

Manual for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19

Technical and practical applications



*"The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**"*

Techniques for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19

Ptolemaida 2020

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“Manual for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19”

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A few words about the manual...

‘In a world that is constantly changing, how can our emotions stay the same?’

Observing all these new and unprecedented events happening worldwide, we have seen in ourselves and in the people around us, fluctuations regarding *mental health*, accumulated *emotions*, uncontrollable *thoughts* and various *behaviors*.

Anxiety, worry, fear, anger. We are thinking: ‘Of course we will be stressed and scared... If we don’t feel those emotions now that we are facing a major threat, then when will we feel them? We have every right to feel discomfort and despair during this challenging period of our life.’

Therefore, we decided to ‘take advantage’ of our scientific knowledge as psychologists and write this manual including techniques, exercises and general ways that are used in the context of psychotherapeutic interventions. Our goal is not to make fear, anger and anxiety disappear from our lives. That is impossible. There is no life without fear and anxiety. These are emotions which we cannot survive without them.

Our main goal is to give you ideas on how to manage effectively your non helpful thoughts and the most challenging emotions that you might experience in the midst of such difficult period in which there is uncertainty and a feeling of weakness.

By reading the techniques, you can choose which ones best suit your needs and apply them whenever you feel they can help you.

We hope you find it useful!

We send you our positive thinking and our optimism!

Thank you very much!

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Remember:

*“You have the right to feel discomfort someday!
It is ok not to be ok”*

Don't forget:

*“To love yourself and take care of him, because you
spend with him every second of your day, every day, 7
days a week, 24 hours a day, and 365 days a year”*

Which are the most common emotions during this period

Today, we are experiencing a situation that is unprecedented and vague, accompanied by the uncertainty and lack of reliable predictions regarding the future.



New experiences with less clarity can trigger various emotions, affecting our mental health.

The most common emotions to experience during this period are:

- ◆ *Anxiety*
- ◆ *Worry*
- ◆ *Anger*
- ◆ *Fear-to not get sick*
- ◆ *Fear-for a loved one to not get sick/die*
- ◆ *Feeling helpless– that we cannot do something immediately for the treatment of the virus.*
- ◆ *Pessimism*
- ◆ *Despair*



However, when we experience these emotions in an excessive degree, (which is more than we can handle) they can be channeled into our body, taking the form of physical symptoms or behaviors such as:

- ◆ *Body aches*
- ◆ *Gastrointestinal symptoms*
- ◆ *Headaches*
- ◆ *Sleeping difficulty*
- ◆ *Dietary changes*
- ◆ *Panic attacks*
- ◆ *Fatigue*
- ◆ *Difficulty concentrating*
- ◆ *Irritability*

In which cases should I seek help?

During this time, everyone regardless, is worried, scared, angry and a little bit more disorganized than usual which is completely understandable. We experience a significant change to our everyday life and every change involves loss. Therefore, one can say that we are in a process that shares common characteristics with the mourning process.

In other words, we go through the loss of our daily habits, the loss of the sense that we control everything, the loss of the frequent physical contact with our loved ones and finally the loss of the idea of us being invulnerable. As a result, the above feelings and reactions are completely healthy and expected.

Nonetheless when those feelings are extremely intense to the point of not having the ability to feel any pleasure anymore, then it would be suggested to contact a specialist. More specifically, we mention a few usual worrying signs:

- ◆ *Recurrent panic attacks*
- ◆ *An increased sense of despair*
- ◆ *Isolation*
- ◆ *Withdrawal from activities that brought pleasure*
- ◆ *Inability to perform daily activities*
- ◆ *Withdrawal from self-serving behaviors (food, bathing, hygiene)*
- ◆ *Suicidal thoughts—the idea that death is the only solution in terms of dealing with negative emotion.*

When an individual experiences intense discomfort with the way he feels and with what he does, while at the same time due to this discomfort there is a decrease in his functionality, it is recommended to discuss with a specialist.



