

# Booklet for Coping with Stress in Times of Pandemic



**I**n the current pandemic situation of COVID-19 caused by the SARSCoV-2 virus, it is usual to exhibit negative feelings and emotions such as: fear, sadness, anger and loneliness, in addition to anxiety and stress.

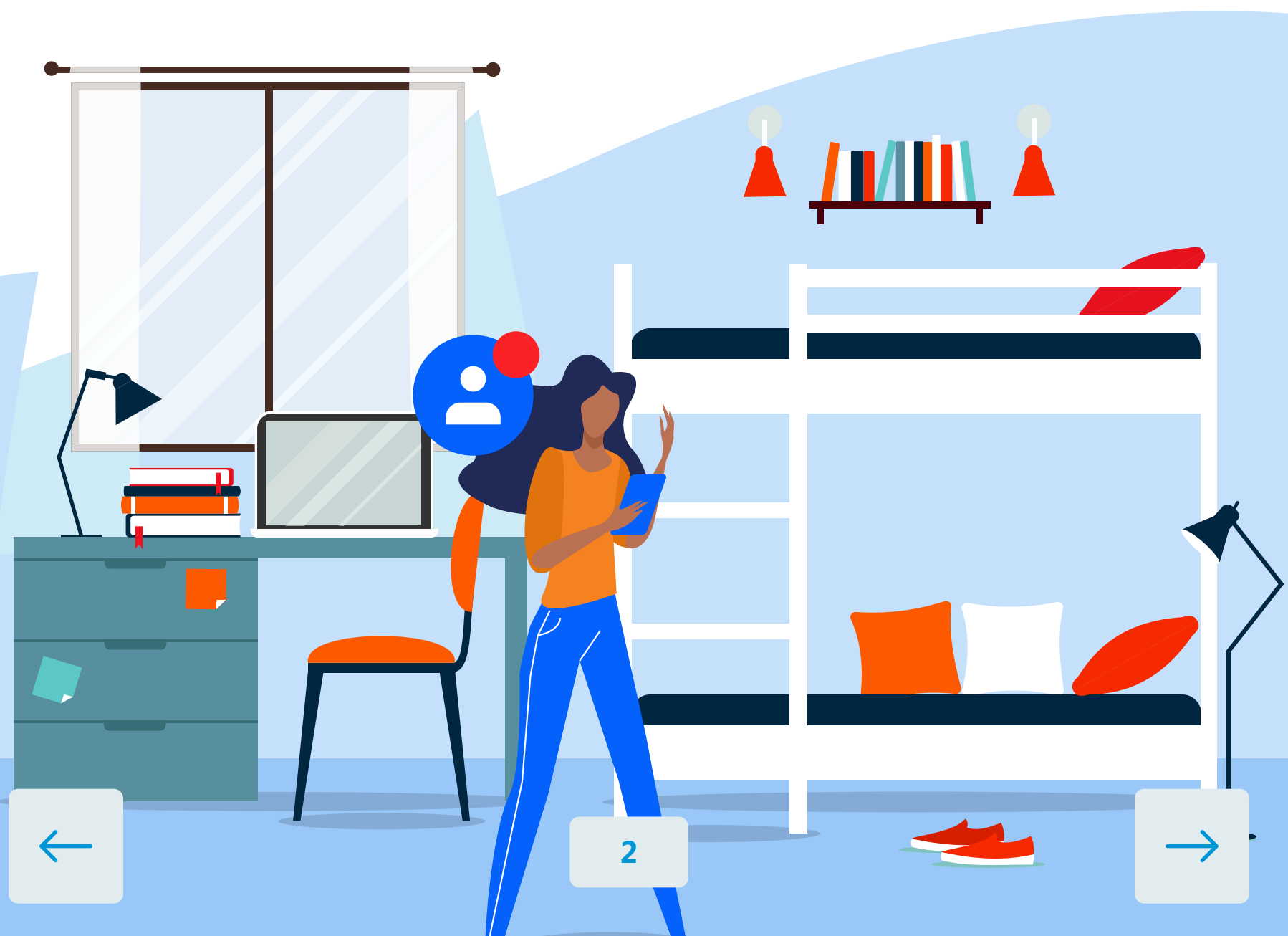
This emotional unease increases or might be heightened due to overwhelming news about the pandemic, changes in everyday routine, social distancing and economic, social and political consequences of this new scenario.

