

Opinion

Doctor feelgood

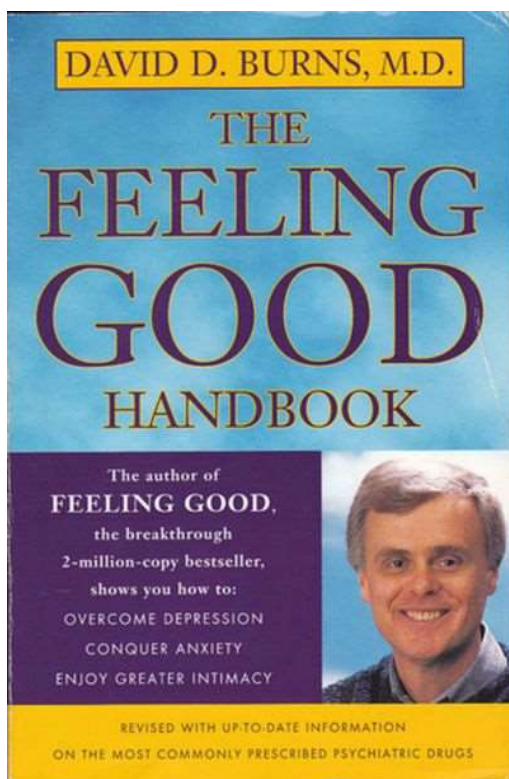
TEN TIPS TO HELP YOU CALM DOWN IN THESE INCREDIBLY STRESSFUL TIMES

By: Barbara Bowes

Posted: **04/11/2020 4:00 AM**

Everyone should now be totally familiar with COVID-19-era terms like "social distancing" and "self-isolation." So now, I'm suggesting it's also time to pay attention to "self-regulation." In other words, each individual needs to pay attention to their personal stress and take steps to control "mind over mood."

It doesn't matter whether you are working out of your home and/or you are still in the workplace, this COVID-19 crisis is causing significant stress, 24 hours a day. And the stress is not normal. Rather, it's high pressure. People are worried about their future; they're worried about their investments and their financial status. They are worried about their paycheque. They are worried about their rent.



In addition, those individuals who have been laid off and are waiting for employment insurance or other government programs are anxiously awaiting further instructions on when and how this will happen. No matter what, life right now is all about stress, stress and more stress.

While most employers have mental health counselling as part of their employee benefit plan, some governments have also taken action to initiate mental health counselling to the general population. (The province was to launch an online mental health therapy program in the coming days to help Manitobans cope with the anxiety caused by the pandemic.) Dedicated local psychologists and therapists are also reaching out

to offer free counselling service to those in need. Managers and supervisors are doing their part by communicating with their employees on a regular and sometimes daily basis. However, all of these tactics may still not be enough for someone who is literally falling apart as a result of stress.

This is where idea of "self-regulation" comes in. When referring to self-regulation, I am suggesting that each person can indeed take steps on their own to help overcome the stress they are experiencing. It requires focus and specific methods and tools, yet these methods and tools are not difficult.

When I am counselling an individual experiencing job loss and I see they are experiencing extreme stress, I often refer them to a handbook written by Dr. David Burns called *The Feeling Good Handbook*. Dr. Burns believes people can change how they feel and his handbook offers exercises and tools to help people understand themselves and develop a pathway to conquer their stress and anxiety. I am pleased to share with you some of his advice.

First, Dr. Burns suggests that every type of negative feeling comes from a specific negative thought. For instance, sadness comes from thoughts of loss, frustration comes from thoughts of unfulfilled expectations while anxiety and panic come from thoughts of danger. Dr. Burns also suggests that people fool themselves and create misery by telling themselves things that are simply not true. These thoughts, which he refers to as "distorted thinking" are automatic, unconscious thoughts.

