

Pandemic Toolkit For Mental Health



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If you're struggling to keep your anxiety and depression at bay while the pandemic continues to surge, you're not alone. We are collectively living through a very traumatic time, so it's easy to understand why you may be feeling heightened. And to those of us who are experiencing an especially difficult time I want to say this to you: through nearly 20 years of counseling clients through their darkest hours to their greatest bliss, I have come to recognize that challenges are opportunities for growth, healing, and development. Hardships promote insight, awareness, compassion, strength, resilience, and wisdom.

And, I know that during times of crisis, it can be more difficult to find the motivation to take care of yourself or stay positive. And, that is okay. It is okay to not have the best and brightest day every day. Our jobs are to feel our feelings and then move on and grow. I hope that this toolkit gives you the information and tips you need to feel empowered and in control of your own day.

Tip 1 Feel Your Feelings

Feelings are waves of energy we experience in the body, If they are not properly expressed, they may result in mental or physical illness.

In order to fully get past anything, we have to take a moment to be present and aligned with what our bodies, minds, and habits are telling us. That's why it is so important to recognize and understand our triggers and warning signs. We know that the ongoing pandemic and social isolation is a huge external factor affecting our daily lives but let's take a moment to look at some internal stressors.



- **Unrealistic Expectations:** You're working from home, maintaining care for yourself and potentially your family, and taking care of the upkeep and responsibilities of being an adult during a global pandemic. Having ups and downs, good days and bad is to be expected—and normal.



- **Negative Attitudes and Feelings:** Maybe you didn't complete a task on time at work and it took over your thoughts and worries which then lead to dishes still in the sink from three days ago. This is just one example of the ways in which negative attitudes and feelings can infiltrate our thoughts and quickly take over.



- **Self-Sabotaging Behaviors:** Procrastination, being consistently late to work and meetings, and stress eating are a few examples. These behaviors create more problems, and more stress, in our lives.



- **Poor Self-Care Habits:** Lack of sleep, water, and food come to mind here. Not providing yourself with the essentials for survival—especially during this challenging season—is incredibly detrimental to ourselves and our health.

All of these factors, both external and internal, can cause stress and burnout. Stress is the body's physical and psychological response to anything perceived as overwhelming. It's the way we communicate with ourselves. And, I know--we almost instinctively want to shoo away stress and ignore its presence but I think doing the opposite is actually crucial in living a happier and calmer life.

Stress is our body's way of telling us to slow down! And, we should listen to it.

Ignoring this queue can eventually lead to burnout. Burnout is a state of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. And, for many of us, this is where we are at, right now. The pandemic has flipped out lives upside down for a whole year! Here are some signs and symptoms of burnout to look out for:

Feeling Of:

Powerlessness
Hopelessness
Detachment
Isolation
Irritability
Frustration
Failure
Despair
Cynicism
Apathy
Emotional exhaustion

A Decrease In:

Self-esteem
Concentration
Memory

An Increase In:

Errors
Absenteeism
Hypochondria
Sleep disruption

If these are symptoms you are experiencing, I want to make two things clear:

**You are
not alone**

1

&

**This is not
your fault!**

2

What we must do now is recognize these two things and move on. The way to do that is to focus on what we can change--things like your thoughts, actions, emotions, behaviors. And, let go of things you can't--like other people's thoughts/actions, COVID-19, outcomes, the weather, etc.

***“If you don’t like something, change it.
If you can’t change it, change your attitude.”***

Maya Angelou

Meditation, yoga, and other mindfulness practices facilitate our collective consciousness and the evolution of our society.

Mindfulness is maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment. It's our ability to pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them and to keep our senses in the present moment. And, the best part is:

Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere, anytime

When we are at peace and empowered internally, we can live a more peaceful and empowered life with others. Practicing mindfulness also:

- Enhances relationships
- Improves job performance
- Reduces chronic pain
- Increases focus and attention, and improves decision-making skills
- Improves creativity, memory, and cognitive flexibility
- Improves mood, empathy, and overall quality of life
- Boosts immune system
- Decreases anxiety, stress, depression, tiredness, and irritability
- Increases emotional intelligence
- Encourages healthier eating habits
- Improves heart and circulatory health
- Aids in recovery from substance use
- Improves sleep
- Increases financial well-being

