

Facing

# COVID-19 with

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## SAD, MAD, BAD and Occasionally RAD

Taking your emotional temperature—  
and treating a spectrum of  
reactions—during COVID-19.

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*A Special Digital Supplement  
to School Nutrition's  
Ongoing Coverage of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Facing

**COVID-19** with

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# SAD, MAD, BAD and Occasionally RAD

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

Taking your emotional temperature—and treating a spectrum of reactions—during COVID-19.



**H**ow are you doing? It's *the* question that everyone keeps asking one another these days. And after nine weeks (and counting), the answers tend to have a routine sameness, yet are far from simple. An emotional rollercoaster is the most popular and vivid metaphor to describe what most of us are experiencing, although I've heard (and used) others, like pinball machine, seesaw and seismograph. The bottom line is that most of us are growing weary of the mood swings that have characterized our pandemic days. We'd like to flatten *this* curve, while working to flatten the infection curve and avoid exposure to COVID-19.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and it's a fitting occasion to investigate the emotional challenges associated with the pandemic, as well as to explore a variety of coping strategies. Truth be told, I assigned this piece to myself because I wanted to use the research and writing process to get a better handle on my own emotional barometer. There are more than 30 defined moods in the four umbrella categories of this piece, and I think I've experienced each and every one on multiple occasions since mid-March. This article is, essentially, one strategy in my toolkit of therapeutic approaches to best manage *my* mental health. I hope you find helpful insights, tips and advice to manage *yours*.

*Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.*

# SAD

*Lonely*

*Anxious*

*Depressed*

*Disappointed*

*Discouraged*

*Defeated*

*Grief*

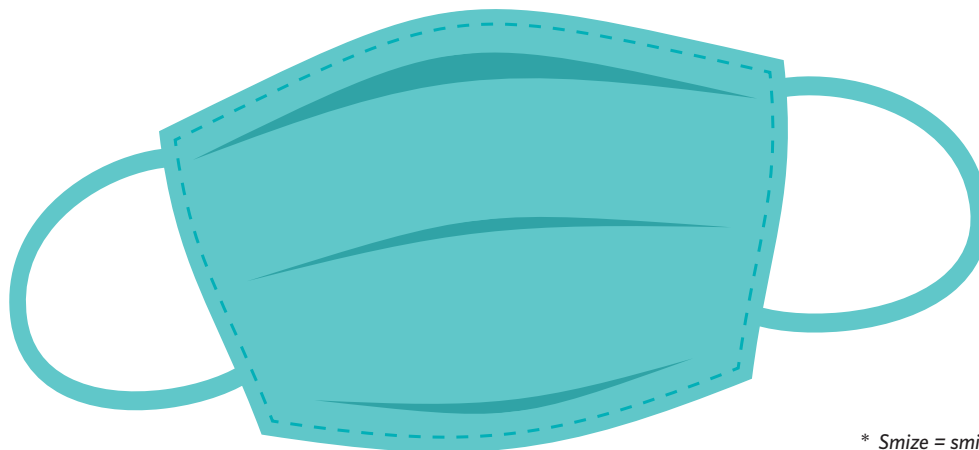
**I loathe the facemasks.** Even colorful and fun patterns depress me beyond measure. I recognize they are an important tool for maintaining safety, but I miss facial cues from others, as well as being able to express my own natural cheer with more than a “smize.”\* And they are a physical manifestation of loneliness, isolation and the realization that “back to normal” isn’t coming anytime soon.

It doesn’t take much to get caught going down a rabbit hole of pandemic despair and anxiety. Even recent moves to “reopen” states are fraught with unanswered questions. Is it too soon? What risks am I willing to take? Will the experts be right in predicting spikes in new infections? Was it fair to make high school seniors miss important rites of passage? What will happen to artists, performers and other niche professionals who have been out of work? Worry leads to anxiety which leads to discouragement, which leads to disappointment and grief and all that makes one feel very, very much alone—especially if you already live alone.

Staving off depression, loneliness and anxiety takes effort—and effort can be in short supply when you are experiencing depression, loneliness and anxiety. But it’s important to try to break the cycle by developing new habits. Start with the Common-Sense Coping Strategies on page 3.

