

Embracing Uncertainty

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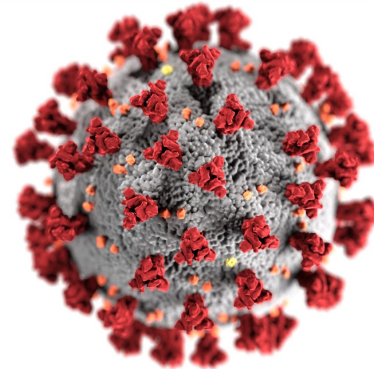
Objectives

- Identify and normalize the various reactions to the current stressful circumstances.
- Understand the reciprocal relationship between the desire for certainty and higher anxiety.
- Illustrate how to be more embracing of uncertainty and deal with anxiety/worry that result from it.
- Identify other practical strategies for coping.

Crisis, Stress, and the Struggle for Control and Certainty

The Crisis: A Disruptive Existential Threat

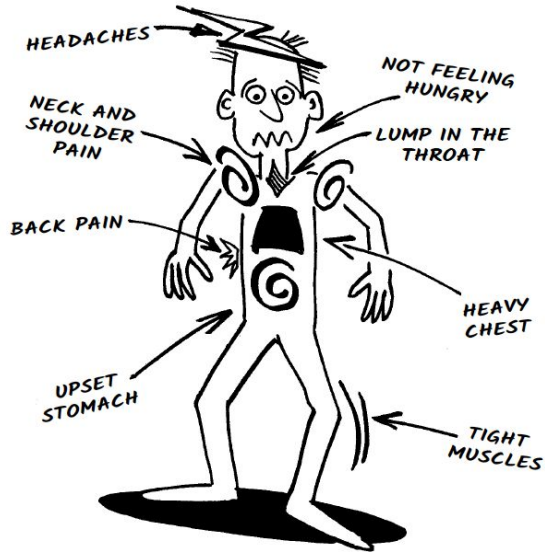
- Financial
- Employment and job security
- Health and safety of self and loved ones
- Grief and loss
- Isolation and loneliness
- Hostility and discrimination from others
- Stress
- Dealing with others/conflict
- Childcare
- Racial injustice
- Impact of past traumas



Reactions to Stress

- Racing thoughts
- Increased heart rate,
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Body discomfort
- Restlessness
- Nausea
- Hypervigilance
- Irritability
- Inability to focus
- Fatigue
- Fear
- Problems sleeping

Reactions to Stress



Other people find their body gets sick – skin rashes, infections, illnesses or bowel problems.

When they are stressed, many people ...

...cannot focus



...get angry easily



...cannot sit still



...have difficulty sleeping



...feel sad or guilty



...worry



...cry



...feel very tired



...have changes in appetite.

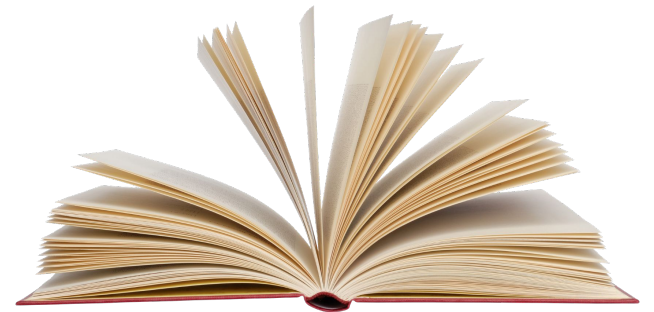


Certainty and Control

- Human beings crave security and certainty.
- Provides a sense of control.

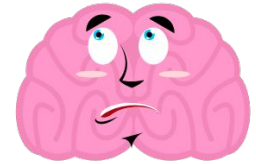
But....

- How much do we really have control over?
- Lots of uncertainty that we already accept.
- As a species, we've been here before.
- What would life be like if everything was certain?