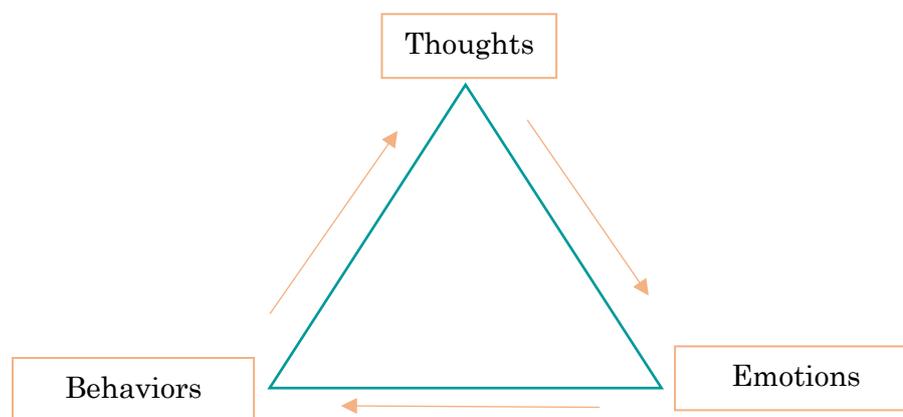
Remember:

“A strong individual is not someone who can handle everything perfectly! But rather someone who has the power to admit when he is not!”

How can I help myself to effectively manage my thoughts, emotions and behaviours?

PRACTICAL TIPS

Stressful events and particularly events that are closely related with ambiguity and lack of control can create negative and non-helpful, non-supportive thoughts. Often, we think the worst-case scenario, spending considerable amount of time on hypothetical questions such as “If I get sick...”, “If something happens to a loved one...” resulting to negative emotions that will lead to negative behaviors, which will then lead to negative thoughts; thus we enter an endless cycle.



🔍 *What can we do to strengthen and empower our mental health?*

🗨 ***Take control and protect yourself by following the NHS guidelines***

Convert your anxiety, into an incentive to adopt hygiene rules and practice them regularly. Make sure you follow the proposed measures in order to protect yourself to the fullest.

➤ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

*“The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**”*

Techniques for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19

Create a new routine, as close as possible to the old one

Make sure to keep and maintain as many habits as you had before quarantine in approximately the same way (if this is possible).

- ◆ *Try to go to bed but also wake up in the morning, every day the same time (preferably the same times as before the quarantine)*
- ◆ *Maintain your food routine (specific hours)*
- ◆ *Create a fixed schedule for your activities (exercise, reading, mindfulness, playing with the kids)*



****Try NOT to procrastinate by saying "I might do it tomorrow, I'll see!"**

- ◆ *The hours you used to work, try to do creative and productive things such as online seminars, reading, working from home (for instance if you worked 9-5, try to do something productive those hours that will enrich your educational and mental world)*

Technique: *Oorganising my routine*

Morning	8:00-8:30 Breakfast (just like before quarantine) 9:00-13:00 Work schedule, productive hours (online seminars, education, reading, staying updated, online meetings)
Noon	13:00 Lunch 15:00-16:30 Relaxation (listen to music, take a nap, read a book)
Afternoon	17:00-19:00 Activities that occupy the brain: <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Gym exercises➤ Mindfulness➤ Videocalls with friends➤ Go for a walk with your pet➤ Activities with the children (for instance if they used to go to an art class at that time, try to paint something at home)
Night	19:30-21:00 Free time to do anything

Techniques for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19

👉 Everyday try to do at least one activity that you enjoy

Activities that we particularly enjoy, can be extremely helpful in terms of improving our mood, our thinking and therefore our behavior.



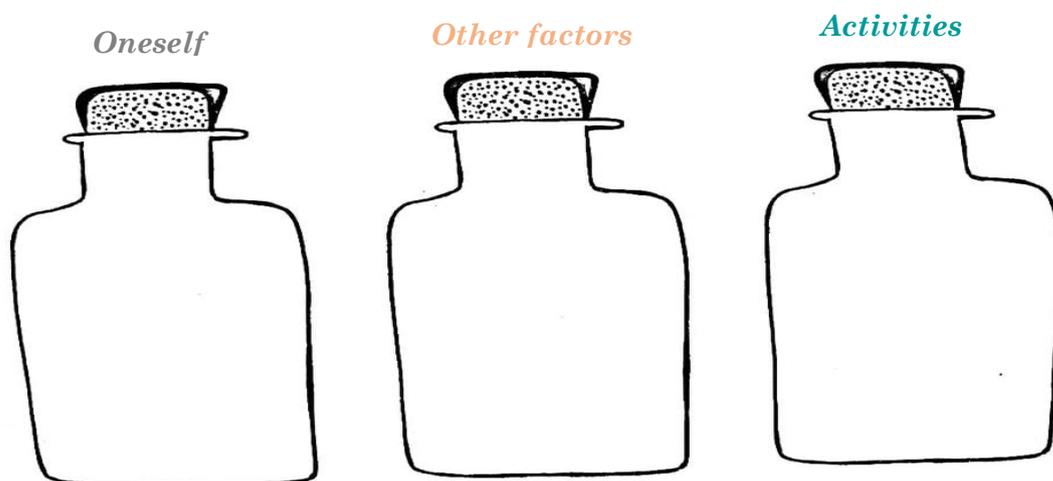
Imagine that you have three bottles, and in each bottle you have your mental reserves. Each bottle has a different content. The aim is to try and maintain your bottle full, therefore when you face a challenging situation, you have already stored mental reserves and therefore you will be able to use them in order to cope.