## GOOD REMINDERS:

- Get outside for a dose of nature, which is good for your physical health and your psychological well-being. One study found that nearly 10% of people with high blood pressure could get their hypertension under control by spending 30 minutes or more a week in a park. Use your senses and notice what you’re seeing, smelling, hearing and experiencing.
- At the start of the week, identify two people you will connect with over the next seven days. Schedule either a video or phone chat and put it in your calendar so you are fully present during the conversation. Research in *The Atlantic* notes that even “lightweight contact,” such as text messages, can help strengthen connections. Even introverts are social beings who need to connect, and during this time of illness and anxiety, we need more social support not less.



\* Smize = smiling with your eyes



## COMMON-SENSE COPING

Experts from a variety of organizations, including the American Psychological Association, Anxiety and Depression Association of America, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and many others, offer a number of practical strategies for taking care of yourself and others.

- **Practice some “media distancing”** along with your social distancing. Anxiety stems from the combination of uncertainty and imagination. The 24/7 media, which is almost all negative, is the driver of anxious thoughts. The more anxious you feel, the more you should take a break from watching, reading, listening or discussing the news. And this includes social media and internet browsing, too! Resist the urge to keep checking the latest news about the virus, tallies about cases and deaths and the status of your investments. If there’s something vital that demands your action, you’ll find out. Can’t go cold turkey? Set some limits on how often you check—if your stress, depression and anxiety start to rise, reduce that frequency.
- **Know the facts** and help stop the spread of rumors. Be aware that internet trolls are planting fake stories on social media that are specifically designed to upset and inflame people on both ends of the political spectrum. Look to authorities with proven professional expertise in this area. And while some major news outlets may slant their coverage with provocative headlines and opinion pieces, most can be relied upon to provide news that is focused on the facts.
- **Take care of your body** with regular exercise, plenty of sleep and well-balanced meals. Alternate long periods of sitting with short spurts of physical activity. Look into meditation practices or, at minimum, take a few minutes every hour to take a few deep, cleansing breaths and stretches.
- **Connect with others** in responsible ways. Many states are lifting stay-at-home orders, but for these to work to keep most people safe, individuals must take care to avoid close quarters with others as well as guard against other means of easy virus transmission. If you learn you have been exposed to COVID-19 in a gathering, stay home and isolate for two weeks. We are lucky to live in an age with so many technological options for staying in touch. Video calls and emails may rely on Wi-Fi and devices, but you can also pick up the phone and have an old-fashioned voice chat! And don’t overlook sending a note or card via “snail mail.” The act of reaching out to others can make you feel as good as when others reach out to you!
- **Put your “oxygen mask on first”** before helping others. It’s easy to devote all your attention on children at home and/or loved ones in high-risk groups, but you can’t sustain the help you’re trying to give them in this crisis if you don’t tend to your own emotional health first. Keep reminding yourself that it’s not selfish to practice self-care.
- **Get organized and take control where you can.** Don’t hoard toilet paper, of course, but make lists and keep track of your family’s inventory of favorite foods and supplies. Know where you can obtain these, whether it’s the local supermarket or an online source. Set a regular schedule for shopping. Don’t overlook regular prescriptions, over-the-counter medications and medical supplies required by you or a family member. Drive your car periodically to keep the battery charged. Make lists of family and friends to keep in touch with and keep track of when you do; time is passing both slowly and crazy-quick, and you might be surprised to learn that two weeks or more have gone by since your last connection. With so much uncertainty about the virus and its ongoing effects on society, you will feel better when you focus on things that you *can* control, rather than on all the things that are out of your hands.
- **Ask for help** when symptoms of anxiety and depression persist. Start by sharing your struggles with a close friend or loved one. It may be hard to talk about your feelings and show your vulnerabilities, so pick someone you trust. If you feel you must be strong in front of family members, reach out to a faith or spiritual leader. Contact your primary care provider and request a referral to a mental health professional—follow up and make an appointment. If you want to remain completely anonymous, contact organizations such as those listed at the start of this section or national crisis hotlines.