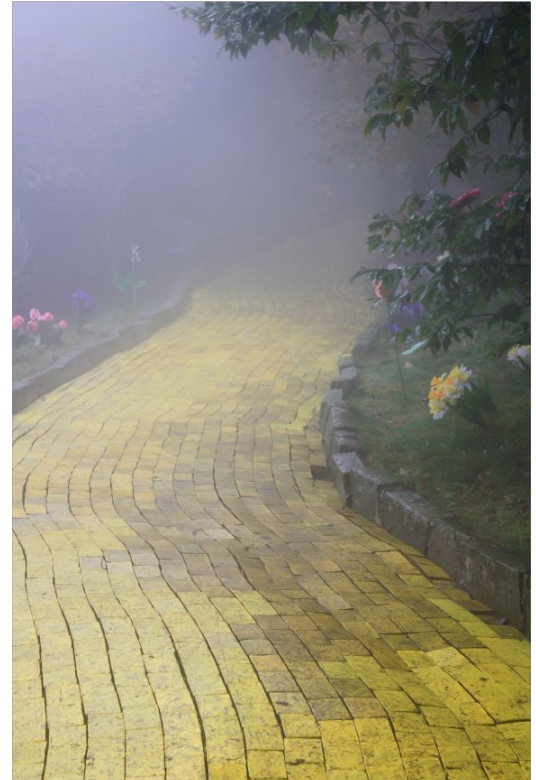
Future-Oriented Thinking

- Your brain's #1 job = don't get killed.
- Errs on the side of perceiving threats.
- This means protecting oneself and similar others.
- Chill cavemen/cavewomen didn't survive.
- Planning, preparing for foreseeable threats and problems gives us a survival advantage.
- All of these physiological and emotional reactions serve a purpose: **SURVIVAL.**



Is life supposed to be so certain?

- We differ in openness to change and uncertainty.
- What might be the downside of expecting a yellow brick road?
- What risks do we take and uncertainties do we normally accept without even thinking about it?
- The unexpected is expected.



The Upside of a Crisis

- Potential to facilitate social cooperation and cohesiveness toward a higher purpose
- New opportunities
- Innovation
- Gain perspective: what really matters?
- Opportunity to reaffirm values



Existential Awareness

- Death or the threat of death reminds us that our lives are finite.
- This naturally challenges us to reevaluate what we are doing with the time we have, offering us an opportunity to reflect on what really matters and whether our behavior aligns with it. meaning, purpose, values.
- Spirituality and Connection



Reaffirming Values

- What do you want to stand for in the face of this crisis?
- What sort of person do you want to be, as you go through this?
- How do you want to treat yourself and others?
- Look for ways to ‘sprinkle’ these values into your day. Let them guide and motivate your committed action.



“....If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children ... not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.” [3] ---C. S. Lewis

WORRY:
*What is it
Good For?*



Worry--what is it good for?

What if... (fill in catastrophe here)???

Anything can trigger worry

- news
- a word (“cancer”)
- phone call
- physical sensation

Even when things are going OK, you might wonder, “but what if it all falls apart?” I need to be vigilant!



Catastrophizing: worry that is a misuse of your imagination.

Imagining worst case scenarios and living it in your mind as if it is happening right now.

- Overestimating how bad it will be.
- Underestimating your ability to cope.



...meanwhile you might just be sitting in a chair.

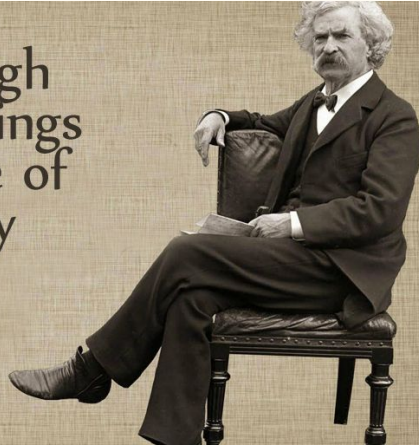
Dysfunctional Beliefs about Worry, Anxiety, & Stress