Facing these challenges may not be an easy task. You may feel overwhelmed, particularly in occasions when you think or feel that:

- You can't do things your own way;
- You don't feel effective;
- You don't feel cared about.

The field of Psychology has generated solid research about how you can cope with stress and manage these difficult situations.

These recommendations are from scientific research and sources like the World Health Organization and serve as the baseline for these guidelines.



When experiencing stress and anxiety, you can exhibit both involuntary and voluntary responses.

An involuntary response is a reaction to a situation with little control over your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. An involuntary response may make it more difficult to deal with a stressful event. Repetitive thoughts that automatically invade our mind and disrupt daily activities such as falling asleep or cause difficulty paying attention are some examples.

A voluntary response demonstrates greater control over yourself and allows you to react more effectively when overcoming difficulties. A voluntary response is easier to achieve when we reach out to meaningful people who embrace our feelings. A video chat can enhance a sense of closeness even if people are physically distant.

Relationships are very important. As a child, you learn to face challenging and stressful situations with the support of people around you.

Nurture your relationships - Support from others is particularly important in crisis situations!





Certain groups of people (children, older adults and people who have serious underlying health conditions) may respond more strongly to the stress of a crisis. They can become more anxious, irritated, angry, agitated, reclusive, suspicious, exhibit depressive symptoms and have difficulty concentrating. Tools you can use in this situation include:

- Encouraging them to express how they are feeling by talking to them, playing, drawing, singing and telling stories with them and listening without criticizing.
- Providing clear instructions in a very simple and objective way.
- Helping maintain a daily routine including: consistent bedtime and wake up times, eating meals regularly and reminding them to drink enough water.
- Children should stay with their families and, whenever possible and safe, preferably with their parents. If not possible, use the video calling features several times a day.

Have (a lot) of patience - avoid shouting or being harsh - this situation is difficult for everyone!

- Remember, parents and caregivers, health professionals and workers with greater risk of exposure are especially overwhelmed at this time.

**Showing empathy and solidarity helps a lot!**

# • • • How to recognize stress and anxiety symptoms?

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations but some of the most common signs include (click on the left to mark the ones that apply to you) :

## Physical signs:

- Shortness of breath (in the absence of a cold or other breathing problems).
- Headaches.
- Muscle aches.
- Increased heart rate.
- Dramatic changes in appetite or sleep habits .
- Indigestion.
- Feeling of "burning" or "heaviness" in the stomach.
- Diarrhea.
- Constipation.
- Tiredness and lack of "energy".
- Muscle tension.
- Unexplained body pain .
- Tremors.
- A worsening of pre-existing conditions

## Emotional signs:

- Excessive and persistent sadness, anger, guilt, fear or worry.
- Depressive mood.
- Discouragement.
- Irritation or feeling that your nerves are on edge.
- Unresponsiveness or emotional coldness

## Behavioral signs:

- Lack of patience with people.
- Avoiding expressing and sharing feelings.
- Increase or abuse of substances (medicine, alcohol, cigarettes and drugs).
- Violence.
- Agitation.

## Cognitive signs:

- Difficulty remembering information and having "blanks" in memory.
- Difficulty concentrating on tasks.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Confusion.
- Repetitive and intrusive thoughts (that "invade the mind") about unpleasant topics.

**If you need specialized support, call your local health care number to get advise.**



## ... Coping strategies to reduce stress and anxiety



### Our challenge

The table below lists situations and ways we tend to cope with the stress generated by these situations.

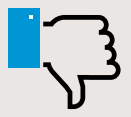
Click on the left of the sentence to mark the ways in which you have been coping with stress when facing these situations:



### IT IS DIFFICULT FOR ME...

#### To feel competent and effective in what i do

- I am afraid to mistake the symptoms of COVID-19 for symptoms of other sickness (i.e. fever) and may already be infected.
- I am afraid to go to health facilities for fear of being infected with COVID-19 while I am being treated for something else.
- I am afraid of being infected and infecting others, especially when the transmission mode of COVID-19 is not 100% clear.
- I am afraid to relive the experience of an earlier epidemic or disease.
- I have feelings of helplessness, boredom, loneliness and depression due to isolation.
- I feel overwhelmed with increased family care, which limits my ability to work and my economic opportunities.
- I feel vulnerable in being unable to protect the people I love.
- I am afraid the physical and mental health of older adults and people with disabilities will deteriorate if caregivers are quarantined.
- I am afraid of not being able to financially support my family.



