

# Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

*Editor’s Note: Content presented in the Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog is for awareness and informational purposes only, and it is not meant to be a diagnostic tool.*

Ten months after phrases such as “stay at home,” “flatten the curve” and “social distancing” started to become part of our daily vernacular in the United States, people are experiencing a type of burnout experts call COVID-19 fatigue. Dr. Jeanne Marrazzo, director of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Division of Infectious Diseases, notes that at this point people are tired — tired of missing family and friends, and tired of not having a routine. Dr. Marrazzo goes on to point out that whatever disruptions to a person’s normal life have occurred, there is no denying the mental, physical, and emotional toll people are experiencing. In fact, dealing with changes in routine, job structure, finances and even living situations can lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety. What we have learned — and what we keep learning — is how to combat this burnout in safe ways that minimize the spread of the virus and enable us to feel some sense of normalcy.

Figuring out how to safely navigate the new normal is more important than ever, explain the UAB experts, particularly heading into more vulnerable and trying winter months that present unique challenges. As Kimberly Wilson said, “Living through a global pandemic is not easy, y’all.”

With COVID-19 fatigue, what signs and symptoms should you be looking for? For example, if you are experiencing general feelings of stress and social isolation and have been for months, you are not alone, states Richard Shelton, MD, professor of medicine in UAB’s Department of Psychiatry. He notes that those feelings may be compounded by potential economic hardships and exacerbating preexisting depression or anxiety disorders that many already had.

“COVID-19 fatigue and/or burnout implies a person has reached his or her capacity to cope and is experiencing various mental, emotional and physical symptoms as a result of the constant exposure to pandemic stressors, including social distancing, isolation from family/friends, fears of contracting COVID-19, grief, financial stress, and more,” said Tami Long, PhD, director of UAB’s Employee Assistance and Counseling Center.

Dr. Long says that symptoms of COVID-19 Fatigue may include:

- Exhaustion
- Physical and mental fatigue
- Lack of energy
- Feeling constantly overwhelmed, sad, or helpless
- The inability to complete daily tasks
- Increased irritability
- Reduced work performance
- Isolating from others

With increased symptoms of fatigue present, it is critical that one's adherence to safety protocols does not go by the wayside. Rather than giving up on the progress made, experts stress that finding ways to do the things we want and see the people we wish, within reason, will be the key to a safe winter.

“Pandemic fatigue is a very real threat to the public health measures like masking and social distancing that have kept many of us safe for the last eight months,” said Ellen Eaton, MD, assistant professor in the Division of Infectious Diseases. “We know that people are ready to switch back to what normal was before, but that's just not possible right now. However, we can provide guidance and encourage ways to make activities safe and reduce potential COVID harm. There are ways we can engage with our loved ones and recharge our batteries, so to speak, that keep us and those around us healthy.”

Another concerning aspect of COVID-19 fatigue and protocol mindfulness is a person's desire to see others and either attending or hosting gatherings of all sizes. If mask wearing and social distancing are not followed even in smaller group settings, the ripple effect of case spread can be impactful.

“Right now, what we are seeing across the board that both small and large gatherings are contributing to accelerated community-acquired spread, and well-intentioned meet-ups are further spreading cases in schools, in the workplace and in the community,” shares Suzanne Judd, Ph.D., professor of epidemiology in the School of Public Health. “It's paramount that people remain vigilant about who they are seeing and how they are seeing them.”

Judd adds that if you find yourself in a high-risk place – a gathering with more than 10 people where masks are not widely used – you will want to be even more diligent with wearing your mask in even small gatherings in the 14 days following that event to protect your close family members and friends.