- **Stress is harmful/bad for you.**
 - The **belief** that “stress is bad for you” is what is bad for you. (Keller, et al., 2012)
- **Worry proves that I care.**
 - Does a person you worry about want you to suffer catastrophes in your mind to prove that you care?
- **Worry prevents misfortune.**
 - Reasonable planning and preparation can lower risk, but we cannot control the future.
- **Worry emotionally prepares me for misfortune if it were to happen.**
 - Not really.
- **If I have a fearful thought, there must be a legitimate reason.**
 - What you fear happening is likely to cross your mind. But it crossing your mind does not make it more likely.
- **If I feel anxious, there must be real danger (*emotional reasoning*).**

Dysfunctional Beliefs about Worry and Anxiety

I've lived through
some terrible things
in my life, some of
which actually
happened.

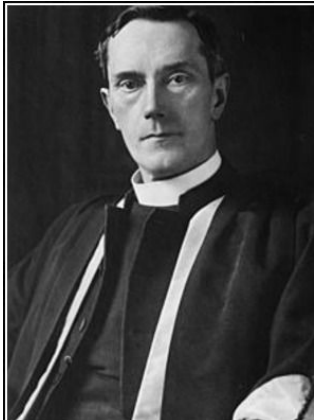
MARK TWAIN



You can't wring
your hands and
roll up your
sleeves at the
same time.

Pat Schroeder

meetville.com



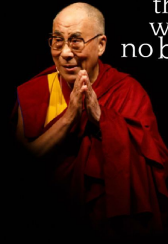
Worry is interest paid on trouble
before it comes due.

— William Ralph Inge —

AZ QUOTES

“If a problem is fixable,
if a situation is such
that you can do something
about it, then there
is no need to worry.
If it's not fixable, then
there is no help in
worrying. There is
no benefit in worrying
whatsoever.”

Dalai Lama



SleepingAngel.com
Quotes in More

Unhelpful Coping

- Excessively seek reassurance from others
- Micromanage people
- Procrastinate
- Repeatedly checking things

*These alleviate anxiety in the short term but create more anxiety in the long-term.