# MAD

*Irritable*

*Impatient*

*Frustrated*

*Restless*

*Tense*

*Bitter*

*Suspicious*

*Resentful*

*Hypersensitive*

*Judgmental*

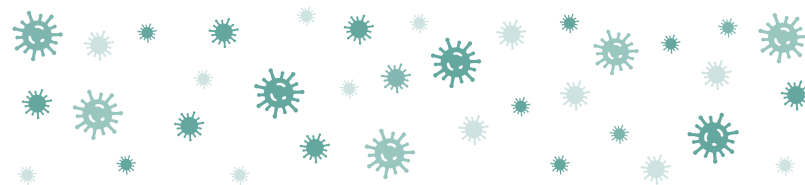
**Our lives and plans have been upended.** There's a lot to be mad about. Cancelled vacations and milestone events. Budget dollars earmarked for new combi-ovens and reach-ins being redirected to insulated bags and box sealers. Your formerly empty nest crowded with young adult children competing with you for internet bandwidth and “office” space. The umpteenth threat or bribe made to quiet squabbling siblings. Your World Series champion baseball team not opening the new season in triumph. And someone finishing the last roll of toilet paper without having sounded the alert about the dwindling supply.

Is it any wonder that there are days where our patience is limited and our irritability is off the charts? Still, we might feel a little taken aback by our own tense and terse reactions, the glares we give to a stranger flaunting the one-way paths in the supermarket or our explosive reaction to a poorly worded email from a coworker. Some of that impatience and frustration may be self-directed, as well. On multiple occasions, I've caught myself clenching my jaw so tightly that I had to head for the ibuprofen bottle hours later.

One way to keep anger and frustration in check is to practice **compassion**. Dr. Suzie Carmack, an Assistant Professor at George Mason University's Department of Global and Community Health, identifies three components to compassion: We should be **mindful** that every human has their own secret struggle in difficult times. Be **kind** to ourselves and each other. Although we each have a well of resilience within, sometimes it's not enough. Let's give ourselves and others a break for being **human**.

## GOOD REMINDERS:

- My coworkers (or friends) and I don't see everything the same way—and that's okay.
- We have different ways of coping with uncertainty and stress.
- They are under pressures that I don't always see, can't fully understand and probably aren't really my business.
- It's not helpful to compare levels of challenge or suffering.
- We are all doing the best we can.





## LEARNING TO LIVE WITH UNCERTAINTY

**A**nxiety is a natural consequence in these unprecedented days when it seems there is nothing *but* uncertainty. According to Jelena Kacmanovic, Adjunct Professor of Psychology, Georgetown University, an essential strategy is to build your tolerance for uncertainty. Writing for the internet publication *The Conversation*, Kacmanovic suggests easing back on certainty-seeking behaviors.

Start small. For example, the next time you have a question or “need” an answer about something, resist the urge to immediately text another person for their response or to research the matter on the internet. How long can you live without getting the information? Is it *really* necessary to have an answer right away? Or even within the day? Similarly, take a walk or a hike *without* checking the weather first, Kacmanovic advises. “Build your tolerance

of uncertainty muscle,” she says. As with any habit, this takes practice and repetition.

Kacmanovic also recommends tackling the “anxiety paradox.” The more we try to get rid of it by actively seeking mitigation, the more anxiety tends to persist. Are you continually seeking reassurance from family, friends and health experts—and feeling no less anxious? Are you obsessively checking the news in hopes of calming your fears? You might get nominal reassurance, but it’s unlikely to last.

Instead, says Kacmanovic, “allow your anxious thoughts, feelings and physical sensations to wash over you. Accept anxiety as an integral part of the human experience. We tend to overestimate how badly we’ll be affected by negative events and underestimate how well we’ll cope with them and adjust to difficult situations. We shouldn’t underestimate human resiliency.”

### BY THE NUMBERS

34%

The increase in prescriptions for anti-anxiety medications filled between mid-February and mid-March, according to client data compiled by ExpressScripts, a pharmacy benefit management firm.



