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The COVID-19 pandemic has upended everything in our lives. The uncertainty about the coronavirus and its social, economic and cultural impacts are, without a doubt, making people feel on edge.

Change, even when it is expected, can cause significant stress, as our bodies react to new and unaccustomed pressures. But during this pandemic, many changes have been forced upon all of us very quickly.

Those pressures might include layoffs (actual or potential), working from home, limited social and physical interactions, having children home all day and the closure of many stores and businesses – not to mention being sick ourselves or taking care of sick family members.

Stress is a reaction, both physical and psychological, to events or hazards that challenge or threaten us. Our responses to stress include distinct and overlapping biological, environmental and psychological aspects. It's true that stress responses can help us: they are powerful protective mechanisms that help us deal with sudden changes, dangers or immediate demands (also known as "stressors"). But of course, problems arise when stressors don't subside.

In normal circumstances, stress usually has three phases: it comes, we deal with it, it leaves. The first response occurs quickly as an immediate, instinctive response to the stressor(s). When the situation concludes, stress usually also ends. However, when the situation causing the stress does not go away, a person can get stuck in the second phase (dealing with the stress), and the body continually reacts. This is the situation many of us find ourselves in now.

Building resiliency

The amount of stress you can absorb is called your resiliency. It is like a battery: you need to recharge to be healthy. Anything in your life that adds stress likewise drains the battery and make you less able to cope with the next (or ongoing) stress.

CUPE never advocates for people to build their mental resiliency so they can take more punishment at work. But building personal mental resiliency is important for coping with the "stress of life", whether at the best of times – or during a pandemic.

Know yourself and your resiliency

During these times, we need to take stock of our own mental health and work to increase our resiliency, as best as we can. Start to take notice of the factors that affect you. Understanding your strengths and weakness can help guide you to take steps which increase your resiliency (or that at least don't drain your "battery").

It is important to understand the areas in which you're strong, and those in which you could improve. This will allow you to learn new skills to help manage the challenges of everyday life, and that can help strengthen your overall mental health by reducing stress.

Improving your resiliency

If we think of resiliency as a battery, we can also imagine ways to improve the "battery life" by increasing the battery's charge or reducing the power use. That is, we can make ourselves stronger, or reduce the impact of life events.

Building and maintaining energy reserves starts with awareness of what builds up and what draws your energy. The fuel that recharges resiliency levels comes from good physical health practices (exercise, diet, rest), good mental health practices (like coping skills), family and social supports, and a work-life balance that allows you to do things you enjoy.

It might seem difficult to practice good health in current circumstances, or as we return to work. But you can start now, even within your own home.

Here are nine practices you can use to improve your mental resilience:

Self-monitor

Check in with yourself. Some people find it useful to create a journal or log of what's stressing them. Name the emotions you feel and identify the situations that make you feel that way. Rather than reacting indecisively or instinctively, review what causes negative emotions and determine the best path forward for overcoming the stressor.

Acceptance

Many things have changed for each of us in a very a short amount of time. We had virtually no control about how those changes happened, so dwelling on resenting these changes will not help much. What can help is altering our practices to make the best of things. You weren't responsible for the current situation, but you can take charge of how you react to it.

Build a schedule

COVID-19 has thrown many of us off our regular schedules, and many will find it hard to adjust. Determine what you are required to do each day or week and make a plan for how you will accomplish these tasks. Break larger tasks into plans for sub-tasks. If you have too many things to do, list the things which must be done and separate them from what you would like to get done. Time for your own mental health should be included in the "must get done" group

Physical distance, don't social distance

The best practice to avoid COVID-19 is to maintain two meters distance from anyone who isn't in your immediate household. That doesn't mean we can't reach out to others. If you are working at home, reach out to co-workers through video chat or phone to talk about what you are working on. Schedule group coffee breaks like you would at work. Call relatives or friends you have not heard from, especially if they are older and can't leave the house.

Be optimistic

It may sound simplistic, but people who maintain an optimistic view of the world maintain higher levels of resilience. Being optimistic can reduce depression and anxiety and can help overcome intrusive thoughts and images that lead to further spiraling and reduced resilience.

Remove toxic stressors from your life

Do not allow negative influences to constantly affect your thoughts. It might help to limit the amount of news (online or other social media especially) you consume about COVID-19. It's important to know what is going on, but constant minute-by-minute updates might be overwhelming.

Improve your physical health

Mental and physical health are linked. Diet, exercise and sleep may not restore your resiliency on their own, but they'll help. Even though your life is more restricted, you can stretch and move.

Perform a positive social good

Many community organizations need help. Find out if your CUPE local is organizing outreach initiatives or getting involved in local efforts to help out. Giving one's time or money can be an excellent way to become part of a larger collective action. It's good for others, and it's good for you: research shows that contributing is good for your mental health.

Give change time

Just like with a new workout routine, we must allow time for change to take place. You may not be able to feel improvements to your resiliency immediately. Start by identifying one or two of the above practices that would be relatively easy or that provide you with the greatest benefit; try and do it every day. Once you feel a change, add another.

Remember to track how you are feeling so you can reflect on the journey as you go. By tracking your resiliency levels, you can determine what adds to your "battery power" – and what drains it.

If you are in a crisis

If you find yourself near or "in crisis", reach out for help. The stress from COVID-19 and the related upheaval may be too much for some, especially those with pre-existing mental health concerns or conditions. Now is the time to get better, not to work on resiliency. Don't forget, you're not alone. Visit cmha.ca https://cmha.ca/find-your-cmha to find resources in your province. If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program, tap into it.