Dr. Burns' list of 10 forms of distorted thinking has become well known as a powerful tool that anyone can use to test the truth of what they are saying to themselves. In other words, he believes that people can talk themselves out of a bad mood or stress. I have suggested to clients that they print this list of 10 forms of distorted thinking and hang it on a cupboard door because in times of severe stress, you can refer to it as many times a day as is needed to calm yourself down. And believe me, it works. The list of 10 is as follows:

- **All-or-nothing thinking** — in this case, an individual views issues in terms of "either/or." In other words, they think that something is absolutely perfect and/or a total failure. All-or-nothing thinking leaves no room for other alternatives. It usually creates an intense negative reaction and anger because there is no middle ground. Think about what you are saying to yourself and try to look at the issues as a continuum.
- **Overgeneralization** — this distorted thinking occurs when an individual views one single negative event as a neverending pattern. They use words such as "always" or "never" to describe an event. For instance, "I'm always the first to lose my job" or "I never

get a fair chance." Stay away from overgeneralizing by being specific and focusing on the here and now.

- **Negative mental filter** — this type of thinking occurs when people focus on one negative detail while ignoring anything that was positive and then dwelling on the negative for days. In other words, people are being so self-critical that they contribute to their own misery. Try to identify some positives and focus on appreciating some of these elements.

- **Discounting the positive** — some people look at a positive experience and then say that it simply "doesn't count." This creates negative emotions because essentially individuals are telling themselves that they are inadequate. This eliminates any joy that could arise from the experience. Take time to focus on appreciating the positives.

- **Jumping to conclusions** — this common example of faulty thinking occurs when people interpret things from a negative perspective without checking any facts. They just arbitrarily come to a conclusion. In other words, their mind reading contributes to their own anxiety and/or anger. At the same time, some people play the "what if?" game where they create future scenarios that lead them to visions of disaster. Going forward, focus on the present time, think about alternatives and check them out for factual information.

- **Magnification** — when under stress, some people blow an issue out of proportion by magnifying or exaggerating the problem. They then compare their problem as worse than another person's problem which only causes more discouragement. Focus on reality and keep things in perspective.

- **Emotional reasoning** — with this type of distorted thinking, people believe their negative emotions truly reflects the way things really are. For instance, someone who is temporarily laid off may think they'll never get their job back. Or, if someone feels hopeless, they believe they really are hopeless. To overcome this type of thinking, take time to listen to both your head and your heart.

- **Should statements** — "I shouldn't have said this" or "I shouldn't have done that" are all statements that direct negativity towards oneself and only leads to guilt. Statements such as, "He shouldn't have said that or done that," cause anger and frustration. On the other hand, some "should" statements simply cause people to rebel. Take time to review your expectations and ensure they are in line with reality.

- **Labelling** — this type of thinking is irrational and is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. For instance, if an individual made a mistake, they might automatically label themselves as a loser. Labelling can also be focused on another person. This can create personal discouragement as well as hostility against another individual and contribute more to the level of anxiety. Turn thinking around to be more realistic and constructive.

- **Personalization and blame** — this distorted type of thinking sees an individual holding themselves personally responsible for something that wasn't entirely under their control. They blame themselves before they stop to look at the cause of the problem. This can result in guilt, shame and feelings of inadequacy. Individuals can also blame other people for their problem without looking at how they themselves contribute. The so-called blame game isn't very helpful in terms of reducing stress; instead take time to look at all the factors that contribute to the problem.

Society and the world are experiencing an unprecedented event. So, stress is a natural reaction because everything seems so out of control. Yet, we need to keep in mind that the only thing we can control is ourselves and this can be done through "self-regulation". It means sitting down and logically assessing what is happening on a day-to-day basis and being much more aware of the risks of letting twisted thinking take over one's thoughts.

Barbara J. Bowes, FCPHR, CCP, M.Ed., of the consulting firm Legacy Bowes, is the author of eight books, a radio personality, a speaker, an executive coach and workshop leader. She is also chairwoman of the Manitoba Status of Women. She can be reached at barb@egacybowes.com