

The DC Jewish Guide to Calm in Chaos

Let's get real for a second: as I talk with more and more people in the community, it has become so clear that we could all use some advice on how to cope with everything that's going on. This election is stressful no matter where you fall on the political spectrum. There is a lot of confusion and hype, and while we are still sitting in the middle of a life-altering pandemic, it makes sense that many of us would be more than just a little overwhelmed. That is why it's more important than ever to cultivate some strategies so we can all find some calm in the chaos.

I had the opportunity to connect with Jewish leaders, wellness experts, therapists, and doctors from around the DC community for some useful tips and practices in this stressful time. And here's what they had to say. While not all of these practices will work for you, the hope is that maybe just one will. Perhaps one will help you accomplish the next thing on your list while we wait for whatever historic news comes next.

Mental Wellness

[Dr. Rebecca Brown](#), Mental Health Professional at the [Capital Center for Psychotherapy and Wellness](#)

Dr. Brown provided us with four coping strategies we can use in our daily routine to keep us grounded during this time - or any time! I am personally very drawn to the coping box (I keep scented [thinking putty](#) at my desk). Dr. Brown currently runs an election support group and also accepts out-of-network clients.

1) Deep Breathing

Deep breathing can be one of the most useful skills in learning to relax and cope. It helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, forcing our body to calm down and essentially making it impossible to have a panic attack if you're breathing correctly! The trick is to breathe from deep in your diaphragm, as opposed to our chest as we are used to. Try to imagine a straw going down deep into your lungs attached to a little balloon placed near your solar plexus, or below the bra line. As your inhale, try and inflate that balloon. Don't just push out your stomach/chest! Really try and get as much air into your diaphragm as possible. Then, once it's all filled up, exhale and deflate the balloon. It helps to place one hand on your chest and one hand on your diaphragm to guide your breath to the right place! Try breathing in for four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, breathing out for four seconds, and holding again for four. Repeat until calm!

2) Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Another useful skill is progressive muscle relaxation. Sometimes we have tension in our body and we have no idea how to let it go! Try sitting comfortably or lying down somewhere and scan your body for tense places. You can start from your head and work your way down to your toes; anywhere you feel tense you can squeeze that muscle really hard, then feel all the tension release as you relax and melt into the ground. Scrunch and release your face, your neck, your arms, hands, back, stomach, butt, pelvis, legs, and feet.

You can even imagine inhaling calm, and exhaling the tension away for an added sense of relaxation!

3) Safe Space

It's hard to find a place to escape while we're all quarantined, so let's go ahead and create one! Imagine you're somewhere you feel safe (this place can be real or imaginary). Now really put yourself there by activating your senses! Think about 5 things you can see. Now touch 4 things around you. What 3 things can you hear? Can you smell 2 different things? What are you tasting? Stay in this safe space for as long as you need!

4) Coping Box

Speaking of senses, it can be nice to keep a box full of items that soothe us. Get a shoebox, a wicker basket, or whatever else you have handy! Now put one thing to soothe each one of your senses into the box. Here are just a few examples:

- A stress ball or some slime for touch,
- Chocolate or even hot sauce for taste,
- Some essential oils or a lavender candle for smell,
- A photo of your family or a pretty landscape for vision,
- A reminder to play a calming song or the name of a guided meditation for sound.

Words of Wisdom - Amanda Herring, [Co-Founder of GoldHerring](#) & [Manager of Jewish Life and Learning at the Edlavitch DCJCC](#)

Amanda Herring is a guiding light in the community who brings her passion for Judaism to every aspect of her work. Below, she provides us for grounding in the Hebrew month and offers some guidance and activities you can do to keep your priorities in check- along with advice on accepting and moving past failure.

This month in the Hebrew calendar, Cheshvan, is all about making good on your promises from last month. In Tishrei we did a spiritual accounting of ourselves, took stock of where we need to be better people, and hopefully committed to some new goals. In Cheshvan it's time to make them happen - establishing good routines now will help us all get through the election season. Everyone needs to be prepared for an election night with no clear results, and most media will heighten and play with the anxieties of those who are already stressed.

- Make a tangible and achievable plan for staying physically and mentally well. Who will you reach out to?
- Set up virtual hangouts, make a plan to get outside for a walk without your phone, order a lighthearted book you've been meaning to read.
- Have all your coping mechanisms ready, and not just for election night but for the whole month.