And look, I get it, slowing down in a world that praises productivity, multitasking, and busyness is a big step to take it. But, I'm here to tell you that it's a necessary step to take. According to Stanford University "[Cognitive Control in Media Multi-Taskers](#)" study, The disease of being busy & multi-tasking:

- Hampers Creativity
- Drains Energy
- Reduces Wellbeing
- Reduces Efficiency
- Kills Prioritization
- Decreases Quality
- Shrinks Brain

Multitasking and constantly focusing on what to do next actually affect your performance in the present. So, slow down to increase your productivity and quality of work.

Here are some practical ways to start practicing mindfulness now and start seeing the quality of your days improve:



Progressive Muscle Relaxation: This is an activity where you actively tense a specific group of muscles when you breathe in, and then release the muscle tension and breath simultaneously. This is a great stress management tool.



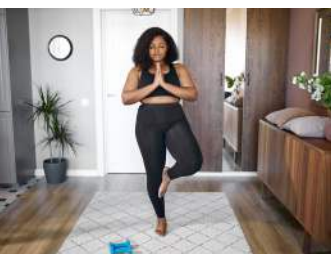
Unplugging From Technology: Taking brain breaks where you set your phone and laptop down and go outside or read a book is necessary. It helps us reset our headspace and can provide much-needed relief to our eyes and minds.



Listening & Using Your Senses: Taste, touch, smell, seeing, and hearing can bring you back down to reality in moments of overwhelm. Using your senses to restore balance and calm is useful also if you're experiencing panic or anxiety attacks. But relying on the senses to make you more aware of your surroundings is a key strategy.



Mindful Eating & Spending: Being aware of what foods fuel you and help you feel your best is essential. The same applies to money. Prioritizing what makes you feel good while maintaining an awareness of what your needs are is important.



Yoga: Yoga improves strength, resilience, balance, and flexibility. The experience of the “flow” state in yogic promotes connection with prana (life force or vitality.). These skills and experiences can be transformative on many levels in life—psychologically, personally, relationally, sexually, spiritually, and professionally.



Breathing: Something so simple with such profound benefits on our minds and our heart, yet so often overlooked. Taking deep, cleansing breaths in moments of overwhelm is a great way to reconnect to yourself.



Body Scan: This can be done in tandem with breathing exercises. Close your eyes and do a head-to-toe scan, checking in with all parts of your body. Notice areas of tension and clenching and where there is room for release.



Positive Mantra: There is power in having a mantra that brings you back to yourself when you get wrapped up in the chaos of the world. Closing your eyes and silently repeating the mantra can raise your self-awareness.



Connection to Nature: Step outside, breathe fresh air, and listen to the world around you. Tune everything else out, and tune in to nature.



Meditation: There are so many amazing meditation resources widely available. Meditation is a great way to silence the thoughts in your brain and focus on yourself and the voice within. Meditations are powerful and can be tailored to specific mindsets, including gratitude, abundance, peace and calm, and so many more.



Plan for Mindful Breaks: Incorporating these breaks into your daily routine is crucial for maintaining mental health and making it a priority. Even 5 minutes every couple of hours goes a long way and can help you reset throughout the day.



Switch Off Distractions: Setting boundaries to turn off technology and external distractions when you focus on your mindfulness practices is key. This will give you the focus you need to take care of YOU!



Be a Single-Tasker: While doing multiple tasks at once is great, sometimes it's more important to focus on one task at a time. This can allow for greater focus and clarity, especially if it's a mindfulness practice!



Pay Attention to the People Around You: Those who you surround yourself with often have the biggest impact on you. So focus on filling your inner circle with those who are as invested in your well-being as you are and who will support your mindfulness journey.

As a bonus, I wanted to include some of my favorite yoga poses!

POSE 1

Easy Pose

Promotes grounding and calm. Imagine you sit bones rooting into the earth. Lift the crown of your head up to the sky. Bring your shoulders down and back. Gently tuck your chin. Connect with your breath. Breathe in what you need, such as peace, strength or serenity and breathe out what is no longer serving you. This is a great pose for meditation. I love apps like Calm, Headspace and Peloton for guided meditations but there are free ones available on YouTube as well.



