

# How to Cope in *Precedented* Times

Becoming a Master of Adaptation

BY SARAH MYERS



“How you gonna ever find your place...  
Runnin’ at an artificial pace?”

—*Gin Blossoms*

It’s amazing how quickly phrases like “unprecedented times,” “new normal,” and “reentry” have become imprinted in our psyches. Just hearing them can trigger feelings of exhaustion, apathy, confusion, and unease. But behind these buzz words are some simple lessons: (1) change is the only certainty in life; (2) we must not take anything or anyone for granted; and (3) we’re more resilient, adaptable, and flexible than we thought.

## Understanding Our Coping Mechanisms

Clinical and neurological researchers have been telling us for years how stressful sudden

and unexpected changes in our environment, routine, and sense of safety can be, and we now have the personal experiential data to back that up. But while we’re all experiencing the same pandemic, the stress of pandemic living has affected us in individual ways. Some of us may be struggling with relationships and communication. Others may be dealing with mental health issues (anxiety, panic attacks, depression, etc.) or struggling with basic self-care (finding it difficult to get enough sleep, eat right, exercise, or clean the house). We may be self-medicating with drugs, alcohol, and other processes (gambling, eating, internet, etc.), or taking our emotions out on others (treating them with less civility, professionalism, and basic common courtesy). If you identify with all or most of these coping mechanisms, you’re not alone.

And yet, we *are* coping, and we are figuring it out. Yes, every day there is some sort of crisis, either in our personal lives, at work, or in the news, and some of us have become jaded and numb by the atrocities we are seeing and hearing about. We have experienced grief, loss, isolation, despair, and true fear on a regular basis. But do not forget that hope, compassion, love, humor, innovation, and a sense of community and support are also experienced on a regular basis and are fueling our collective drive to improve our responses to this pandemic and its aftermath.

## How Humans React and Adapt to Change

We have gone through one of the most extreme shifts in daily life that the developed world has seen in recent generations, and the threat of change continues every day on both macro and micro levels. Thankfully, when the “unprecedented” becomes “precedented,” or, better said, when change becomes the accepted norm, humans adapt. Granted, adaptation is not always a pleasant experience. Our minds rebel against change, and our nervous systems go into high alert, creating anxiety about every detail—how long will we have to wear masks? How long with the vaccine last? Is it safe for the kids to go back to school? Will I be at risk back at the office? What are the new procedures for reentry? What are the new guidelines? Do I need to replan that visit to see my family or friend *again*? What are my pets going to do if I go back to the office? How am I going to pay the rent/mortgage? The list of concerns grows every day, demanding our attention and causing our bodies to release chemicals as though we were in acute danger. Metaphorically speaking, the amount of adrenaline and cortisol produced by humankind in the past year could probably fuel a rocket to Mars.

Change also creates strange polarities and contradictory tendencies. People feel claustrophobic and agoraphobic at the same time and can become reactive instead of responsive. In addition, our tolerance for discomfort diminishes for a short time, leading to all sorts of self-sabotaging behaviors and tendencies to take our stress out on others. As

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Victor Frankl said, “an abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.” That is not to say that all the reactions are acceptable; obviously, it’s never okay to physically or emotionally abuse someone. But if at times you have not “recognized yourself” in the past year, that makes sense.

Adapting is about change, and we might be shocked by how we behave or the things we say or think when we are faced with such extreme stressors for such long periods of time. Maybe some of the things you thought were important are not so important in the face of a pandemic, or the type of law you are practicing does not suit the “new normal” or telework, or you have realized you would be happier doing something else. Maybe your relationships need adjusting, considering what you have learned about yourself and your needs. Maybe you are more of an introvert than you thought

because it turns out you love working from home. Self-discovery and a shift in priorities are hallmarks of adaptation, often mixed in with moments of confusion and the chaotic feelings that also accompany drastic change.

### Allowing Conflicting Feelings

We’re all being forced to adapt and to face these changes. To help our intelligence and cognitive abilities during this time, and to perceive healthy mental and psychological well-being, we need to embrace dichotomies. In other words, we need to give ourselves permission to be “both/and” rather than “either/or.” For example:

- We can go “kicking and screaming,” or we can take the path of least resistance. Some days, it will be both.
- We can accept that everything we knew has been forever changed, or we can long for the “days of yore.” Some days, it is both.

■ We can do our best to take care of ourselves during the change and to support those around us with patience, compassion, and understanding, or we can assume the worst in others and assume they had a negative tone when they wrote that email or text. Some days, it has been both.

■ We can approach every day with hopeful anticipation of how this is going to turn out and have faith that the best and brightest of humankind will create new solutions to help us, or we can pessimistically believe that the country has “gone to the dogs” and that no one knows what they are doing. If you watch the news or look at social media often, it will definitely be both.

