

On January 22, 2021, SWIMM held a Q&A with a Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) clinician and coaches from Wellbeing at Stanford to talk about mental health and coping strategies. Below are some of their most helpful tips and resources for taking care of your mental health. This is not a transcript.

Special thanks to our panelists for donating their time and expertise to our event:

- Bri Griffin, Wellbeing Coach
- Donovan Somera Yisrael, Wellbeing Coach
- Dr. Riley Cropper, CAPS Staff Psychologist

1. MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING RESOURCES

If you need urgent mental health support, **CAPS has a 24-hour on-call therapist reachable at 650-723-3785.**

To make a regular appointment, call 650-723-3785 weekdays between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. CAPS offers short-term therapy, but will help you find options if you need long-term therapy or are living in a different state and need to find care in your area.

To book an appointment with a Wellbeing coach, visit coaching.stanford.edu.

If you've experienced sexual, relationship, or gender-based violence, Stanford's Confidential Support Team provides free, trauma-informed counseling.

2. NOTES FROM Q&A SESSION

I'm struggling with motivation—working from home I feel isolated from my academic community, and my abstract math research feels pointless. When I have Zoom meetings with my advisor, I'm excited about my work, but the rest of the time I feel very apathetic and struggle to focus. How can I get motivated again?

The issue described in this question comes up a lot, especially during COVID when the world's problems are so blatant and come into tension with the choice to do highly abstract research. Some tips:

- If you are **intrinsically** motivated to do something, you would do it even if no one else was watching. Most motivation is **extrinsic**, i.e. you need some external accountability. If you are lacking intrinsic motivation, identify and focus on your extrinsic motivations.
- If progress on your work is difficult to recognize, give yourself hobbies or chores on which you do make visible progress.
 - **Example:** during breaks from working on your dissertation, do some cleaning to make yourself feel productive.
- Structure your schedule:
 - Study with friends on Zoom or use the Pomodoro method.
 - Break up your time into small intervals that don't feel overwhelming, even if they're only five or ten minutes.
 - If you tend to waste time or procrastinate with overthinking, set a limit on the time you spend on each activity.

When taking courses that are challenging or working on a research problem how do you not let fear, stress, and insecurity get in the way of progress and well-being? How do you balance interest/curiosity/excitement in a subject with the fear/stress of not being able to do things in time?

Doubt and insecurities are **not a bad thing**. Research shows that in an experimental setting, diverse groups doubted their decisions more, but ended up being right more often than homogeneous groups.

But this person finds doubt and insecurity are interfering with their progress and well-being. To manage these feelings, try the following:

- Consider what is causing the fear and if it's manifesting as avoidance. This is something you can work on with a therapist or coach.
- Being afraid or insecure **does not have to be a barrier**. You can still accomplish something if you are feeling less than 100%. It is perfectly normal—and even helpful!—to be nervous or scared during a stressful time or event.

- If your thoughts tend to be along the lines of “I don’t belong in this field” or “I’m not good enough”, try reframing them in a more positive light.
 - **Example:** “I am nervous but I can do this”

What are some strategies to approach feelings of guilt around not working more? In normal times, I’d have more social and other events that feel like worthwhile breaks from work, but currently it feels like the most worthwhile thing is to spend more time on schoolwork.

First, ask yourself what you mean by the word “worthwhile”. Not all time has to be productive—it’s okay and healthy to just be sometimes. What’s more, taking regular breaks can increase your productivity in the long run.

To get used to having some unproductive time, consider devoting shorter but more focused periods of time to work. Tackle the hard stuff first; you may feel once you’ve made progress on your most daunting tasks that you can relax more during your breaks.

Finally, give yourself permission to celebrate your accomplishments when you finish something on your to-do list! This is both an excuse for a break and can keep you motivated.

How can I build independence while still living at home during the pandemic?

Check out CAPS’ video on this topic. Try the following tips:

- Make sure to take time by yourself, even if it’s just a walk.
- Set new boundaries with your family around your alone and work time.
- Find a space to work that is not your childhood bedroom.
- Remember that independence includes being responsible for yourself! To earn the kind of freedom you want, consider taking on new responsibilities, like cooking and grocery shopping.

I’ve heard that stress makes you stronger. Is this true? How can I learn to view stress as a positive?

Stress is a signal that keeps us alert, like caffeine. Too much or too little stress will lower your productivity; the key is to find the sweet spot. Check out the stress mindset handout or Kelly McGonigal’s Ted talk for more information.

If you find yourself overwhelmed with stress, don’t try to power through. Use coping strategies like:

- Calming activities: exercise, deep breathing, a walk
- Connecting with your community—friends, family, or a therapist
- Breaking down your task into manageable pieces
- Asking for help

How can I distinguish between “the blues” or being in a funk vs. depression/anxiety that I should get help for?

There is no problem that is too small to seek help for. If you really want to assess your experience, think about whether or not it is impacting your functioning. Is it interfering with your work? With your ability to care for yourself normally? With your relationships?

When in doubt, seek support rather than trying to figure out if you meet a certain threshold. A professional therapist or a Wellbeing coach can help you figure out how to interpret any thoughts or feelings.

How should I support a friend or family member who is struggling with their mental health without feeling emotionally drained?

Compassion training, available on campus, can teach you skills to hold space with someone who is struggling and the strength to bear their emotional weight.

Provide resources, or sit down with your friend/family member to look up resources, e.g. a therapist.