You can fill the first bottle by doing things exclusively for yourself (for instance keeping a diary, psychotherapy – personal development, positive self-talk).

You can fill the second bottle with the strength you gain from important people in your life, the ones who support you, help you, inspire you and “listen” to you (metaphorically and literally).

The third bottle can be filled with different activities that bring you joy like exercise, cooking, knitting, reading, listening to music, etc.

Technique: *Strengthen my mental reserves*



Source: © *Loss of life – support bridges, MERIMNA*

*** If our bottles are empty- then we are running out of mental reserves- which means it will be difficult for us to manage the current situation. Try do to at least one thing every day to either maintain or increase your mental reserves.*

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Techniques for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19

👉 Find ways to avoid over-analyzing

It is only natural that majority of our conversations at this point are mostly related with coronavirus. However, excessive thinking can easily trigger negative emotions and thoughts, making it difficult to maintain and control.

- ◆ *Avoid excessive exposure to the mass media and the social media (Facebook, twitter). Stay updated once or twice a day.*
- ◆ *Try to limit the discussion on this specific topic for a certain amount of time (for example one hour per day).*
- ◆ *Find valid and reliable sources of information.. Don't be informed by sources that you don't know if they provide valid information. Select two or three specific sources to keep you informed.*
- ◆ *When you feel like you are about to think something negative, stop yourself and say "Instead of sitting and devoting so much time to my negative thoughts, why don't I dedicate this time to something I like and enjoy?". And then start doing something that helps you divert your train of thought.*
- ◆ *Make an appointment with your non-helpful thoughts. If such thoughts occur frequently during the day, then choose a specific time, with a specific time frame for example thirty minutes – (preferably not before your night sleep) and let them overwhelm you. Within these 30 minutes bring your thoughts and emotions to the surface and process them. As soon as the thirty minutes are over say: "Our time is up, we'll talk again tomorrow". In case these thoughts come back sometime during the day, you can say: "It's not your time yet! We'll speak tomorrow in our appointment at XX:XX".*

***In this way you don't suppress your feelings, but you also don't let them overwhelm you.*

Technique: *Appointment with my negative thoughts*

Day: *Monday*

Time: *18:00 – 18:30*

10 minutes before the appointment

The thoughts that appeared the most during the day were *"What if my parents get sick?", "Why can't some people obey the rules?"*

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The way to manage them was to remind myself that it is not appointment time yet, in order to deal with these thoughts! I will deal with them during the appointment and only then!

*The feelings I said using the above management style were there to make me feel that I have more control over the situation but also relief because now I won't have to deal with something difficult **and the degree which I felt them was** control 8/10 and relief 8/10. I understand that if I didn't use this technique, the thoughts would overwhelm me to the point of feeling weak and unable to control anything 10/10 with no signs of relief.*

During the appointment

Let all the negative and stressful thoughts out and try not to avoid them.

End of the appointment

The thoughts that challenged me the most were "what if my family gets sick?", "is there anything more I can do to protect myself?", "Maybe I am not doing a good job protecting myself", "If I get sick I will lose my job".

The emotions that I am experiencing right now are "relief" because I let all my emotions out, I cried, I got angry. Right now I am feeling better because I found a way to not hold my feelings inside or overthink them. I feel "proud" because I manage to take this small but significant step (8/10).

In order to help myself calm down and relax I will take a relaxing bath, listen to my favorite music and then I will cook one of my favorite meals.

"Difficult events in our life have a role to play!

They give us a huge opportunity-

... to work with ourselves

... to develop skills

... and acquire knowledge

... to become the best version of ourselves"

*"The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**"*

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👉 **Be careful with the vocabulary you use. Try to use a positive language with optimistic meaning**

The words we use, sometimes hold more power from what we intended them to. Sometimes they can affect not only our mood, thought and behavior but also the way we deal with a situation.