## WHAT TO AVOID

### Helplessness and Escape

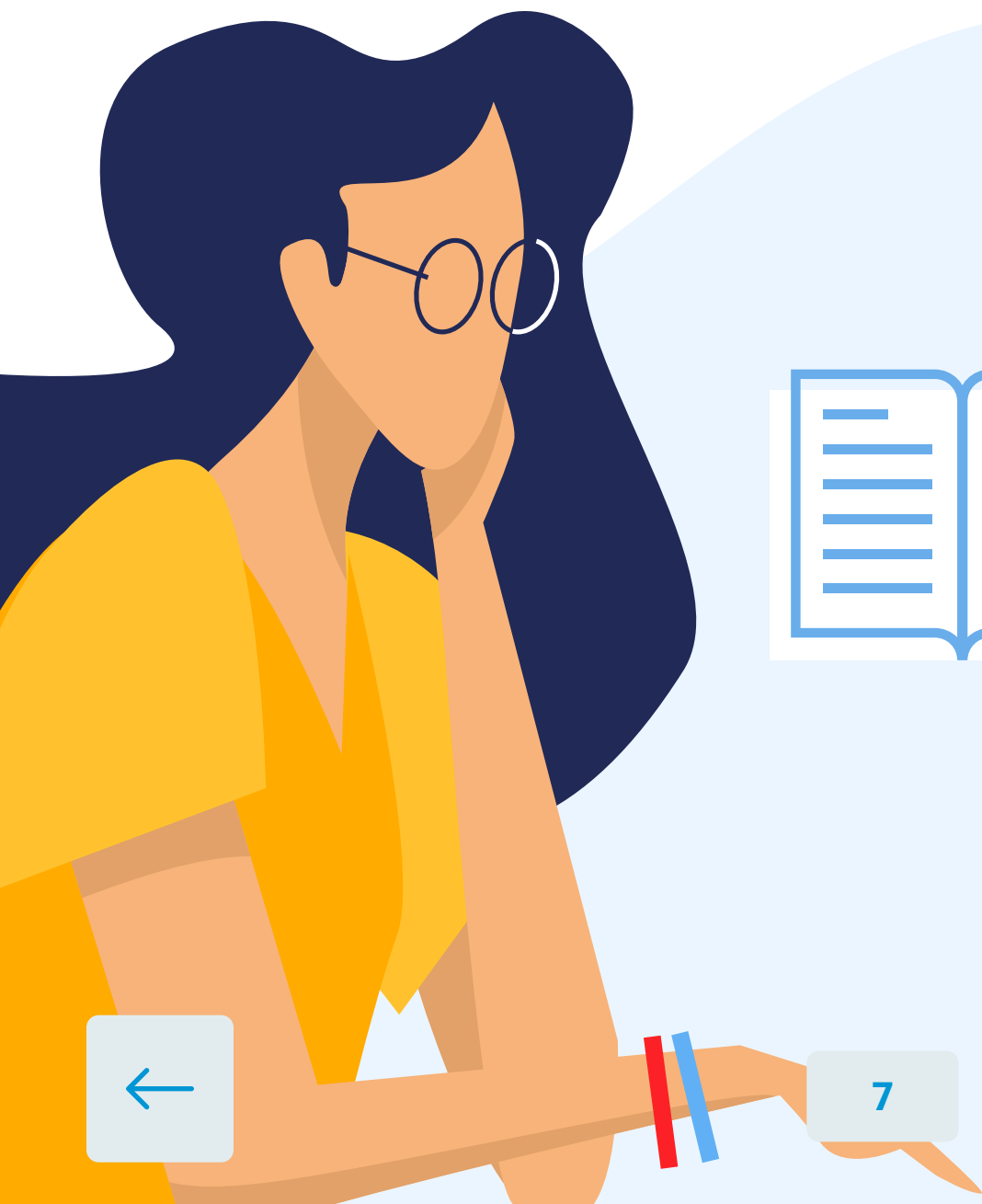
You may feel that you have reached your limits, postponing or giving up on solving problems.

