. Keep in mind that fear is part of a vicious cycle. Our sense of risk is driven by our emotions, like fear, and fear turns up our perceptions of risk. This situation has all the significant elements that research has identified causes fear: when a threat is new and unfamiliar when people feel little sense of control over the threat, and when they experience a sense of dread (Slovic & Peters, 2006).
- **Educate yourself** on appropriate precautions and follow them. Make sure your sources are reliable, be prepared and keep a realistic mindset. For example, when following necessary precautions, chances are significantly decreased of contracting the virus, and even for people who do get the virus, CDC reports 80% of those cases as mild to moderate.

- **Limit news and social media consumption.** Keep up to date as the situation evolves, but be mindful of how much time you are spending watching the news or consuming information on social media as it can increase stress and anxiety (Holman et al., 2014). Research suggests that social media may cause more anxiety than traditional media, for example, after the Zika epidemic (Chan et al., 2018), so pay particular attention to how much time you are spending on social media.
- **Communicate with your children.** Discuss the news coverage of the coronavirus with accurate and age-appropriate information (Wang, 2020). Parents can also help reduce distress by focusing children on routines and schedules. Remember that children will observe your behaviors and emotions for cues on how to manage their feelings during this time. You may want to limit how much media they consume to help keep their anxiety in check.
- **Keep connected.** Maintaining social networks can foster a sense of normality and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. You can manage these connections without increasing your risk of getting the virus by talking on the phone, texting, chatting with people on social media platforms, or video platforms (e.g., FaceTime, Skype, Zoom).
- **Find a routine.** When faced with a "new normal" (e.g., kids out of school, working from home, limits to usual recreational activities), maintain or develop a routine for yourself and children. Structure and routines lend a sense of security.
- **Just breathe.** Practice anxiety-reducing strategies such as: progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness, mediation, or prayer. There are many videos on YouTube or apps like Headspace or Calm that can assist with this.
- **Keep moving.** Physical activity is very helpful in reducing anxiety and encourages a sense of wellbeing and control. Move your body. Go for a walk, go hiking, ride your bike, use exercise videos at home, even some form of subtle chair exercise can be helpful.
- **Look for the positives.** Try to find some positives in the situation, e.g., more time to engage with your family/children. Use this time to reconnect at various levels with family members. Read with your kids, do crafts, cook a romantic dinner with your spouse. Look for moments of joy.
- **Exercise your brain.** Learn a new skill. Memorize passages from favorite writings, keep a gratitude journal, read that book you've had on your list.
- **Lend a hand,** be a good neighbor, find creative ways to serve others e.g., write letters, or have children color pictures for kūpuna and mail them.
- **Seek additional help.** If you or your loved ones are feeling an overwhelming nervousness, a lingering sadness, or other prolonged reactions that are negatively affecting their job performance or relationships, please consult with a trained mental health professional. In the aftermath of SARS, nearly half of residents surveyed in affected areas reported that their mental health had severely or moderately deteriorated, and 16% demonstrated posttraumatic stress symptoms (Lau et al., 2005). If you are experiencing acute stress now, effectively managing that trauma now is more likely to protect you from long-term mental and physical health outcomes (Garfin, et al., 2018). Psychologists and other appropriate mental

health providers can help people deal with extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals to help them find constructive ways to manage adversity.

There are special groups within our state that we need to take extra care of during this time. First and foremost, our kūpuna. While anyone can feel lonely or isolated, older adults are at higher risk because of such vulnerability factors as chronic illness, hearing loss and other sensory impairments, a higher likelihood of living alone, and the death of friends and family members (Blazer et al., 2020). Please make sure that you check in with your elderly family members or neighbors to make sure they have all they need. Second, our keiki. A shelter in place mandate can put undue stress on all parents. Shelter in place does not mean all in one room. Turn on the TV and take 10 minutes for yourself to breathe, turn on one of the meditation apps. If you know a parent who needs a break, consider watching their kids outside in the yard or offer to drop off a meal. Lastly, victims of domestic violence. Home can be one of the most dangerous places on earth for domestic violence victims, especially during an economic crisis. All domestic violence programs and shelters are running as usual. Please call the Domestic Violence Hotline at (808) 531- 3771 or 1-800-690-6200 for more information.

We would also like to acknowledge and address the emotional needs of frontline workers, such as healthcare professionals and store staff, which can protect them from negative consequences later. We know that following the SARS outbreak, healthcare workers on the frontline experienced significant long-term stress (Maunder et al., 2008).

The idea is to focus on that which you can control and change. We must all practice physical distancing, and perhaps self-isolation, or sheltering in place, but we get to decide how we spend that time and what we choose to dwell on. **Physical distancing does not have to mean social isolation**, use technology to connect to your friends and family.

**Just like other health care providers, psychologists are still practicing today via telehealth.** Telehealth allows you to meet over video on your smartphone, tablet, or computer. If you don't have access to these, they can do phone visits. Research shows telehealth is equivalent to in-person care in diagnostic accuracy, treatment effectiveness, quality of care, and patient satisfaction for many psychological problems (e.g., Wangelin, Szafranski, & Gros, 2016). If you need services or assistance with managing your anxiety or depression during these challenging times, visit our website [www.hawaiipsychology.org](http://www.hawaiipsychology.org) to find a psychologist, send us an email, and we can provide a list in your area or contact us today!

If you need immediate assistance, please contact:

- 24-hour Crisis Line of Hawai'i at 832-3100 on Oahu or toll-free at 1-800-753-6879)
- Domestic Violence Hotline at (808) 531- 3771 or 1-800-690-6200
- Aloha United Way - 211
- Aloha text line (text ALOHA to 741741)

If you are struggling with addiction, many AA/NA meetings have moved online:  
<https://oahucentraloffice.com/meeting-schedule-by-day/oahu-online-meetings/>

If you have lost your insurance coverage due to job loss, you may be eligible for Quest. Please contact the State's Med-Quest Division - <https://medquest.hawaii.gov/>. **Our membership is offering pro-bono services for those without insurance coverage.** Please visit our website for more information.

Mālama Pono,

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