

Mindful Veterinary Guide for Working with Fear and Stress During COVID-19

Tip #1: NOT A TIGER. Stress is a physiological reaction of the body to something that the mind perceives as a threat. An instantaneous reaction meant to protect us from life-threatening danger—such as being attacked by a tiger—this response shuts down the cognitive mind and causes a cascade of physiologic reactions—increased adrenalin and cortisol, elevated heart rate, elevated blood pressure—all meant to fuel the flight/fight response. However, very little that we encounter in modern life, including during this pandemic, is served by this response, referred to as an amygdala hijack. Saying to ourselves, “Not a Tiger” when we feel stressed or threatened can be a good way to remind ourselves that the things that cause most of our stress are not tigers that we need to run away from, but more complex issues that we need to respond to with the full array of our cognitive facilities. Saying “Not a Tiger” can provide just the pause we need to avoid an amygdala hijack.

Tip #2: WHERE ARE MY FEET? Bringing attention to wherever the body is in contact with the solid surface of the earth is a useful technique for bringing awareness into the body. When we bring awareness into the body we heighten our awareness of the sensations associated with emotions as they are arising. Dropping in and noticing what is there—that tightness that signals fear or that sense of pressure that signals anger—allows us to work with our emotions more effectively.

Tip # 3: BREATHE. The sympathetic nervous system is activated by the amygdala and is responsible for the fight/flight response. The other side of the autonomic nervous system—the parasympathetic nervous system—applies the brake to this response. Lucky for us, the parasympathetic nervous system can be activated with our breath. When faced with a situation that you feels stressful, taking slow deep in-breaths and then exhaling slowing, bringing full attention to the exhale can help to engender a sense of calm.

Tip #4: DON'T PROLONG STRESS BY FEEDING IT. Intense emotions and stress can be triggered by what we see, read and hear just as easily as being triggered by what is actually happening to us personally in the moment. This has become especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before engaging with any media, ask yourself “Do I know this to be from a reliable source? Do I know that these images or words will not prove harmful to me in any way? Do I believe that these images or words will be helpful to me at this moment in time in making the decisions that I need to make?” If the answer to any of these is “no”, it is best not to engage.

Tip #5: DON'T MAKE THINGS WORSE FOR OTHERS. There is a lot of suffering in the world right now and we cannot begin to know what another person is going through. The careless sharing of stories around COVID-19 can cause unintentional harm to others. While you can choose what you watch or read, the people around you cannot choose to unhear what you say. Before you speak, ask yourself “Do I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is true? Do I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that no one who hears this will be harmed in some way? Do I believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt that what I am about to say is necessary—that it will be helpful in some way? If the answer to any of these questions is “no” choose not to speak.

Tip #6: PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR BODY. Common places where stress will manifest itself as tension or tightness include the shoulders, upper back, neck, jaw, temples, chest and abdomen. When faced with a stressful situation, bring attention into your body noticing where you feel any tension or tightness. Take a slow deep inbreath and, on the exhale, imagine that you are sending the outbreath to that part of the body. Imagine the body part softening, relaxing, and the tension releasing. Methodically scanning the

body from head to toe several times during the day can be a good way to notice and release accumulated tension.

Tip #7: STRETCH. Stretching is an excellent way to release the muscular tension associated with accumulated stress. Stretching through the neck, back, and shoulders can be particularly helpful, especially when combined with awareness of the breath.

Tip #8: MEDITATE. There is an abundance of evidence for the benefits of meditation and an abundance of online resources available that can help you get started, reboot your meditation practice if you have let it slide, or support your practice if you are already a regular practitioner. Mindfulness meditation (also called Insight Meditation) is particularly helpful for working the emotions and stress and teachers who teach Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction can be especially good resources for guided meditations. I particularly recommend this form of meditation because, unlike some other practices, it isn't about reaching some ethereal state or having a certain type of experience, it is just sitting still, allowing the body to breathe, and paying attention.

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