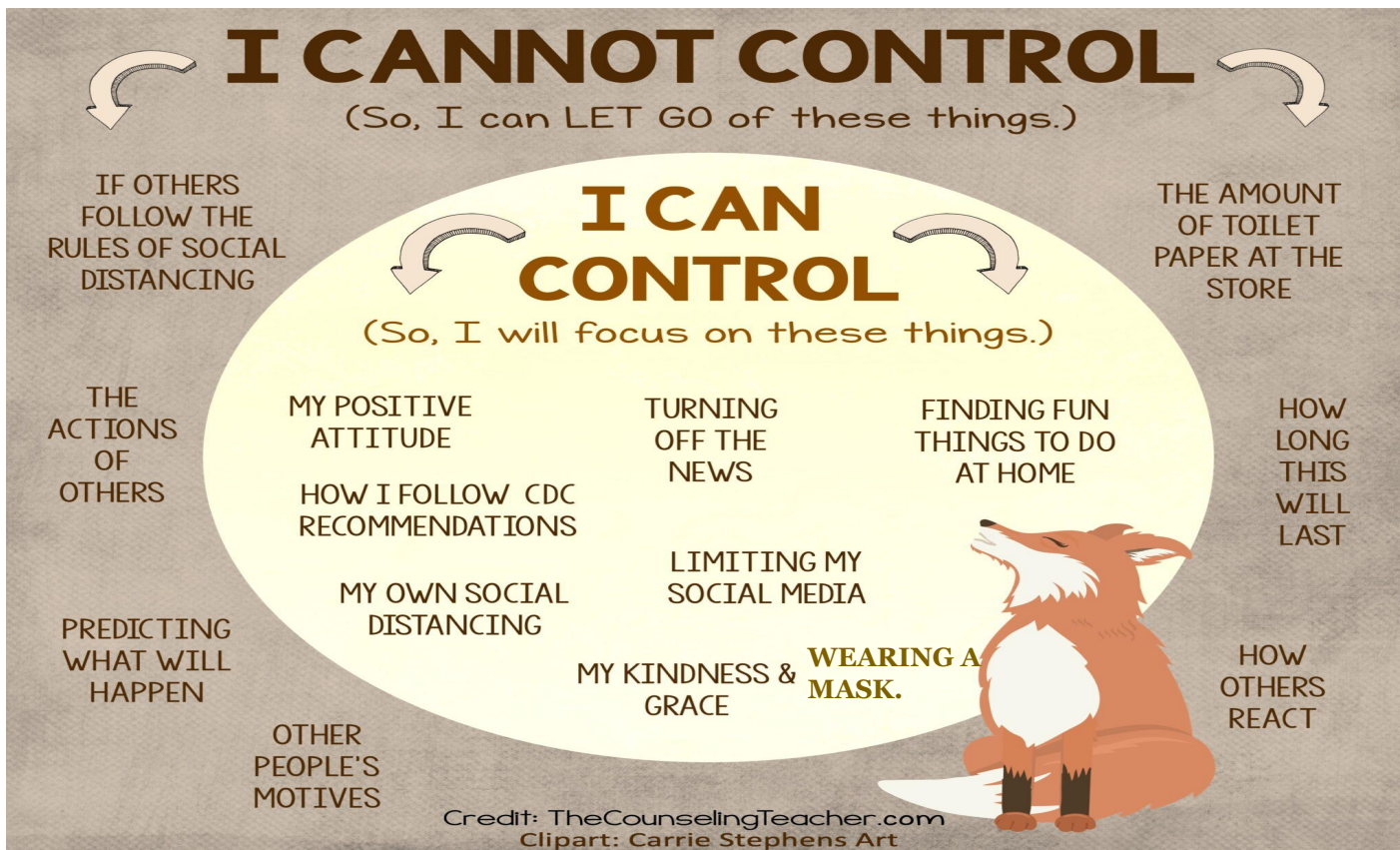


So What Can You Do?

Focus on **What is in your Control**

- Higher need for control & certainty where there is none
= **MORE ANXIETY**
- Instead, make a commitment to work on:
 - Differentiating **what is** vs. **what is NOT *within your control.***
 - Letting go of what is NOT within your control.
 - Accepting the uncertainty that truly exists.
 - Does not mean NOT having a plan, **but...**
 - We can't prepare for every possible scenario.
 - Life is simply too random and unpredictable.

What is and is NOT in my Control?



Real vs. Hypothetical Worries

- **Real problem worries** are about actual problems that need solutions right now. For example, given the very real concern about the virus at the moment, there are helpful solutions which include regular handwashing, social distancing, and physical isolation if you have symptoms.
- **Hypothetical worries** about the current health crisis might include thinking about worst-case scenarios (what we might call catastrophizing). For example, imagining worst case scenarios such as *most* people dying.

Real vs. Hypothetical Worries

Real Problem Worries

- About actual problems that need to be solved now.
- Making plans, problem-solving solvable problems, mitigating risk, and preparing for what is foreseeable.
 - e.g., regular hand-washing, social distancing, asking for help, asserting myself

Hypothetical Worries

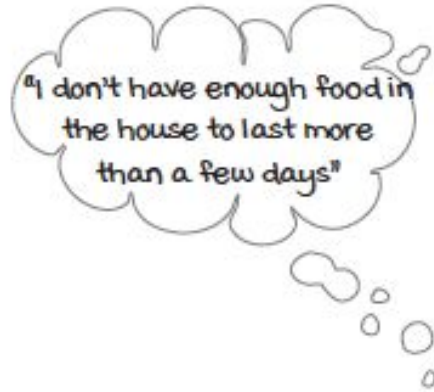
What if...