This will generate feelings of helplessness and personal devaluation. Sometimes you may even experience panic.

If these reactions persist for a long time, they can get worse or lead to depression.

#### **Suggestions:**

If you notice that you are having difficulty following your schedule and solving your tasks, avoid a judgmental or critical attitude towards yourself, after all it is an adaptation phase for everyone. Try to understand the reasons why you didn't follow your plan and look for alternatives for the next few days.





## WHAT I CAN DO

### Information Seeking and Problem Solving

It is preferable to be more proactive with problems and challenges at this time. Try to act in a planned manner with effort, persistence and determination. Reliable and evidence-based information can be sought to enhance feelings of control and competence. Remember, you have managed to cope with difficult problems in the past. That knowledge will help you gain more self-confidence!

#### Suggestions:

- Seek information on what to do to protect yourself and take care of others.
- Choose reliable sources of information - do not spread fake news. Use official websites like the World Health Organization, Ministry of Health and Universities.
- Avoid spending all day checking social media, reading newspapers and listening to the news. Avoid information overload! Set a specific time of the day to get informed.
- Fill your time with optimistic information and pleasurable activities.
- Think about how to make your tasks more enjoyable: seek a peaceful environment, make a tea or something that gives you comfort to feel more capable of carrying out the tasks.
- Plan activities for the day in a way that do not overwhelm your body and mind.
- Build separate schedules for work, leisure and family interaction.
- Include self-care actions in your daily routine: physical exercise, meditation or relaxation, healthy eating - including fruits and vegetables - and drink enough water .
- Make a list of tasks in order of priority and try to solve them one by one. At some point of time, it may be necessary to say "no" to some non-urgent demands.
- A good tip for staying focused is to establish small rewards after completing each task, such as watching an episode of your favorite series or spending a few minutes with your pet. Using food as a reward may not be the best option.
- If you are concerned about your financial situation, a good tip is to organize a budget with your earnings and expenses. Establish which expenses are essential and which can be cut off.
- Believe that you can do something to improve the way you are handling this situation.

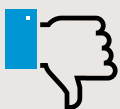




## IT IS DIFFICULT FOR ME...

To keep my relationships and bonds, to feel accepted and supported, to belong in a group

- I am afraid of getting sick and dying.
- I am afraid of losing who I love because of the virus.
- I am concerned about having to take care of children, elderly or people with disabilities if their caregivers need to be quarantined.
- I am afraid that workers on the front line may transmit COVID-19 to friends and family as a result of their work.
- I am afraid of being separated from the people I love and caregivers due to the quarantine regime.
- I worry about children at home alone when schools are closed
- I am concerned about being socially excluded for being associated with the disease (e.g. prejudice against people who are from infected areas).



## WHAT TO AVOID

### Isolation and Helplessness

Trying to isolate yourself when faced with conflict is not a good way to deal with stressful situations. It may bring momentary relief, but in the long run, the consequences will be detrimental to relationships and might even generate feelings of loneliness and helplessness.

#### **Suggestions:**

If you are feeling this way, try to accept these feelings without judgment. It's okay to be afraid to share your feelings. Try to understand what you feel initially and consider the possibility that other people might be feeling the same. Gradually, you should find opportunities and relationships that allow you to feel more comfortable expressing yourself. Remember difficulties will not last forever. Developing skills to deal with challenges or remembering strategies you've used in the past can be useful.



## WHAT I CAN DO

### Seeking Support and Self-Reliance

Feeling that you can count on other people and that you can support them is something that can help improve your emotional state. Positive emotions have a beneficial effect when faced with physical and mental illness. Sharing emotions with parents, spouses, children, friends and colleagues, even online in these difficult times, fulfills our need to feel loved by others.