- ◆ *Try to avoid words such as “restriction”, “isolation”, “prison” since they enhance the feeling of inability to control the situation.*
- ◆ *Try to use expressions such as “protection measures” or /and “precautionary measures”, where the sense of control is created as well as the active role we have in terms of responsibility and care.*

**Positive words have the effect to facilitate the adjustment and not trigger secondary and tertiary thoughts that may complicate the situation.

<i>Words I should try to avoid</i>	<i>Positive words</i>
“Isolation”	“A chance” to spend time with my favourite people.
“Restriction”	“A break” from the hectic lifestyle.
“Prison”	“My home” which I am lucky to have, and especially now I have time to clean, decorate it etc.
“I am trapped”	“I am responsible” to protect myself but also the others.
“I feel weak”	By staying home I “contribute” to the prevention of the virus.

*“The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**”*

👉 ***Identify, write down, and doubt your not helpful thoughts***

The first and one of the most important steps in order to be able to manage all those worrying thoughts is to be able and acknowledge that they truly are not helpful. Therefore, we suggest a few steps to detect such thoughts and then to convert them into helpful ones!

Observe the thoughts that appear more frequently:

- *What secondary thoughts are developed?*
- *What feelings do they create?*
- ◆ *Make a list and have them all together. At the top of the list should be the thoughts that are challenging to manage.*
- ◆ *Usually the thoughts that begin with Συνήθως οι σκέψεις που ξεκινάνε με το “what if...”, “maybe...”, “I should...”, “I could...” intensify the stress which makes it harder to manage.*
 - *“What if I have coronavirus”*
 - *“What if I get sick...”*
 - *“What if something happens to X...”*
 - *“I should (not) have done that X...”*
- ◆ *Once you have written down and collected these thoughts try to doubt them. You can tell to yourself one of the following doubtful thoughts:*
 - *“If a friend was telling me the things that I am thinking right now what would I tell her?”*
 - *“Is there some concrete evidence to confirm my thought?”*
 - *“Is there some concrete evidence that contradicts my thought?”*
 - *“Am I trying to interpret the situation based on my own assumptions?”*
- ◆ *Once you doubt them, make a list with positive and helpful alternative thoughts and remind them to yourself regularly.*

Below is an example from the technique of managing negative and non-helpful thoughts! Additionally, you will find the corresponding blank worksheet in the appendix to use.

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Technique: Management of my thoughts

1. Take notes when you feel some of the following emotions: anxiety, fear, sadness shame, in the “**Emotions**” column and evaluate their intensity from 0 (small) to 10 (large).
2. Take notes of your current situation in “**Status**” column.
3. Write down what you say to yourself about the situation and identify negative (non-helpful) thoughts. Write it in the “**Thoughts**” column.
4. Try to produce more supportive and realistic thoughts in the “**Alternative Thoughts**” column (statements such as acceptance of self, desires and wishes – try to avoid the terms “must” or “should have”).
5. Practice alternative thoughts for the next time you face negative thoughts.
6. What are the new emotions that you are experiencing? Write them down in the “**New Emotions**” column and evaluate their intensity from 0 (small) to 10 (large).

Day	Status (what am I doing exactly)	Thoughts (negative/pessimistic)	Emotions (0 – 10)	Alternative Thoughts (helpful)	New Emotions (0 – 10)
Monday	<i>I don't have anything to do to keep myself busy I am just sitting here doing absolutely nothing.</i>	<i>“What will I do if I get sick? How do I manage it?”</i>	<i>Anxiety 9/10 Pessimism 10/10</i>	<i>Right now I am fine & I protect myself by following the rules. Instead of spending time thinking “what If” I will do something that I enjoy!</i>	<i>Anxiety 5/10 Mobilization 7/10 Relief 5/10</i>
Tuesday	<i>I am on a videocall with my friends and we discuss about the current events, before that I was watching the news.</i>	<i>“We feel like prisoners, we can't meet anymore. I can't deal with not seeing my people.”</i>	<i>Sadness 9/10 Anger 9/10 Disappointment 8/10</i>	<i>“While we are dealing with a challenging situation, I am not losing contact with my favorite people. At least I can see them through a videocall.”</i>	<i>Relief 7/10 Grateful 7/10</i>

*“The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge**.”*

🗨 *Breathing exercises*

The way we breathe has a significant impact regarding the way we experience stress. Breathing is a function of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) along with digestive function, body temperature, blood pressure, etc. The Autonomic Nervous System consists of two systems: the parasympathetic and sympathetic system. The parasympathetic system is activated when we are facing a threat. It produces energy in order to help the individual to face the threat (Flight -or- fight response). Once the threat is over, the sympathetic system tries to restore the body and relaxation as it was before.