**IMAGINED
CATASTROPHE!**

Real vs. Hypothetical Worries

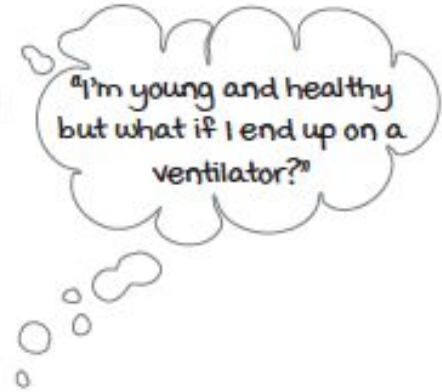
Real problem worries

are about *actual* problems
that are affecting you *right now*.

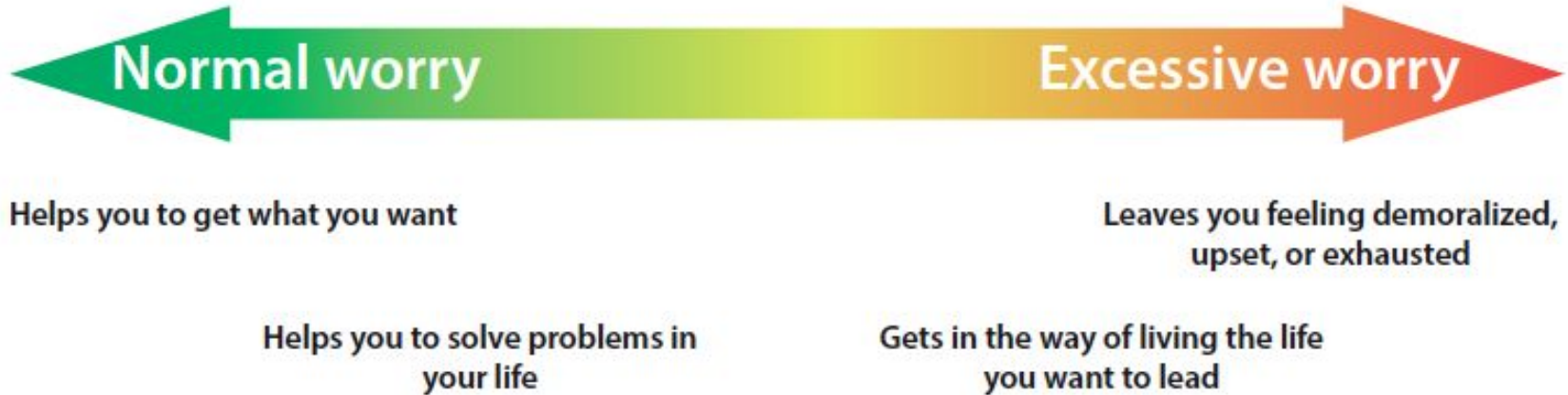


Hypothetical worries

are about things that do not currently exist,
but which *might* happen in the future.



Real vs. Hypothetical Worries



Source: Whalley, M. G., Kaur, H. (2020). Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty. Retrieved from: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/living-with-worry-and-anxiety-amidst-global-uncertainty>

Postponing Worry

Practice postponing your worry.

Worry is insistent – it can make you feel as though you have to engage with it **right now**.

Set aside time each day to let yourself worry (e.g. 30 minutes at the end of each day).

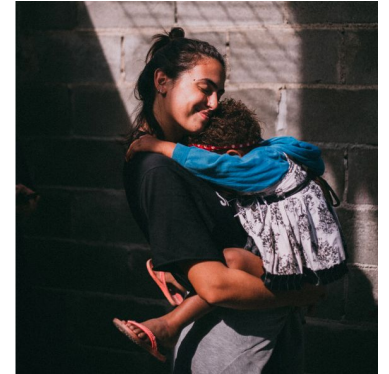
It can feel like an odd thing to do at first!

It also means that for the other 23.5 hours in the day you try to let go of the worry until you get to your 'worry time'.



Mindfulness

Living in the Present



Mindfulness: Be in the Present

What mindfulness it is NOT....

- clearing your mind
- keeping your focus
- relaxing



Mindfulness: Be in the Present

What it IS...



- Adopting a **gentle, open, curious, allowing stance** towards your experience as it *unfolds from moment to moment*.
- When your mind wanders...simply **bring it back**. Again & again & again & again...