POSE 2

Child's Pose

Promotes grounding and release. Start on your hands and knees, with your knees mat width apart. Gently sit back on your heels and slide your arms forward, reaching your hands to the front of the mat and lowering your hips down and body to the mat. This stretch (first image) helps you lengthen and releases tension in the back and side body. When I am feeling overwhelmed, overstimulated, and vulnerable, I find that pulling my arms backwards and gripping my heels (second image) makes me feel like I am in a safe cocoon. Either way, this pose helps me surrender and let go of all I can not control. It helps me connect with the earth and my breath and body, stretch, release and rest.



Image 1



Image 2

POSE 3

Warrior Two

Warrior Two is empowering! The pose helps you tap into your strength and balance and helps you know you can handle any challenges coming your way. Place your right foot facing forward at the top of the mat and step your left leg back with your foot on a 45 degree angle. Lunge deeply. Make sure the heel of your front would align with the arch of your left foot if you were on a balance beam. Make sure your hips align with the side of the mat you are facing. Extend your arms out to your sides, parallel to the floor. Hold your upper body strong and look over the middle finger of your front hand. Feel your feet rooted into the earth. Feel the strength in your legs, back, shoulders and arms. Know you are strong, balanced, and capable and can handle any challenges coming your way. After holding this position for five cycles of deep breath, swivel your direction on the mat so you are facing the other way with your left foot in front and repeat.



POSE 4

Savasana or Corpse Pose

This pose is used for relaxation, often at the end of a yoga practice. Rest your feet at the outside edges of the mat and let your legs flop outward. Tuck your shoulder blades in and let your arms flop at your sides in a slight V position. The hands are usually left open and facing upward to embody receiving all that you need. If you need more grounding, you can lay your hands downward to connect with the earth. This pose is also good for meditation, especially if you have been sitting a lot or are feeling very depleted. I love using essential oils, such as lavender to promote relaxation.



And, two of my favorite apps to help you release and relax:

- Calm ([30-Day Free Trial](#))
- Headspace ([2-Week Free Trial](#))

“Be as least as interested in what goes on inside you as what happens outside. If you get the inside right, the outside will fall into place.”

Eckhart Tolle, The Power of Now

Tip 3

Work Self-Care Into Your Routines

You must care enough about yourself to welcome the life you deserve.