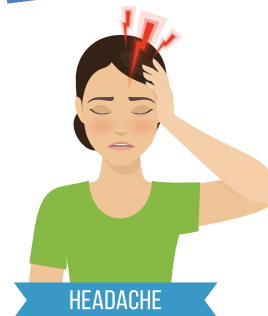
78%

The ratio of all anti-depressant, anti-anxiety and anti-insomnia prescriptions that were filled as new prescriptions during the week ending March 15, according to ExpressScripts.



56%

The portion of U.S. adults who report that worry or stress related to the coronavirus has caused at least one negative effect on their wellbeing, such as problems sleeping or eating, difficulty controlling their temper, frequent headaches or worsening of chronic health conditions like high blood pressure, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.



HEADACHE

# BAD

*Stressed*

*Overwhelmed*

*Fatigued*

*Fearful*

*Bored*

*Unmotivated*

*Pessimistic*

**According to the CDC,** symptoms of stress during an infectious disease outbreak can include:

- Fear and worry about your own health
- Fear and worry about the health of loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches and loss of appetite

But stress is just one example of several difficult and uncomfortable emotions that are on the rise as a reaction to this pandemic. They can combine together in destructive ways, with negativity pulling one down and down.

On a “bad” day, I can lose hours between idly watching television reruns I have memorized and long naps. Even if I regroup and end the day with a brisk walk and a (moderately) healthy meal, I’m still apt to scold myself for not making more of an effort to use my unscheduled time “better.” There are many cool programs to stream online or classes to take. Didn’t I bemoan how quickly the long Christmas vacation passes and how much home improvement I could get done if I only had more time? Well, I’ve got that time—and more—on my hands and yet I find myself struggling simply to run the vacuum regularly. I probably don’t have to tell you that self-recrimination is not a particularly effective motivator.

## GOOD REMINDERS:

- Self-care helps. Making the commitment to developing healthy habits can have its own cumulative *positive* impact.
- Adapt and transition old normals to new ones. Normalcy is an important touchstone for mental health. Many school nutrition professionals have received parent feedback about how important school meal pickups are to giving their children an anchor in normalcy. Be open to adapting your own cherished routines. For example, schedule a recurring “dinner” with a friend over Zoom. Did you get a lot of reading done on the treadmill at the gym? Try Audible and listen to a book while you walk in the neighborhood. Consider an online exercise class or live-streaming a worship service.
- Just as there is stress contagion, calm is also contagious. Be intentional about ways to bring serenity into your days.





## SEEKING SWEETER DREAMS

A good night's rest is so important to both physical and mental health, but pandemic stress is putting that practice in jeopardy for many people. And have you been experiencing more frequent and more vivid dreams—even nightmares—as the pandemic wears on? You're not alone.

According to the Sleep Foundation, reports of insomnia are on the rise, driven by several factors:

- School and business closures have been a huge disruption in daily life and it can be difficult to adjust to new schedules or, for some, the lack of a schedule. Keeping up with work obligations while home with partners and children can generate stress, strain and discord that are barriers to satisfying rest.
- Keeping track of the time and even the day can be hard without typical time “anchors” like dropping kids at school, attending recurring social events or going to the gym.
- Being stuck inside, especially with low levels of natural light, can reduce light-based cues for wakefulness and sleep.
- Excess screen time, whether video calls or binge-watching television, especially later in the evening, can stimulate the brain in ways that make it hard to wind down.
- If you've nowhere to go, you may be tempted to oversleep in the mornings and/or nap throughout the day.
- Worries about all the unknowns—how much the disease will spread, whether hospitals can manage the crisis, when we will feel comfortable being in public, our personal economic security and the state of the nation—are helpful. Uncertainty brings on a racing mind, which can make it impossible to wind down and sleep or to sleep without tossing and turning.

Sleep empowers an effective immune system, heightens brain function and enhances mood. Likewise, lack of sleep has negative effects on all those areas. And then, there's the issue of fatigue, defined by the Mayo Clinic as “a near constant state of weariness that develops over time and reduces your energy, motivation and concentration.” Sounds like the experience of many school nutrition professionals working to prep mass quantities of school meals! But even “adequate” sleep is rarely sufficient to address the grogginess and lack of motivation that can result from this type of mental and physical exhaustion.

