

# Coping With Pandemic Fatigue

By Molly Ranns

**E**xhausted. Drained. Depleted. Do any of these words sound familiar? Do they describe the feelings you experience throughout the day as the COVID-19 pandemic continues? If so, you are not alone. These words, and many other synonymous terms, are used to describe what so many of us are feeling right now. Perhaps you feel more irritable than usual. You may work for an hour and then sink into your chair, wondering why you feel so tired. Maybe you're ill-tempered with your children or partner and feel guilty for unfamiliar impatience. Your efficiency level seems lower. You feel less productive.

Clinicians describe “pandemic fatigue” as the mental and physical exhaustion that occurs with constantly having to navigate chronic uncertainty with no specific end in sight. It's being mentally and physically *over* the pandemic months ago yet, realistically, still stuck in the middle of it. It's being sick of homeschooling while parenting and working remotely yet, frankly, just getting started as the new school year begins. Pandemic fatigue is being tired of isolating, of trying to decide what to make for dinner for the 100th day in a row, of having every day feel like the one before it. Some days may seem more difficult than others.

It was approximately 6 p.m. on a Wednesday in mid-August when pandemic fatigue hit me. I had been in the virtual world for what seemed like ages, attending Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting from early morning to late afternoon. An email came in from our school district, providing notification that my 6-year-old son would start his 1st grade school year online. My 4-year-old daughter asked me to help her build a fort in the living room. I felt so weary. My mind went blank and I had one thought—I am done with this pandemic.

I miss traveling and MSU sports and going to restaurants. I miss concerts and social gatherings. I miss being able to separate work from home life.

Mild and occasional stress, anxiety, or unease are not necessarily bad. These unpleasantnesses alert us to danger and help us prepare to meet certain obligations. Our bodies respond to distressing events in ways that keep us alive, functioning, and thriving. Our brains produce millions, likely billions, of neurochemicals to adjust to stressors, enabling survival. But what happens when a stressor doesn't end, when the brain and body are not allowed to return to a normal level of functioning?

When stress becomes chronic, as it seems to be for so many given the ongoing pandemic, our mental and physical health and overall well-being begin to suffer. It leaves people wondering when things will get better and what they can do until that happens. It poses the question, *What can we do when abnormal is the new normal?*

The answer: We cope. We adapt. We pause and just *be*. Here are five tried and true strategies to get through even the most exhausting of pandemic-fatigued days:

(1) **Take a break.** Stop what you're doing and take 20 minutes to rest. Give yourself

permission to sit with emotions and feelings, whatever they may be. Set aside work and any other obligations to clear your mind and reset. Avoid unnecessary stimuli like emails, phone calls, and social media. Set your phone to “Do Not Disturb” and turn off the volume on your computer. Set a timer to ensure you get enough time to pause.

(2) **Exercise.** Research shows that spending just 20 minutes walking in nature can help lower stress hormone levels. Feel your cortisol levels drop and the stress-reduction benefits begin to take effect.<sup>1</sup> Don't worry about the level of intensity or strenuousness of the activity. Any sort of movement can help. Go for a walk or a bike ride. Swim. Golf. Dance. Garden. Enjoy the sunshine and warmth while it lasts!

(3) **Be mindful.** Mindfulness is defined as awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.<sup>2</sup> Numerous studies demonstrate how mindfulness-based interventions improve both mental and physical health. Mindfulness takes us out of ruminating about the past and having anticipatory anxiety about the

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future, much of which we have no control over, and places us right here in the moment. This gets easier the longer it's practiced. For those new to mindfulness, there are easy mindfulness exercises that can be done anywhere.<sup>3</sup>

- (4) **Breathe.** Sitting and paying attention to your breath may seem silly, but studies show that focusing on breath and taking note of pace and timing activate regions of the brain connected to body awareness, attention, and emotion.<sup>4</sup> Nervous-system regulation and stress reduction are benefits of paying attention to rhythmic inhaling and exhaling. Focusing on breath can help to slow it down and subsequently reduce fear, anxiety, and stress responses.
- (5) **Express gratitude.** It can seem as though we are always being plagued by bad news. To stop the cycle fueling angst and negativity, try practicing the art of being grateful. For example, during the nightly dinner routine, go around

the table and have each person identify three things for which they are grateful. This simple exercise has significant benefits. Gratitude has been shown to effectively reduce depression and increase happiness. It helps to neutralize negative emotions such as worry, unease, and fear. It focuses us on the present and helps us to not take things for granted. This practice improves mental and physical health and overall well-being.<sup>5</sup>

Times are difficult. Pandemic fatigue is real and can impact us all. Be gentle with yourselves during this ongoing uncertainty. Let go of the things you cannot control, identify those things you can, and try putting these coping skills to use. As always, the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program is here to help. ■

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*Molly Ranns is the interim director for the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program.*

## ENDNOTES

1. A 20-minute nature break relieves stress, Harvard Men's Health Watch, Harvard Medical School (July 2019) <<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/a-20-minute-nature-break-relieves-stress>> [<https://perma.cc/7PPH-ZB2Q>]. All websites cited in this article were accessed August 27, 2020.
2. Jon Kabat-Zinn: *Defining Mindfulness*, Mindful (January 11, 2017) <<https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/#:~:text=The%20Definition%20of%20Mindfulness%3A%20Mindfulness%20is%20awareness%20that,add%2C%20in%20the%20service%20of%20self-understanding%20and%20wisdom.%E2%80%9D>> [<https://perma.cc/5BXA-376P>].
3. Ackerman, 22 *Mindfulness Exercises, Techniques & Activities for Adults (+PDFs)*, Positive Psychology.com (June 23, 2020) <<https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-exercises-techniques-activities/>> [<https://perma.cc/F779-MDP8>].
4. Herrero et al, *Breathing above the brain stem: volitional control and attentional modulation in humans*, 119 J Neurophysiol 145, 145-146 (January 2018), available at <<https://journals.physiology.org/doi/full/10.1152/jn.00551.2017>> [<https://perma.cc/RE5U-M5ZW>].
5. See generally Emmons & McCullough, eds, *The Psychology of Gratitude* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), available at <[https://books.google.com/books?id=Qz4nhZ3ZMmgC&pg=PR3&source=gbs\\_selected\\_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=Qz4nhZ3ZMmgC&pg=PR3&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false)> [<https://perma.cc/N7CH-NY4C>].



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