

Hello AENC Members,

I hope that all of you are staying safe and well. The AENC staff invited me to share my thoughts about maintaining your mental health during these difficult times. I am therefore sharing a few tips, but I also encourage you to consider your own strategies since you are the best judge of what will be most effective for you.

First, “social distancing” should not mean isolation. Some people in my profession prefer to call it “physical distancing” because the more common term implies that we must be socially isolated. Social media and telecommunications apps allow us to remain connected in ways that were not possible twenty years ago, and it is important to take advantage of those technologies. Instead of only texting or talking by phone, use FaceTime, Skype, or another platform that will allow you to see the other person’s face just as you would if you were not physically distancing. While we use technology to remain socially connected, we should avoid potentially negative effects that can result from using technology excessively or operating technologies that cause stress (Kennedy & Baker, 2016).

Second, practicing self-care is critical when dealing with stressful situations. We all take care of ourselves in different ways, so it is important to first reflect on what will work best for you and then consider the many options that are available to you. Exercise is a common outlet, and [some fitness companies are providing free workouts](#) during the crisis (Olick, 2020). Even taking walks around your neighborhood and talking to neighbors at a distance may help you feel less isolated and remind you that everyone else is in a similar situation. If you enjoy music or stand-up comedy, billboard.com has created [a list of artists who will be performing virtually](#) (Billboard Staff, 2020). Finally, helping others may be a source of self-care for you, and you can find [some suggestions for “random acts of kindness”](#) compiled by the Mental Health Foundation

(2020).

As we and many others cope with circumstances that can seem overwhelming, mental health concerns such as depression will understandably become more prevalent. You may experience anxiety, sadness, and/or a sense of hopelessness. This is normal during such trying times, and it is important to accept your emotions instead of refusing to acknowledge them. In [an article in the Washington Post](#), Dr. Jelena Kecmanovic recommends that we “notice negative emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations as they come up, look into them with curiosity, describe them without judgment and then let them go” (Kecmanovic, 2020). This is the essence of “mindfulness,” which involves focusing on the present and accepting oneself and the way one feels non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Apps such as Aura, Calm, and Headspace can help you to practice mindfulness at home (Fulton, 2020).

If mental health concerns begin to affect your daily life, it will be important to seek help. If you decide that you would like to speak with a professional counselor or psychologist, many practitioners are now offering services virtually. The concept of meeting with a psychologist or counselor online may seem strange, but research has shown that “telemental health counseling” is just as effective as in-person counseling (Hilty et al., 2013). If you are trying to verify whether a professional has been trained to offer telemental health counseling, common credentials are the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) [Board Certified TeleMental Health Provider Credential \(BC-TMH\)](#) and PESI Inc.’s [course on “Telehealth for Mental Health Professionals.”](#) An important resource for everyone to know about is the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) (1-800-273-TALK), which provides support 24 hours a day.

My colleague Dr. Cheryl Fulton recently led a webinar for the North Carolina Dental Society. The last part of her presentation focused on mindfulness, and in response to a question

about how often people should engage in mindfulness activities, she replied, “I think that if you can do it every day, that is actually the best thing, even if it is just a few minutes a day” (Fulton, 2020). Dr. Fulton acknowledged that, as with physical exercise, getting into a daily routine of taking care of one’s mental health can be challenging. I agree that it can be difficult, but I encourage each of you to consider how you can make supporting mental health a regular priority for yourself, your family, and the members of your staff. A phrase that may be starting to sound like a cliché, but which remains accurate, is that “we are all in this together.”

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