And about those dreams? Experts think that sleep patterns during the pandemic can lead to a heightened recollection of dreams. When we are sleep-deprived, the pressure increases for REM sleep—when dreams occur, say researchers. This

tends to lead to a so-called rebound in REM sleep, with people reporting more vivid and emotional dreams than usual.

Similarly, heightened dream recall has been associated with having a *longer* sleep, if you find yourself sleeping in without the pressure of a commute and standard work hours. “Our last REM period of the night is the longest and most dense, which correlates with long, vivid dreams,” says Deirdre Barrett, an expert in the study of dreams, in an interview with the *Harvard Gazette*. Without early or frequent awakenings cutting abruptly into that period, there's more opportunity for the dream to play itself out.

And if you're obsessing about COVID-19 just before sleep, it's the perfect fodder for dreams that reflect “fear, embarrassment, social taboos, occupational stress, grief and loss, unreachable family and more literal dreams around contamination or disease,” says Dr. Rosie Gibson, writing for *The Conversation* in early May. Barrett, who is monitoring COVID-19 dream reports, sees common clusters not only about experiencing virus symptoms but about virus metaphors, such as bug dreams. Dreams exaggerating isolation or crowding are on the increase, she says, as are economic-related dreams, such as discovering your money is gone or being unable to get a job.

You probably know what you *should* be doing for a better night's sleep, but here are some helpful reminders.

- Stick to a schedule for wake-up, wind-down and bedtime. Wind-down is especially important for relaxing into later sleep and can include activities like light reading, stretching and bed-time preparations.
- Each day, spend some time outside in natural light and open windows and blinds during the day. Daily exercise is also important.
- Limit alcohol and caffeine intake late in the day.
- Reserve your bed for sleep—avoid “working-from-bed” habits, as well as bringing a device into bed to watch some entertainment before sleep.
- Take an hour before bed as “me” time without any electronic engagement, as well as only minimal conversations or calls.
- Limit tossing and turning to 20 minutes. If you still can't sleep, get out of bed and do something relaxing in low light, such as stretches or listening to calming music.
- Take 10 slow, deep breaths to fall or return to sleep. It should be a slow inhale through your nose for 3 to 4 seconds, followed by a slow exhale through your mouth for 3 to 4 seconds.





**Most of us do have good days.** The ingredients of mine are so obvious—and so textbook, according to my research—that I don't know why I can't whip together that recipe every day. For me, it's about striving for balance, spending modest amounts of time connecting with friends, taking a walk and practicing yoga, reading and doing something creative (writing, coloring, photography) and, of course, tackling work and must-do chores, all while avoiding non-nurturing behaviors like midday naps and lousy TV.

I can't seem to "make" myself reliably follow these directions day after day. Fortunately, I *am* getting better at realizing that I just have to cycle through a bad day and keep the faith that the good days to come are still plentiful in number.

One strategy with a 100% success rate in raising my spirits is tapping reliable sources of inspiration. There are a few friends on Facebook whose quippy posts and commentary always make me laugh. Examples of others' creativity can motivate me to tackle a learning project. But above all, I find my soul nurtured in reading the social media posts of school nutrition teams serving their communities with spirit and a smile. These make me grateful, inspired and hopeful for what comes next.

# RAD

- Balanced*
- Hopeful*
- Grateful*
- Happy*
- Creative*
- Empowered*
- Inspired*
- Accepting*

## GOOD REMINDERS:

- Make note of the activities and behaviors that lighten your mood. Record them in a list on your phone or a gratitude journal so you can refer to them when you're feeling low. Pick just one and commit to doing it at some point during the day.
- Commit to regularly trying something new. It doesn't have to be an in-depth course on food safety or on knitting a sweater. It can be as simple as trying a new side dish with dinner, a TV show you've never watched or spending 30 minutes reading poetry instead of historical fiction. Focusing on the new keeps one looking *forward*.
- Remember that resilience is inherently human. As noted by the team at the George Mason Center for the Advancement of Well-Being, in the last two months, most of us have adapted to a disruption bigger than most of us have experienced in our entire lives. "We've had no choice but to adapt, and although it feels uncomfortable, adapting is actually what we are made to do."

