

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Health Matters During Tumultuous Times

We saw a meme recently that said: “If 2020 was a drink, it would be...colonoscopy prep.” This has been a rough year, and it’s only June. We have faced pandemic, acts of human injustice and resulting protests, closing of schools and college campuses sending our children home for months, floods, natural disasters, community shut downs, economic decline, murder hornets, and some of us have even lost our jobs. All of it has taken a toll on our brain and physical health.

When it comes to risk factors for brain and physical health, among the top of the list is stress. Not so much the stress itself, but *our mental, physical and emotional response to the stress*. We all feel stress from time to time, but if we are not resilient in our response to stress, it is not healthy for our brain or our body. According to the American Institute of Stress, chronic unmanaged stress accounts for up to 90 percent of doctors’ visits.

The stress we are currently experiencing may seem especially traumatic because the stressors seem outside of our control, long-term, and unending. Florida is now in Phase 2 of recovery, and it may be difficult for some of us to move on. Much of our ability to move on, or not, is related to our *response* to the stress and the resulting physiological experience of the stress we are enduring in our brain and body. There are ways to optimize our experience of stress, increasing our brain health and fighting brain illness as we try to find our “new normal.” To regain some sense of control, ask yourself, how you can be part of the solution? How can you help your family, friends, colleagues, neighbors and greater community?

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Here are a few ideas that may help build your resilience to your stress and help you thrive during this tumultuous time. For each of the following, you may want to read [previous Brain Health BOOSTS! for more information](#).

Step back from the news. Stay informed, but don't immerse yourself in the 24-hour news cycle. Check the news periodically, know when to turn it off — and be careful about spending too much time on social media. Try to be aware of when your mind and body are telling you that you have had enough, and then do something else. Maybe go for a walk, listen to music, or exercise.

Take control. If what is happening in the world makes you feel helpless, find activities where you feel in control. Find a hobby, volunteer and serve in the community, reach out to the lonely, or maybe tackle that home improvement project you have been putting off. Or take an online class to learn a new skill. Whatever it is, find something that puts you in back charge.

Maintain a routine. Routine is a family's best friend. Routine means safe and predictable. Knowing what to expect and knowing what's going to happen next as much as possible are very important, especially during challenging times.

Be active. Regular, moderate exercise gets the blood pumping, starts boosting your mood and immune system functioning, and lowers stress.

Support one another. Find ways that work for you and yours to share comfort. Be together meaningfully. Go outside and play, enjoy nature and really notice your beautiful surroundings. Share smiles and laughter. Prepare comfort food and have family meals together. Read a bedtime book together. Talk about each family member's feelings, if they want to share. Communicate openly, honestly, and frequently about each other's experience.

Stay connected. Video conferencing has replaced the meeting at many workplaces, but it provides you an opportunity to stay connected to your colleagues while working remotely. Phone calls and apps, such as FaceTime, also provide a great way to stay connected to friends and distant family.

Experience or Express yourself through the Arts. There is an increasing amount of scientific evidence that demonstrates that the arts enhance brain function, including lessening the effects of stress. For example, experiencing or expressing oneself through the arts can increase positive emotions, actually raising the level of serotonin (the hormone that helps to regulate mood, well-being and happiness, among other important functions).

Give yourself a break. It takes time to get over a traumatic event, so give yourself time to grieve. Grief comes in many forms and can include the loss of an opportunity, or not being able to follow through on planned activities. It's OK to grieve those losses and start making plans to move past them. Find a way to look ahead to better times.

Listen to music Music has the power to enhance positive emotions and moods very quickly. Fun, upbeat music can help us maintain a positive outlook. Spontaneously dance or sing! Playing soothing music in the background as you go throughout your



day at work and at home can help increase feelings of calm and peace. All the BHI Playlists are posted on the [Brain Health BOOSTS!](#) webpage

Find humor. Having a sense of humor gives the brain an opportunity to rest and find relief in present-moment stressful experiences. It is possible to train your brain to see and experience more humor.

Look for the silver lining. To say better days are coming may sound trite and unhelpful, but evidence shows that positive and grateful thinking and being able to reframe a situation in more positive terms can help us become more resilient. The door may have closed on our plans for the first half of 2020 but perhaps a window has opened for the second half of this year.

Get help. Don't let your stress or fear become depression or anxiety. If your sadness goes on for several weeks, or starts to impact your home and work life, find professional help.

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.

To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).