#### Suggestions:

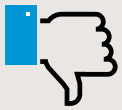
- Look for people who can support your emotional needs.
- Use video calls to connect with people.
- If you are distressed, sad or anxious, try to talk to people who are generally more positive or optimistic.
- Dedicate time to your responsibilities and family.
- Accept emotional support when offered.
- Ask for help with tasks or emotional concerns and offer help whenever you can.
- Try other ways to express yourself such as: painting, drawing, writing, music or dancing.
- Express your emotions and feelings.
- Encourage your family members to share their feelings. Some (i.e. children, elderly) may need help expressing concerns or anxieties.
- Pray or engage in the religious practice of your belief.
- Make time for emotional connection with yourself. Knowing your inner world, your own emotions and thoughts can be a first step towards taking more voluntary actions coping with stress. Use the available resources, such as meditation practices, that promote that connection.
- Seek guidance at health care facilities or through professional referrals.
- If you realize that you are not coping with your emotional struggles, seek specialized support from a mental health professional. Many can offer online assistance.



## IT IS DIFFICULT FOR ME...

### To take ownership of my actions

- I fear losing my ability to choose my actions.
- I am afraid of having to comply with external rules with which I do not agree.
- I am afraid of not having access or that vulnerable people will not have access to assistance if they need it.
- I am afraid of the disease relapsing if I am infected.



## WHAT TO AVOID

### Submission and Opposition

Avoid arguments and fights; they increase stress and decrease everyone's ability to get along with each other. Feeling angry or holding a grudge are not helpful. Placing blame and accusations generate resentment. Negative thoughts and pessimism lead to inaction and may bring negative consequences for the physical and mental health of you and the people around you.

#### **Suggestions:**

If you are having these negative thoughts, try to pay attention to the moments when they come up. Try to find a way to tolerate this situation keeping in mind that thoughts and feelings may not fully represent the reality.



## WHAT I CAN DO

### Acceptance and Negotiation

When we can't change a situation, it is better to accept it.

By changing our perception of the situation, we can regulate our emotions. We can try to negotiate when possible. Even the smallest change can strengthen our sense of control.

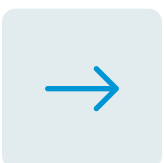
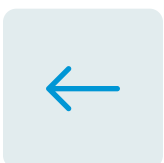
#### Suggestions:

- Realistically accept the situation. A good strategy is trying to describe the situation without judgment, only the facts. For example, it is a fact that classes will be taught online or work will be done remotely. Whether you like it or not is not helpful when the goal is to accept a situation you do not like. Accepting is a fundamental step in understanding and implementing what needs to be done.
- Question thoughts that may be troubling you, such as, "this has no solution." Is it a fact or just a thought?
- Propose different and creative ways to solve tasks. Don't be afraid to innovate.
- Think about what you will learn during this time. For example, many people are taking the opportunity to learn how to use social media for work, meeting apps, and project management software.
- You can also learn new skills such as: making a new recipe, creating a craft from supplies you already have at home or growing a small vegetable garden.
- Try to improve skills you already possess like crafts or playing a musical instrument.
- Finish activities that you have been too busy to complete such as: repairs at home, cleaning the cabinets or sewing.
- If you were not physically active before, this may be a good time to start! Begin with low intensity exercises and stretching.
- If you are working from home, negotiate with your supervisor and your family to establish your work routine.
- Prioritize your tasks.
- When communicating, remember:
  - Describe the situation (e.g. "I spent many hours watching the news and did not follow my schedule").
  - Express how you feel (e.g. "I feel this situation hindered my performance and I am concerned about meeting deadlines").
  - Say what you need (e.g. "I need to change my schedule").
  - Reinforce - say why it is important ("I want to produce quality work and that is why I will prioritize my tasks").



## MY NOTES

Write down ideas, plans or thoughts that could help you deal with your challenges.



# We hope this booklet is useful!

## IMPORTANT

Keep updated about the situation and the new guidelines; it is important to ensure that you are following the appropriate precautionary measures. In addition, seek reliable sources of information to avoid misinformation or sensational coverage.

**Use credible sources** - This includes World Health Organization (<https://www.paho.org/bracovid19/>), Ministry of Health (<https://coronavirus.saude.gov.br>) and local health authorities' guidelines

Feeling overwhelmed? Choose one or two daily updates . Constant monitoring of the media, especially when compulsive, can fuel stress and anxiety responses rather than diminish them.

Be careful with what you share: stop the spread of rumors



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