In addition to diligent mask wearing and social distancing, you can minimize the risk of socializing by creating a “pod” or “quaranteam,” a small group friends (no more than 10; the fewer the better) who have a consistent set of risk exposures and social tolerances. Members should only socialize with members of your pod and avoid high-risk situations. It is important to know how many face-to-face exposures your pod members have with others — and what kinds — to ensure that you all are safe and COVID-negative when you are gathering. Know how pod members are feeling week to week. If you think a pod member may be exposed or is steering away from the set agreements you all have put in place, it may be time to reevaluate whom you are socializing with and in what contexts.

With shorter times of daylight and winter months on the horizon, intentionality in overcoming fatigue and burnout will be key, Dr. Long says. “Daily self-care will help you build up resistance to stress, as one cannot wait until they are feeling exhausted or overwhelmed to start. You must be deliberate about following through with your plan and engage in self-care on a regular basis.”

Additionally, Dr. Long encourages planning for the months ahead with a solid self-care regimen; take the time to write down your plan for accountability. This can include sharing new goals and things you wish to do that can be done safely during COVID-19 while wearing a mask and social

distancing. Also, she urges people to understand their stressors by keeping a log, and when you feel triggered, take a step back and figure out the best type of activity or fix for you in that moment.

There is no better time than now to get in a good routine and headspace by incorporating tips from UAB experts below into your lifestyle at home, at work and in the community, she says.

When we are stressed, hormones like cortisol flood our systems, producing the “fight or flight response” in which our heart rate goes up, we breathe more heavily (requiring more oxygen), and our blood vessels constrict.

This often leads to panic and anxiety or the desire to find unhealthy ways to cope and manage this feeling. So, what can be done to increase our protective factors, our own self-care, and our mental health.

Here are some simple ways to help us de-stress and work through COVID-19 fatigue.

### **Go for a walk.**

Sometimes all we need is a change of scenery to help change our mood — especially if you have been in the confines of your home for too long. Just because we are practicing social distancing does not mean you cannot go outside and enjoy some fresh air. The key is to do it safely, and to stay at least six feet away from others while you are on your walk. Even though the weather is changing, it really is not the amount of time spent walking, but just the activity of getting outside. Start out with short walks. Then as you become comfortable with the weather, you may want to increase your distance and time walking.

### **Keep a schedule.**

The key to managing COVID-19 fatigue and stress (and staying productive) is keeping your regular schedule. Set an alarm clock, eat breakfast, take a shower, and get dressed (at least from the top up if you are going to be on Zoom meetings). Habits are built and kept with a routine. If you are unable to leave your home, establish a daily schedule for when you wake up, when you sleep and everything in between. This discipline and consistency will help to keep you on track.”

### **Get some rest.**

No one says you need to learn a new hobby, cook every day, or keep up with what people are doing on social media. You are living through a global pandemic, and your body needs rest just as much as your mind. Give yourself some grace by staying hydrated and getting an approach amount of sleep — it will do wonders with helping you battle through COVID-19 fatigue and stress.

### **Stay connected.**

Communicate with friends and family as often as possible. Should you self-assess and find yourself reverting to old habits or turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms, the best line of defense is a supportive network of people who can offer advice, encouragement or just a listening ear.

**Unplug when you need to.**

Smartphones, in particular, are linked to increased stress, and part of the reason is because it is the way that we consume content. Social media, news, video and even texting all go down on your phone. If you find that staying up to date on what is happening with COVID-19 is also what is increasing your stress and fatigue level just unplug, and only check for updates as you see necessary.

**Challenge your brain.**

It is no secret that many of us have found ourselves bored over the past few weeks. How long can you binge Netflix or do your favorite YouTube workout before you become unengaged altogether? Use this time as an opportunity to challenge your brain by taking up a new hobby or re-engaging in an old hobby. Other brain engaging activities to combat COVID-19 include learning a new skill, begin leisure reading activities, play games, work crossword or Sudoku puzzles, or listen to podcasts that are of interest to you. Keeping your brain engaged is an important way to make it through COVID-19 fatigue.

Throughout the winter months, more self-care information will be frequently published.

*Editor's Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.*  
Always remember – **CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!**

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