## SURVIVOR STRESS

CDC acknowledges that there can be many mixed emotions for those entering into or coming out of quarantine, whether because of a COVID-19 diagnosis or because of isolation after notice of definitive or possible exposure. Be on the lookout for the following symptoms and go easy on yourself and others as you ride through the process.

- Relief that you have survived exposure and/or illness
- Fear and worry that your health is still at risk
- Fear and worry about the health of your loved ones
- Increased isolation, now possibly within your own home
- Guilt and stress about not being able to perform normal work or parenting duties during quarantine
- Stress from the experience of monitoring yourself and others for COVID-19 symptoms
- Sadness, anger or frustration because others have unfounded fears of contracting the disease from you, even if you've been determined not to be contagious

## CARING FOR YOUR TEAMS

**R**esearch released by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) in mid-May finds that 22% to 35% of U.S. employees are experiencing symptoms of depression during this pandemic. In addition, more than 40% feel burned out from work, used up at the end of the workday and/or emotionally drained from work. But more than one-third indicated they hadn't taken any proactive steps to cope with their feelings. And only 7% had contacted a mental health professional.

"Now, more than ever, employers should double down against stigmas and guarantee that employees know of the [mental health] resources, benefits and accommodations that are available [to them]," said Johnny Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, President and CEO of the organization, in a release. If your school or business operation offers an employee assistance program as part of its health insurance benefits or any other mental health resources, be sure you send reminders of these to your staff.

But don't rely solely on these professional resources. "Family, friends, coworkers, faith leaders—we can and we must help one another through this difficult time," advises Rick Trim, President of LivingWorks, a provider of suicide prevention solutions based in Canada and interviewed by SHRM. "This isn't something that can be left only to mental health professionals."



Whether your staff is working from home or working onsite to prep and serve meals, let them hear from you. Don't rely on questions that lead to generic answers like the ubiquitous "How are you doing?" Instead, queries should give team members a more sincere chance to engage—if they so choose. For example, "What did you do over the weekend?" "What games have you been playing with your kids?" "Got any good TV recommendations?"

SHRM also notes that you can be a role model to your staff as a way to address stigma about emotional health challenges. Acknowledge your own anxieties and stress. "Normalize" talking about mental health, advises SHRM.

Be alert to physical complaints, persistent sadness, excessive worrying and increased anger or irritability. If you sense someone is struggling and needs more attention, reach out to them in private. Be upfront about your availability to listen or to direct them to resources, and be equally clear that you respect if they choose not to take advantage of your assistance.

Be sure to celebrate and acknowledge milestones like meals served, individual birthdays and employment anniversaries. Find ways to keep staff who are home engaged and connected. *[Editors' Note: See "Staying Engaged While Staying Away," May 2020 for more ideas.]*

In SNA's webinar "COVID-19 Reality: Leading a Team in a Virtual World" (available at [www.schoolnutrition.org/trainingzone](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/trainingzone)), presenters Julia Bauscher, SNS, Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools, and Rhea Steele, CAE, SNA Headquarters, pointed to research on challenges experienced by those newly isolated from the team by working from home. These include loneliness, distractions, difficulties staying motivated and an inability to "unplug" after work. Topping the list of suggestions is providing flexibility, especially in schedules that acknowledge how current realities may require different start/stop times and midday breaks for family obligations and physical exercise. Staff who have busy, full days working also may need to be reminded they are entitled to mental health days and vacation time.

# We have your back.

It's the least we can do. We see all the things you are doing to manage the "right now" so that your students and communities have access to healthy, wholesome foods. On top of all that, you have to try to piece together a feeding plan for the upcoming school year when so many things are still unknown. So, whether you need ideas on how to use up inventory, are looking for some grab 'n go inspiration, or simply need to smile, we are here to support you during these ever-changing times.

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