However, during this period we are under excessive stress therefore the parasympathetic system is overworked. A proper way of breathing can significantly help to reduce stress and bring some relaxation.

Breathing from the diaphragm is considered a helpful relaxation technique.

Breathing from the diaphragm can offer a variety of benefits. For instance:

- *It strengthens and improves the immune system*
- *It helps the metabolic process; due the insulin secretion being achieved more effectively - better blood sugar management*
- *It helps with insomnia, as it activates the sympathetic system and facilitates the secretion of melatonin (sleep hormone)*
- *It relaxes fast heartrate and blood pressure*
- *It helps with irritable bowel syndrome*
- *It reduces depressions, stress and anxiety since it affects the secretion of cortisol (stress hormone)*

We suggest the following breathing exercise:

4 – 7 – 8

- ◆ *Find a quiet place that relaxes you and get comfortable*
- ◆ *Place one hand on your chest and the other just below your chest, in the area where your diaphragm is located.*

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- ◆ *Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds. During the inhalation try to not move at all the hand that is located on your chest and keep your shoulders fixed. During the inhalation, ONLY your abdomen should move outwards (like we have a balloon in our abdomen and we want to inflate it).*
- ◆ *Then hold your breath for 7 seconds.*
- ◆ *Once the 7 seconds are over, exhale through the mouth for 8 seconds, while pressing your abdomen inwards (like you want to deflate the balloon).*
- ◆ *Repeat this technique seven to ten times, once or twice per day.*

***Please see the appendix for a brief explanation of the breathing exercise.*

🗨️ *Try to avoid comparing your mental states with others*

A lot of the time we tend to observe people around us and their reactions to see if our own reaction is “right”. There are no “right” or “wrong” feelings and reactions. Comparing the way you experience or/and manage the situation with that of another individual it does not make any sense since everyone is different each with has their own unique characteristics which results to a unique and special way of handling events.

When we make comparisons, thoughts like these come to mind:

“Why isn’t he anxious, while I am too anxious?”

“How can she manage her stress and I can’t?”

“I wish I was like her that she handles everything perfectly.”

When such comparisons and similar thoughts come to mind, we suggest some alternative expressions that you can say to yourself instead:

“There is absolutely no reason to compare myself with anyone else. Everyone is different and manages situations differently.”

“I cannot possibly know how everyone feels inside. Quite often what we show is very different from how we feel inside.”

“There is no right or wrong way to experience emotions. A certain situation can be easy for someone, while for someone else it can be extremely difficult and vice versa. That doesn’t mean the one has the ability manage it while the other cannot.”

👉 *Try to avoid blaming yourself for the things you do or don't*

During such difficult days, it is expected that we will not be able to do everything that we would like to. On the contrary we often do things that we don't want in a larger degree. That is completely expected considering our everyday life has changed. Consequently, we need time to adapt to the new conditions. During this time of adjustment, we may stop some of our habits (e.g. regular exercise) or restart some behaviors that we wanted to avoid (e.g. unhealthy diet).

The human body needs time and it has a right to take that time. If it gets out of control for a while that is okay too. We will try again soon.



One of the most harmful things we do to ourselves currently is to judge him; for the things that we do or the ones we don't.

We have the right to take a break for a few days or even weeks. Our character and who we are doesn't depend on whether we got out of control in terms of food consumption. In fact, increased food consumption is expected and completely acceptable these days. You are not responsible for this. There are multiple factors contributing to a certain behavior. Think about how your body and mind are trying to fit into a new routine so don't be so hard with yourself and most importantly don't rush to blame yourself.

Additionally, even intense mood swings and anger is expected therefore it is reasonable to experience some friction with the family. The goal is not to not experience stressful situations but to rather learn ways of managing them! Sometimes, nerves and irritability are created because of the feeling that we lost our productivity during this time.

Please see below the blame-free pie technique. Through the pie chart it is indicated that we end up doing more than we think. It is important to not to underestimate what we do and to not emphasize what we do.