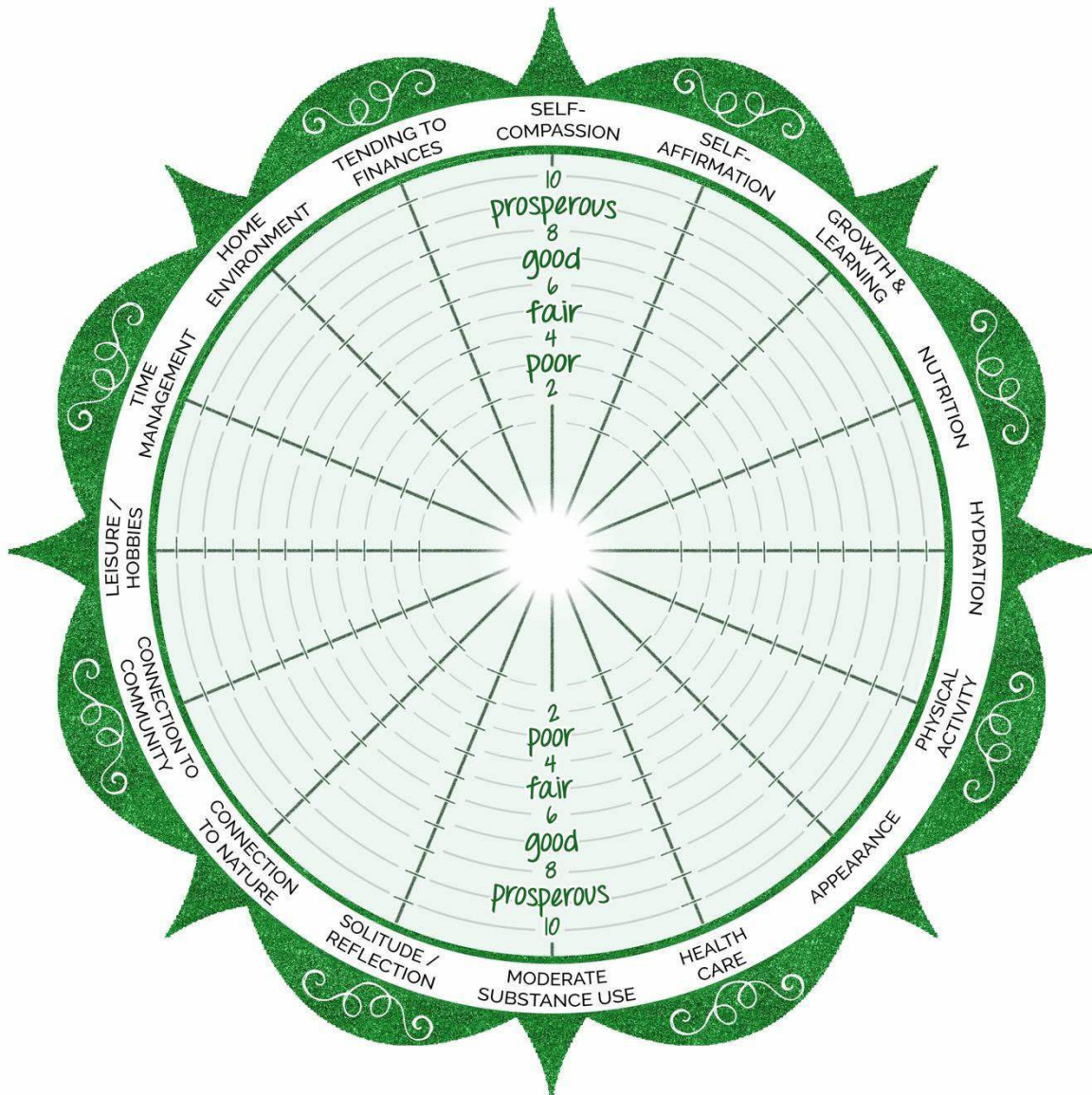
There’s no doubt, we are living in uncertain times. With news of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) constantly filling everyone’s newsfeed, people are unsure and nervous about what may happen next. It’s hard not to think about how this could impact you and your loved ones, and the rest of the world- and how it may continue to impact us all.

Take a deep breath. Give yourself a moment to reset. Now is the time for all of us to support each other and try to make the best of an unexpected situation. And, this starts with taking care of yourself.

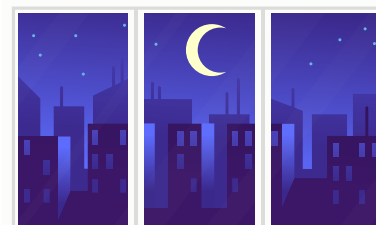
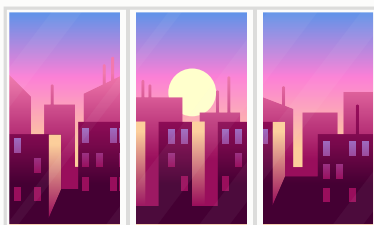
Prioritizing your own-wellbeing is crucial in maintaining your mental health, especially in a time where everything around us is constantly changing. Take a moment now to use this self-love wheel to assess where you stand in some of these major aspects of self-care.



The Self-Love Wheel



Don't be embarrassed or ashamed, we all are going to lack some of these categories. I know, I can say that there are plenty on this wheel I am still trying to improve every day. Here are some of my tips on how I do that:



Morning

- Start every day with a self-loving affirmation: I am worthy, I am loved, and I am enough.
- Drink a whole glass of water, first thing.
- Open my curtains/expose myself to sunlight.
- Even if not going nowhere that day, are just attending Zoom calls, or taking a day to rest, change out of pajamas.
- Take time with breakfast and try not to rush it

Afternoon

- Schedule in time for yoga or another exercise regiments
- Keep track of water intake by marking water bottle
- Choose healthy snacks over junk food
- Have a hard stop time for work to leave room for passion projects / relaxing
- If the weather allows, take a walk at least once a day.

