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# Adapting to the “New Normal”

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It's been more than a year since COVID-19 began to impact our lives. Whether you personally went through having the virus, know someone who has had it or is currently experiencing it, have tragically lost someone to it, or even if you are not in any of those categories, COVID-19 hangs over all of us like a dark cloud negatively influencing our lives every day.

## Settling in with the “New Normal”

We have all heard the phrase the “new normal.” I don't feel as though this has become cliché. It's a reality that we are dealing with every day. Coping has remained difficult. Being more than a year into the pandemic has forced us all to learn how to adapt to our new environment. Adaptation is key and has throughout history enabled us to change with the times to move past new obstacles that are presented to us. We can now leverage these adaptation skills to push through the emotional challenges that COVID-19 bring us.

The most obvious adaptations for those intent on doing their part is to stay safe and keep others safe by following local executive orders, laws, regulations, and CDC recommendations. These can include continuing to wear a mask and social distance when in public. These have become automatic as compared to how they were a year ago. Also, take the vaccine when it's your turn.

An emotional downside of these practices is a constant reminder of the continuing threat of illness or worse. You can also be stressed when you see someone not wearing a mask or only partially wearing it when it's required. Do you or do you not say something? That can bring an unnecessary pressure to an already emotionally-elevated environment.

## Burnout

Even with adaptation, burnout is still common. Our “baseline” or usual emotional level in all categories, whether anxiety, stress, mood, or others, is typically set at a constant level. With a chronic stressor, our baseline emotional level is elevated higher than before the emergence of the chronic stressor.

For example, let's look at anxiety. This factor has usually been elevated with most lawyers even prior to COVID-19. If prior to COVID-19 on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being no anxiety and 10 being unbearable anxiety, if someone is typically 2; that is the baseline. If a new stressor was experi-

enced, that person's anxiety might escalate to 4, last 15 minutes or so, then through coping skills return to 2. However, during COVID-19, that baseline is now increased to four. This means if that person experiences a new stressor, the increase in anxiety level will be quicker, higher, and more intense than previously. This could result in an escalation to a seven lasting an hour or more.

The short term goal is to get through the emotionally challenging moment as quickly as possible using healthy coping skills. After the crisis, the goal is to reduce the baseline level to pre-COVID-19 (or ideally better), thus causing the effects of future stressors to be reduced.

This can be helpful to keep in mind. You're not having more difficulty coping than you have had in the past because something is wrong with you. It's due to the overall strain of COVID-19.

### Keep Up the Coping

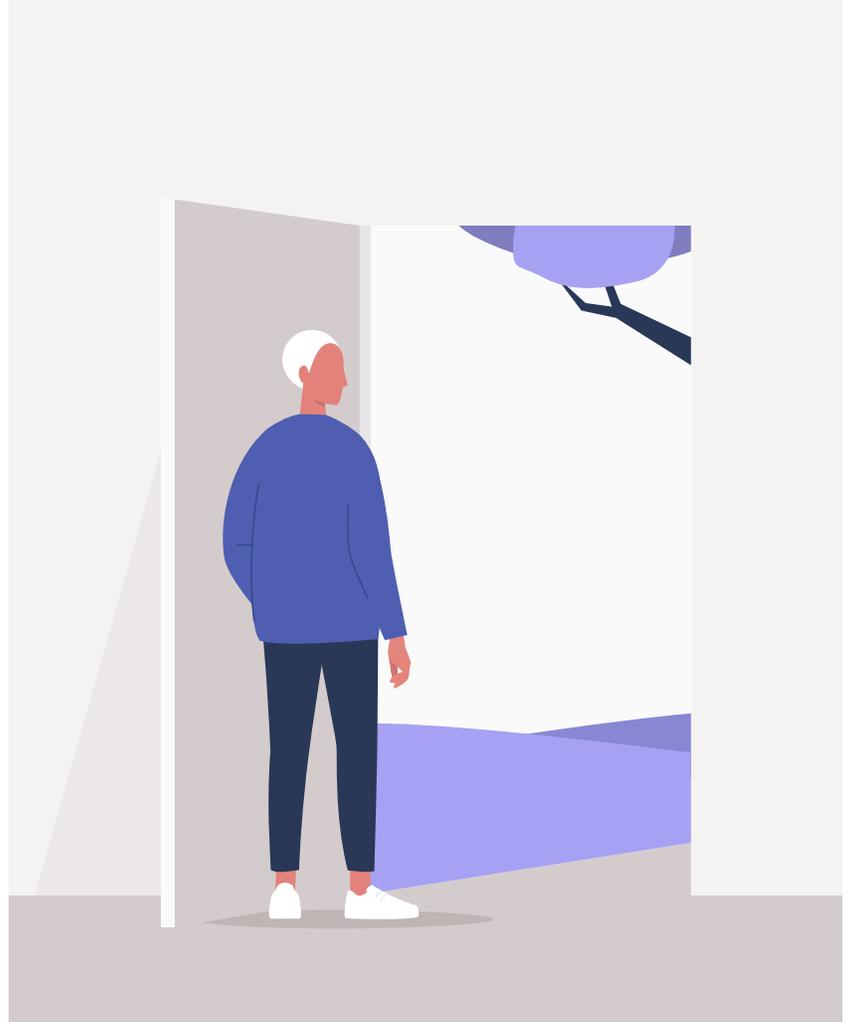
Prior to COVID-19, we all had our coping skills that are helpful in managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Whether it's exercising, reading, playing guitar, going for a walk, watching our favorite show, meditating, deep breathing, seeking support through our network of family and friends and with mental health professionals (if necessary), and many others, they help us better manage our mental health to keep our functioning in our personal and professional lives healthy.

Let's all continue with our coping skills. Keep doing what works, improve what "kinda" works, don't do what doesn't work, and try out new ones. Share with others and see what they're doing. Develop and enhance your "tool box" of coping skills. It's crucial during COVID-19.

### What Will the Future Hold?

We all wish we knew. The vaccines bring hope for the future, but as of now, there is no end date for this pandemic. The lack of an end date can have a great impact on our outlook. For example, if we knew that as of January 1, 2022, COVID-19 would be gone, although this would be more many months into the future, we'd likely rest easier through these months. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Fear of the unknown is a significant and draining stressor.

I sometimes think of how our collective experience with COVID-19 will change our behavior in the future. Will we wear masks during flu season? Given the mild resistance and more intense protests of some, I don't think it's likely to be all the time, every day. But I hope at the very least if people have



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the flu or another contagious illness, they'll wear them out in public. Statistics show for flu season this year, wearing masks, social distancing and higher rates of flu vaccines reduced the cases of the flu by tens of millions as compared to last year.

### And Finally ...

The unfortunate reality is COVID-19 isn't going anywhere in the near future. It's up to us to remain vigilant and do what's working to limit and ideally stop the spread of the virus. We also need to remember to take care of ourselves and keep our baseline levels of any mental health concerns as low as possible and manage stressors in a healthy way. Reach out for support if you need it. It is possible to cope. It is possible to adapt. Let's all keep it going. 🌍

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