Grounding or Dropping Anchor

To get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on the activity you are doing.

- Look around the room and notice 5 things you can see.
- Notice 3 or 4 things you can hear.
- Notice what you can smell or taste or sense in your nose and mouth
- Notice what you are doing
- End the exercise by giving your full attention to the task or activity at hand.



Trying to CONTROL Thoughts & Feelings

- Does it work?
- Think of something you've been worried about.
- Now try NOT to think of it.
- Now try NOT to have any of the feelings that just showed up.



Making Room for Thoughts & Feelings

- **Allow yourself to feel the uncertainty.**
- Allow the feelings that came along with it.
- Allow the thoughts; they are just thoughts--not facts.
- Come back to the present moment, again and again, re-engaging in what you were doing especially what matters.
- Give up needing to NOT have difficult thoughts or feelings.
- If they persist, bring them along with you.

Cognitive Defusion

- Relating to your thoughts as “just thoughts.”
- Not as concerned as to whether the thought is true. Rather, is it useful?
- Avoiding the trap of trying to control them.
 - if NOT useful: NEITHER push them away, NOR engage them.
- Allowing thoughts to come and go as they please as part of your experience instead of the focus of your experience.
- Patiently and repeatedly coming back to the present moment once you are hooked.



Image source: engaget.com

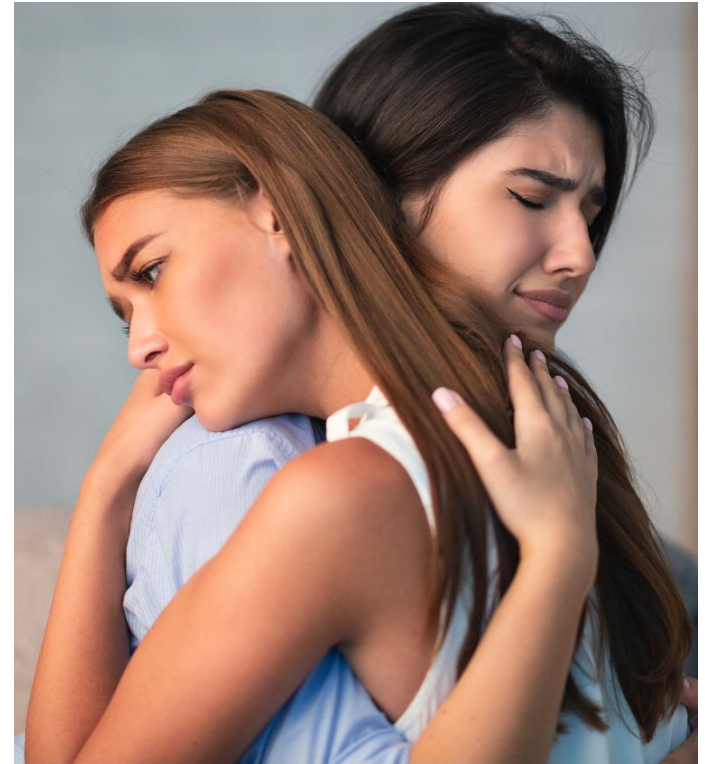
Acceptance/Willingness

- Seeing feelings as sensory info; neither bad nor good--just labeled as such.
- Never meant to be controlled; like the weather.
- Allowing feelings to be as they are without judging them or trying to control them.
- Opening up to them, making space for them...softening around them...breathing into them.



Self-Compassion (Neff, 2015)

- ‘If someone I loved was going through this experience, feeling what I am feeling – if I wanted to be kind and caring towards them, how would I treat them?’
- How would I behave towards them?
- What might I say or do?’
- Then try treating yourself the same way.





What Can I do?