Night

- Take time to release all the stresses of that day and welcome a new day.
- Sleep at the same time every day even if you don't have to get up early the next day
- Turn off screens at least an hour before bed.
- Take care of skin and replenish before going to bed
- Turn off all lights

“You can search throughout the entire universe for somebody who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”

Buddha

Practicing gratitude is important because it trains the brain to look at the good parts in any situation, reinforcing a positive attitude as well as resilience.

We are slogging through an incredibly difficult season. Acknowledging the pain and suffering is a must. Those feelings are valid and we have to honor them. And doing so will also make space to welcome feelings of gratitude and positivity. Gratitude promotes positive thinking which attracts good energy. Using this train of thought to shift our thinking will also change our attitude towards our days. After all, we are an outcome of our thoughts--so, positive thoughts lead to positive people.

Take the time to notice all the good parts of today. I find when I do this, I instantly feel better.

Here are some things I often look to when I want to practice gratefulness:

- Health
- Safety
- Family
- Food
- Clothing
- Shelter
- Water
- New beginnings and opportunities

Being consciously grateful has instant benefits but is also shaping our mindset to be more resilient in tough times. Resilience is our ability to bounce back from unexpected events or stressful situations. It allows us to feel empowered, have better relationships, and grow. Resilience is our strength to continue on the path which we know to be true, despite obstacles and challenges. And, in times like the current, having an internal compass like this is crucial. Resilient people:

- Understand that challenges are a part of life
- Promote health and wellbeing
- Enjoy connection & collaboration
- Are open, flexible, and adaptive
- Are emotionally intelligent
- View challenges as opportunities
- Learn from mistakes
- Avoid worrying
- Have a sense of humor even when stressed

Besides staying positive in our thoughts and being grateful, how does one become more resilient? The answer, although simple, takes an immense amount of strength and perseverance. And it is:

Just keep going.

And, I'm here to say: I am proud of you. I am proud of you for putting one step in front of the other and forging on. It is not easy but, you're doing it and you can keep doing it. You got this.

“Life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for the evolution of your consciousness.”

Eckhart Tolle

Tip 5

Ask For Help

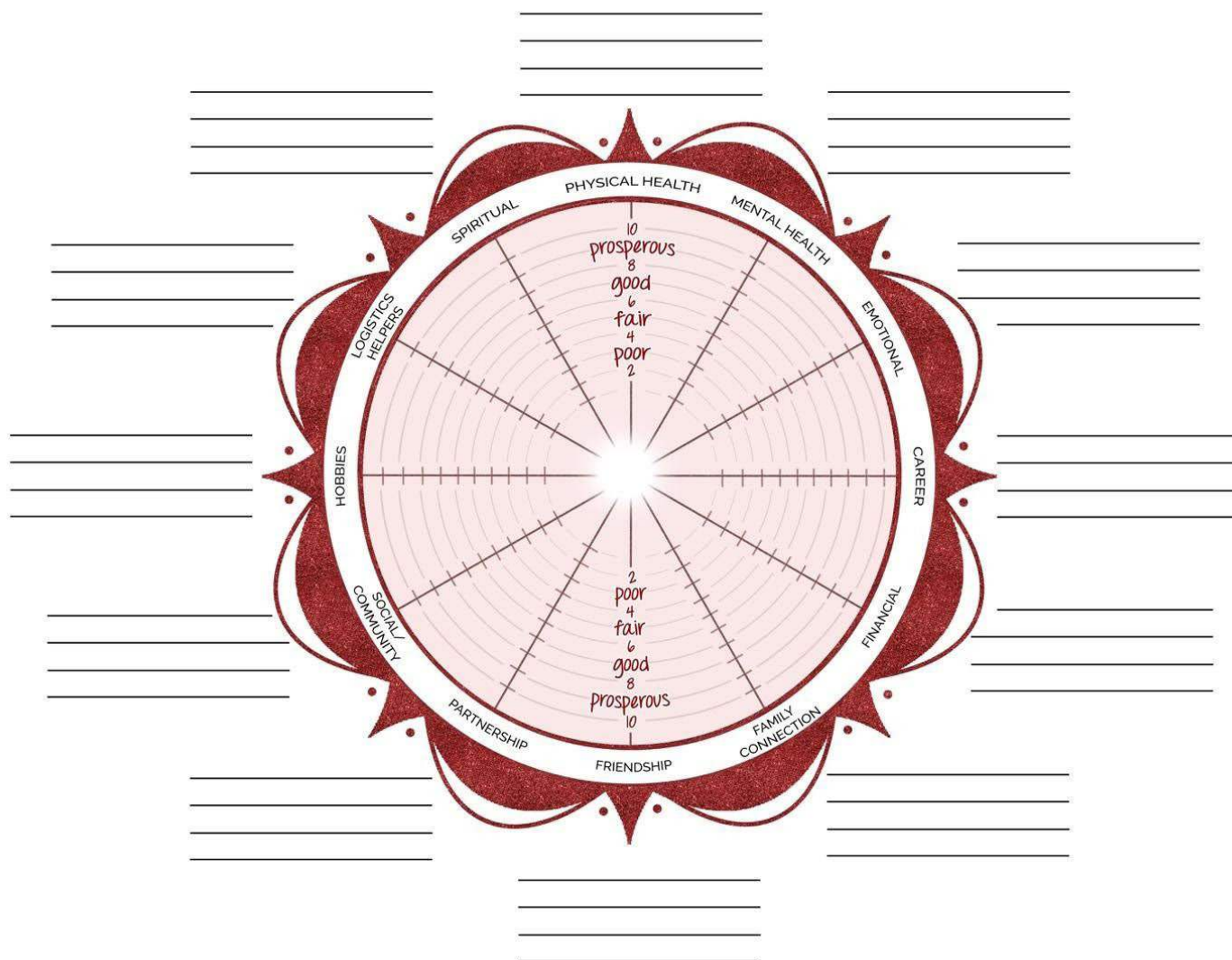
We all can benefit from therapy or counseling at different points in our lives as we deal with issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression that are common aspects of the human condition.