Technique: *Blame-free pie*

The most common answer to the question "how do you spend your days?" is: "Nothing special" or "I am not doing anything" or "I am always on the couch".

The following chart will include the most common things that we do even in quarantine but we don't notice because are considered obvious things to do. But they are not! Because all of these require effort. They are not implied. They are a choice. The other choice is quitting and being passive.

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After all, all of these are not “nothing”! In the appendix you will find an empty pie that you can fill with the things you usually do these days. You will see that in the end that you did much more than you thought. In that way you will understand that you do not need to burden yourself with guilt and blame for not doing much!

***Note: This particular technique can be used in other cases, not just for daily activities. For example you can use it in cases you feel guilty about your food consumption while recording different factors that lead you to doing it. You can also use it in any situation that you find challenging and brings you negative feelings.

**You can also use it as a record of negative thoughts and factors that contribute to these thoughts.

APPENDIX

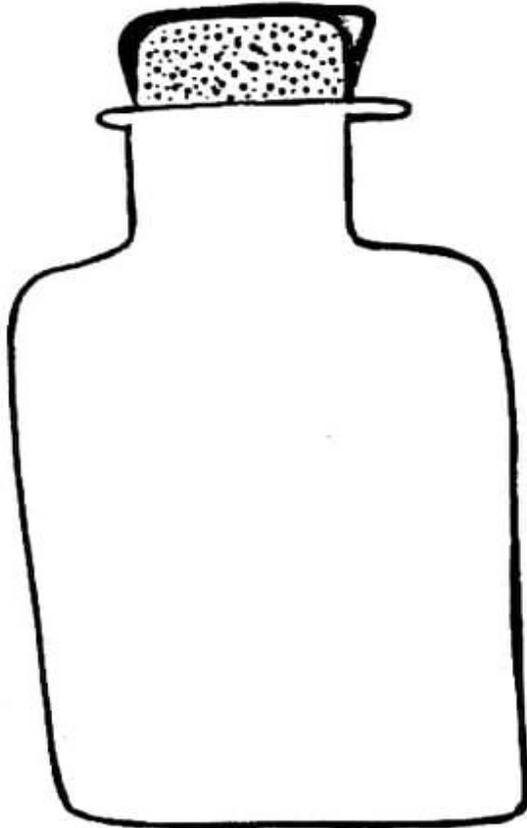
Technique: *Organisation of my routine*

<i>Day:</i>	
<i>Morning</i>	
<i>Noon</i>	
<i>Afternoon</i>	
<i>Night</i>	

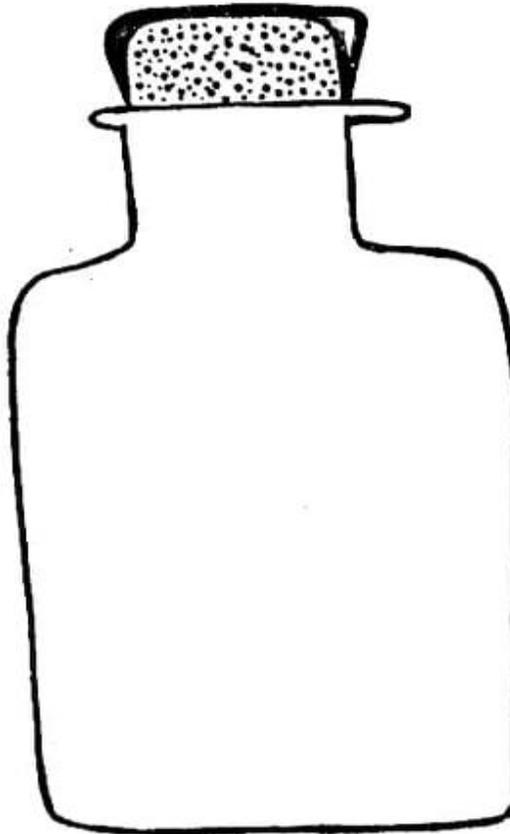
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Technique: *Strengthen my mental reserves*