**Reorient towards values and
engage in valued action.**

Committed Action



Animals

Pet an animal
Walk a dog
Listen to the birds



Be active

Go for a walk
Go for a run
Go for a swim
Go cycling
Use an exercise video at home



Clean

Clean the house
Clean the yard



Create

Draw a picture
Paint a portrait
Take a photograph
Doodle / sketch
Organise photographs
Make a photograph album
Start a scrapbook
Finish a project
Do some sewing / knitting



Expression

Laugh
Cry
Sing
Shout
Scream



Mind

Daydream
Meditate
Pray
Reflect
Think
Try relaxation exercises
Practise yoga



Music

Listen to music you like
Find some new music to listen to
Turn on the radio
Make some music
Sing a song
Play an instrument
Listen to a podcast



Schedule

Get up extra early
Stay up late
Sleep in late
Tick something off your 'to do' list



Self care

Take a bath
Take a shower
Wash your hair
Give yourself a facial
Trim your nails
Sunbathe (wear sunscreen!)
Take a nap



Committed Action



Kindness

- Help a friend / neighbor / stranger
- Make a gift for someone
- Try a random act of kindness
- Do someone a favour
- Teach somebody a skill
- Do something nice for someone
- Plan a surprise for someone
- Make a list of your good points
- Make a list of things or people you are grateful for



Learn

- Learn something new
- Learn a new skill
- Learn a new fact
- Watch a tutorial video

Listen to a podcast



Nature

- Try some gardening
- Plant something
- Do some pruning
- Mow the lawn
- Pick flowers
- Buy flowers
- Go for a walk in nature
- Sit in the sun



Plan

- Set a goal
- Create a budget
- Make a 5 year plan
- Make a 'to do' list
- Make a 'bucket list'
- Make a shopping list



Try something new

- Try a new food
- Listen to some new music
- Watch a new TV show or movie
- Wear some new clothes
- Read a new book
- Do something spontaneous
- Express yourself



Watch

- Watch a movie
- Watch a TV show
- Watch a YouTube video



Connect with people

- Contact a friend
- Join a new group
- Join a political party
- Join a dating website
- Send a message to a friend
- Write a letter to a friend
- Reconnect with an old friend

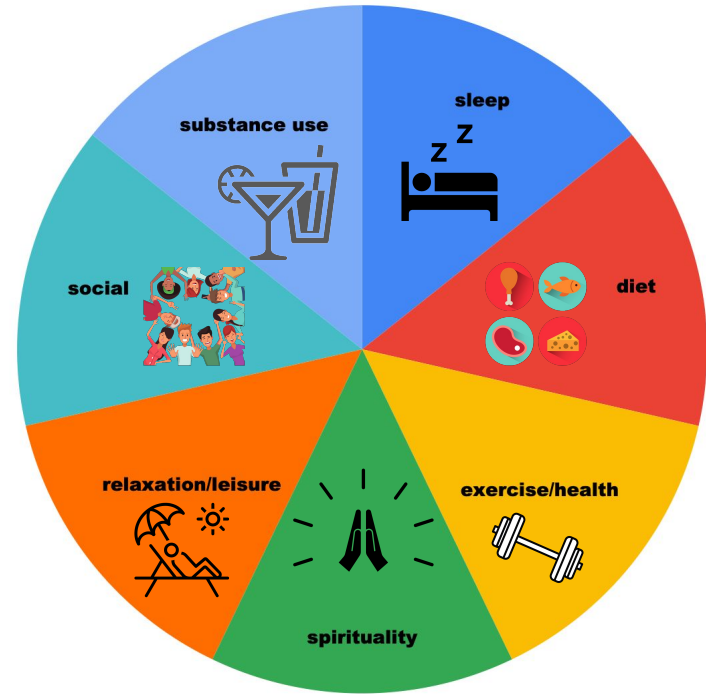


Cook

- Cook a meal for yourself
- Cook a meal for someone else
- Bake a cake / cookies
- Roast marshmallows
- Find a new recipe

Balance and Self-Care

- Stay Mentally and Physically Active
- Relaxation/Leisure
- Sleep
- Diet Nutrition
- Routine
- Notice and Limit Worry Triggers
- Practice Kindness and Gratitude



References and Resources

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