Believe it or not, knowing when to ask for help is one of the most emotionally intellectual acts a person can do! There is no shame in needing help to work through your emotions, your stresses, your problems, your everything else! Having a good support system is crucial in creating a positive and healthy environment.

The activity below will help you think about your own support wheel and identify areas in which asking for more help can be beneficial:

Each spoke of the wheel represents a different category or aspect of your support network. On the lines under each category, write down the names of the people who provide you with this type of support.

On each spoke of the support wheel, there are “tick” marks. They go from one to ten. After placing your tick marks on each, connect the tick marks to create a circle. This will provide a visual of any “dents” in your wheel or areas of needed support.



Definitions for each type can be found [here](#).

The goal is to have a large, and well-balanced, and round wheel of support. And, right now, it may be that some areas are lacking and that is okay. The first step was to realize that and now we can work on improving lost connections and fostering meaningful relationships. I understand that this may be a little more challenging as there are still travel restrictions and social distancing protocols in place, but it is not impossible. Here are some conversations starters to check-in and reconnect with loved ones:

- How is your heart?
- How are you taking care of yourself?
- Is there anything I can do to support you?
- I know times are tough, so I wanted to check in with you.
- What has been helping you most recently?
- I wanted to reach out and let you know I'm thinking about you.

Having a strong support system is so important but sometimes even that is not enough and again, that is okay! As a therapist, I hope to educate people that therapy can help them overcome or better manage issues, align with their authentic selves, and increase their happiness and success both personally and professionally. I love being part of a ripple effect of so much healing and positive change in our communities!

Many therapists are offering video-conferencing if you don't feel comfortable meeting face-to-face. Here are some resources for you to look into:

- [Find a Mental Health Facility Near You](#)
- [United Healthcare](#) has launched a free (to anyone) 24/7 support line staffed by mental health experts: Call 866-342-6292
- Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a [Crisis Counselor](#)
- The NAMI HelpLine: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or info@nami.org
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255
- Most insurance companies are covering teletherapy and some like Aetna have waived copays for telemedicine.
- [PsychologyToday's Find-A-Therapist Directory](#)
- [Urban Balance](#) is an insurance-friendly counseling practice with 8 offices in Chicagoland, 3 in Denver, 2 in Dallas, 1 in St. Louis, and 1 in Louisville that provides teletherapy.