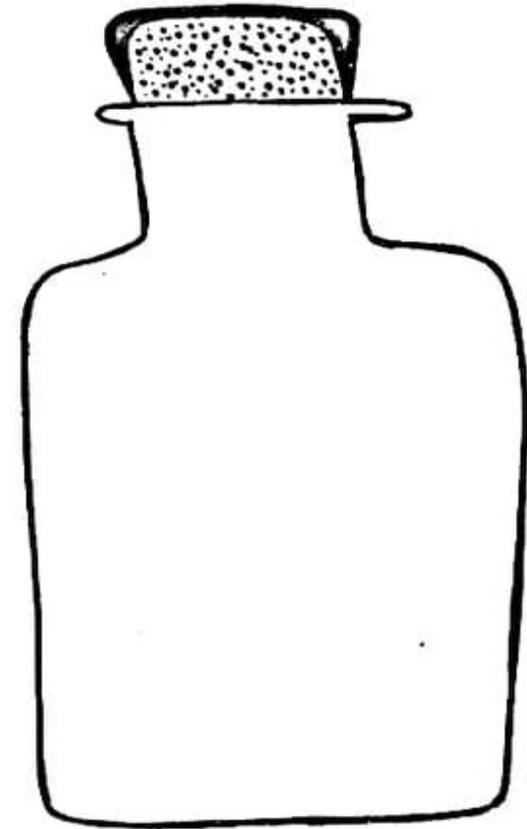
Oneself



Other Factors



Activities



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Date: *Appointment with my negative thoughts*

<i>Day:</i>
<i>Time:</i>
<i>10 minutes before the appointment</i>
<i>Thoughts that appeared the most during the day:</i>
<i>How did I manage them?</i>
<i>The emotions that I said using the above method were and the degree which I experience them was:</i>
<i>During the appointment</i>
<i>Let all the difficult and stressful thoughts to come out and try not to avoid them.</i>
<i>At the end of the appointment</i>
<i>Thoughts that bothered me the most:</i>
<i>The emotions that I am experiencing right now are:</i>
<i>Now, I will do something to help myself relax and calm down which is:</i>

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Technique: *Management of my thoughts*

7. Take notes when you feel some of the following emotions: anxiety, fear, sadness shame, in the **“Emotions”** column and evaluate their intensity from 0 (small) to 10 (large).
8. Take notes of your current situation in **“Status”** column.
9. Write down what you say to yourself about the situation and identify negative (non-helpful) thoughts. Write it in the **“Thoughts”** column.
10. Try to produce more supportive and realistic thoughts in the **“Alternative Thoughts”** column (statements such as acceptance of self, desires and wishes – try to avoid the terms “must” or “should have”).
11. Practice alternative thoughts for the next time you face negative thoughts.
12. What are the new emotions that you are experiencing? Write them down in the **“New Emotions”** column and evaluate their intensity from 0 (small) to 10 (large).

Day	Status (what am I doing exactly)	Thoughts (negative/pessimistic)	Emotions (0 – 10)	Alternative Thoughts (helpful)	New Emotions (0 – 10)
<i>Monday</i>					
<i>Tuesday</i>					

*“The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**”*

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<i>Wednesday</i>					
<i>Thursday</i>					
<i>Friday</i>					
<i>Saturday</i>					
<i>Sunday</i>					

*"The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**"*

Technique: *Breathing exercise*

4 – 7 – 8

- ◆ Inhale for 4 seconds through the nose while at the same time push the abdomen outwards as if we have a balloon in our abdomen and we want it to inflate it
- ◆ Hold your breath for 7 seconds
- ◆ Exhale for 8 seconds while taking the air through the mouth and pushing our abdomen inwards like we want to deflate the balloon.
- ◆ Repeat a few times, once or twice per day

Techniques for managing stress and negative thoughts during covid-19

Technique: *Blame-free pie*

Make a list with the activities/thoughts/behaviors you do everyday and then indicate how much space each one has on the chart

List:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)



What are your conclusions now, after seeing the demonstration on the chart and realizing you did more than you thought, are there many factors affecting that or just one?

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*“The best tool to deal with fear is **knowledge.**”*

Important note:

This manual is by no means a substitute of psychotherapeutic interventions. If you are experiencing mental health issues, we suggest you consult a mental health professional in order to create together a personalized intervention plan for your own unique needs. Don't just rely on these techniques they might not suit you. Do not hesitate to ask for help if you face issues that make it difficult for you to cope. The specialist will be able to provide you with scientifically proven techniques that will help you manage more effectively your personal worries and concerns.

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In a difficult situation don't feel pressure to be fine. Just try to feel a bit better in comparison to what you already feel.

The point isn't to not break down by your situation but to get stronger through it”

Thank you very much for reading this manual! We appreciate your support and we don't take it for granted!

