

# ***BRONX VOICE***

## **Managing prolonged COVID-related stress - What every New Yorker needs to know about**

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### **By Salvador Garcia, FRIENDS Clinician, Visiting Nurse Service of New York**

**HEALTH** - Over the last two years, families have been under a tremendous amount of stress. At the FRIENDS clinic, an Article 31 clinic located in the Bronx, we continue to assist overwhelmed and exhausted clients that are having trouble managing stress after a prolonged experience with the COVID pandemic.

At the FRIENDS clinic, our licensed social workers, psychiatrists, and psychiatric nurse practitioners provide medication management and ongoing therapeutic services for children, youth, and their family. Whether it's parents with limited resources, students struggling with heightened anxiety and/or depression, or older adults fearful of leaving their home, these concerns do not follow the stream of spikes and dips in the overall COVID cases in the Bronx. Instead, these are persistent emotions that ultimately manifest themselves in ways that are unhealthy for both the mind and body.

At VNSNY's FRIENDS clinic, where we focus on trauma-informed care, emotional/behavioral needs, and individual and family counseling, I often remind my clients of what we are told during airplane safety demonstrations... it is important to put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else with theirs. That same sentiment applies to self-care during stressful times. You must take the time to address your own needs. This is not an act of selfishness but, necessary in order to help others manage their own stressful situations.

I have found that the following self-care strategies may be good for your mental and physical health and can help you take charge of your life. These strategies will also benefit your mental health and allow you to effectively help those around you cope better with stress.

### Take Care of Your Body

Get enough sleep. Go to bed and get up at the same times each day. Try to stick to your typical [sleep-wake schedule](#), even if you're staying at home.

Participate in regular physical activity. Regular physical activity and [exercise](#) can help reduce anxiety and improve your mood. Find an activity that includes movement, such as dancing, walking or use an exercise app.

Eat healthy. Choose a [well-balanced diet](#). Avoid loading up on junk food and refined sugar. Limit caffeine as it can aggravate stress, anxiety, and problems with falling a sleep or even a good night's sleep.

Avoid tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. Using alcohol to try to cope can [make matters worse](#) and reduce your coping skills. Avoid taking drugs to cope unless your doctor has prescribed medications for you.

Limit screen time. Turn off electronic devices for a set amount of time each day, especially 30 to 60 minutes before bedtime. Make a conscious effort to spend [less time](#) in front of a screen: television, tablet, computer and/or phone.

Relax and recharge. Set aside time for yourself. Even a few minutes of quiet time can be refreshing and helpful for you to settle your mind and reduce anxiety. Many people benefit from practices such as deep breathing, tai chi, yoga, mindfulness or [meditation](#). Also, soaking in a bubble bath, listening to music, or reading/listening to a book. Whatever helps you relax, select a technique that works for you and practice it regularly.

## Take Care of Your Mind

Keep your regular routine. Maintaining a [regular daily schedule](#) is important to your mental health. In addition to sticking to a regular bedtime routine keep consistent times for meals, bathing, getting dressed, work or study schedules, and exercise. Also, set aside time for activities you enjoy, this predictability can make you feel more in control.

Stay busy. Healthy distractions can help you not focus on the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety and depression. Enjoy hobbies that you can do at home, such as reading a book, [writing in a journal](#), making

a craft, playing games or cooking a new meal. Try to identify a new project or clean out that closet you promised you would get to. Doing something positive to manage anxiety is a healthy coping strategy.

Focus on positive thoughts. Choose to focus on the [positive things](#) in your life instead of dwelling on how bad you feel. Consider starting each day by listing things you are thankful for. Maintaining a sense of hope will help you to accept changes as they occur and to keep problems in perspective.

Use your moral compass or spiritual life for support. If you draw strength from a belief system, it can bring you [comfort](#) during difficult and uncertain times.

Set priorities. Do not become overwhelmed by creating a life-changing list of things to achieve while you are home. Set reasonable goals each day and outline steps you can take to reach those goals. Give yourself credit for every step in the right direction, no matter how small and recognize that some days will be better than others.

While these tips can certainly help with self-care during stressful times, if you are experiencing a mental health crisis, it is very important that you reach out to a medical professional immediately.

The [FRIENDS clinical service program](#) is open weekdays from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

For more information, please call [1-718-742-7100](tel:1-718-742-7100).