In this Hebrew month, we read Torah stories about Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Lot. Each of our biblical ancestors was tested, sometimes failing miserably. The reason to reread

these stories over and over again is to learn from the failures. We establish a new routine, and we miss a day; we "cheat" on our new diet, or we get caught up in our own lives and forget to check in with a friend. Treat each failure as a learning experience: how will I prevent this in the future, what did I learn about myself, what can I do to set myself up for success? Do not allow a simple setback to throw you off course. It is human to forget our goals, that is why we need reminders. Jewish tradition is full of physical reminders of our commitment to our values and community. Passing a [mezuzah](#) as we enter a home and putting on ritual garments like [kippas](#), [tallit](#), and [tefillin](#) are all physical reminders of commitments we've made. Our ancient texts assumed people would need constant signs to remember what it means to be a good person in society. Consider hanging a sign on your door, or stick a note to your computer that says "if you're on Twitter again, close me and call Mom". Figure out what reminders you need to stick to your plan and set yourself up for success.

Mindfulness - Sandy Jolles, [Wellness Expert & Personal Trainer](#)

Sandy Jolles is a dynamic wellness professional who tries to bring in a holistic approach to mindfulness and wellness. Here are two practices that you can do from your desk to help center you in the moment.

1) Alternate Nostril Breathing

[Here's a quick How To](#)

Every 1 1/2 to 3 minutes each nostril opens a little bit more and that's basically the way the body is going to balance your energy naturally. You will find that if you're concentrating, working, or you're stressed, your right nostril will be very open and your left nostril will be a little bit more closed. The idea is that you can alter your state by just breathing in the nostril that you want to enhance.

When you are feeling overtired: Close up your left nostril, breath in your right and then breath out your left. You are energizing that part of your body.

If you are having trouble sleeping: Do the opposite. If you can't go to sleep you want to breathe in your left and breath out your right.

2) Simple meditation

Another practice you can do at your desk is a very simple meditation. Just close your eyes, focus on your breath, and count from 1 to 10 with every breath. Inhale 1 and exhale the 2, inhale the 3 and exhale the 4 - and you can do this all the way to 10. Then you go backwards.

Now invariably, the mind is going to get busy and you're going to question.... was I on 5 or was I on 6? When that happens, start over to 1 and you just keep doing it. This is the most popular form of meditation and based on what Zen Buddhists do. If you get distracted, you just do it again. This will maybe take you 2 or 3 minutes, but it will take

those brainwaves and slow them down and then maybe you get a little taste of that little inner stillness.

Physician and Physical Therapy Wellness - From [Dr. Marc Gruner, DO](#) and [Dr. Brian Sherman, DPT](#).

Former [Jewish Doctor of the Week](#) Marc Gruner and his Colleague Dr. Brian Sherman shared with us a few exercises to keep us relaxed and agile to prevent us from doing long term damage to our bodies. If you have any questions about how to stay fit, and healthy during Covid this winter, feel free to meet with them at [Point Performance](#).

During this time, staying safe and keeping distance has become a priority. This has also caused us all to spend much more time at home and sedentary. We are moving less overall, sitting more and using technology more than ever. It is important to remember physical activity is crucial to maintaining our healthy lifestyle, and movement is a priority. When you're sitting at your desk, couch or chair, try to listen to what your body is telling you. Do you find yourself moving around a lot? Grabbing your neck or back to try to massage out those kinks or knots? Stiffness may be setting in. Joint stiffness is extremely common when being still in any position for 30 min. However, this does not necessarily mean you are injured. I recommend some easy stretches and movements that can help loosen joints within your middle and lower back to improve posture and avoid excess pain.

When we sit for an extended period of time, our head shoulders, chest and mid back start to drift forward. We should remember to be conscious of our positioning, especially when pain or discomfort sets in. Simply standing up and moving around for just 2-5 minutes will help decrease stiffness and promote blood flow throughout your body. You can also utilize the slouch, overcorrect, relax strategy. While sitting at your desk or table, you can slouch letting your body relax, then arch your back overcorrecting your posture finding an extra tall position then release and return to your natural comfortable position prior to returning to your task or work. You will most often find yourself in an improved position overall. This will give you a better frame of reference of it's alignment and will help make you more mindful of your body position throughout the day.

- 1) Seated Thoracic Extension - Begin in a sitting upright position with your arms crossed over your chest, slowly arch your trunk backwards and hold for 3-5 seconds, then return to an upright position and repeat 10 times. Keep your movements slow and controlled and do not move through pain.



- 2) Standing Scapular Retraction or “Scap Squeezes” - Begin in a standing upright positioning with your arms resting at your sides. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together for 3-5 seconds, then relax them and repeat 10 times. Make sure to keep your back relaxed and do not shrug your shoulders during the exercise.



In addition to some mobility exercises to improve your range of motion, exercise is essential to a healthy lifestyle. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends all health adults aged 18-65 should participate in moderate intensity (brisk walk) aerobic exercise for a minimum of 30 minutes five days a week, or vigorous intense (runnings or tennis match) aerobic exercise for a minimum of 20 minutes three days per week. Additionally, every adult should perform activities that maintain or increase muscular strength for a minimum of two days per week.

Are you doing something to help the community during the election that you want us to share? Shoot me an email at Alexf@gatherdc.org and we can talk about ways to highlight your work!