### 13 Healthy Coping Strategies

Generalities, dichotomies, and rhetoric aside, there are practical things we can do to help our



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brains and nervous, immune, digestive, and endocrine systems adapt to change:

1. Get consistent amounts of sleep. Consistency is more important than a specific number of hours each night. And, if you can, catch a 10- to 20-minute nap during the day. If naps are not an option, take at least 5 to 10 minutes to lay down on the floor or a couch, or sit in a meditative position away from your screens, and focus on breathing with your eyes closed. Research shows this can positively impact the brain and nervous system the same way a nap does, and it will prevent afternoon grogginess. Inhale for a count of four, hold for a two-count, and exhale for a count of four.
2. Slow down. Stress hormones cause our minds to race (perseverate and ruminate) and our bodies to move quickly, causing us to be clumsier and more forgetful. For example, we might bump into furniture, put our keys in the refrigerator, or wonder why we walked into a room. Slowing down and concentrating on the present moment, or what we are doing in that moment, helps the brain assimilate to change.
3. Carefully plan your to-do lists. Get more strategic about what you take on in a day. During times of change, we need to be cautious with how we spend our mental and physical energy the same way we need to be prudent with our finances. Reserve time for getting sidelined or distracted with last minute to-dos, since they happen every day; do not sabotage yourself by waiting until the last minute to meet deadlines, as that stress compromises your health. Also, take more time to be creative and contemplative with your work when possible.
4. Review your calendar Sunday evening. Don't go into a Monday without a clear sense of what the week ahead will bring, and be ready and prepared for Monday meetings. Starting your week off feeling put together and prepared relaxes the nervous system, reduces adrenaline and cortisol, and sets you up for success.
5. Set aside one day a week as a "no-work" day. It should be two days a week, but let's be realistic: that's not possible for many of

us. If you set reasonable goals, you have a better chance of achieving them!


6. Focus on nutrition. Keep a consistent mealtime schedule, plan out your meals, and eat whatever foods make you feel your best. Digestion both drastically impacts, and is drastically impacted by, stress hormones. Eating healthy will help your cognitive skills and your energy levels so you can face changes in your life.
7. Take more breaks during the day and move around. Sitting is an occupational hazard for attorneys, and it is detrimental for cognitive skills, intelligence, and energy levels.
8. Be more forgiving and "cool your jets." Of course, there is a place and time to be upset. But you cognitively and physiologically cause harm to yourself if you are resentful, outraged, and angry on a regular basis. Channel those emotions into something practical instead.
9. Reduce screen time. Detox from your devices, particularly before bed. The negatives far outweigh the positives!
10. Schedule time to speak with people you enjoy. Who makes you laugh, knows the "real" you, and appreciates you? Who talks as much as they listen and helps you stay positive and motivated? Who listens to your stories, commiserates, and yet does not enable too much negativity? Who demonstrates good boundaries and says "no" when they realize they have too much on their plate? Who models interdependence versus codependence? Who encourages you to take accountability for your moods and actions? *Those* are the people you want to spend more time with during times of change.
11. Smile more. When having difficulty, "fake it until you make it." When you smile and laugh, your body releases hormones and chemicals that heal the damage stress has done to your system. You don't have to do it all the time, or even where others can see; just smile more than you are now.
12. Ditch the perfectionism. When you feel like you don't know what you're doing or like you are failing, remember that *everyone* feels that way. No one feels like they have

been the perfect parent, manager, leader, employee, team member, family member, or friend during this time. There is no way to be perfect at anything during times of adaptation or change; that's the whole point! We're creating a new paradigm in how we work, communicate, and operate. It's not about getting things right or perfect; it's about learning how to do it better the next time we have the opportunity.

13. Dump the cortisol and detox the adrenaline. Reducing toxic stress chemicals and hormones in the body is surprisingly easy. Stay hydrated, laugh more, and focus on breathing throughout the day. We get so focused on the stressor that we forget to drink water, we get too serious to laugh, and we hold our breath as we attempt to multitask.

### Memorize the "Big Three" of Self-Care

If you take nothing else away from this article, *Laugh, Breathe, and Hydrate*. When in doubt, or when you are being hard on yourself or critical of others, *Laugh, Breathe, and Hydrate*. When you feel stressed, overwhelmed by the change going on around you, or worried about the future, *Laugh, Breathe, and Hydrate*. While these three self-care techniques will not make all of the stressors magically disappear, they will help you access the parts of your brain that are critical for good decision-making, and your brain and body will thank you by adapting faster to the changes around you!

If you're struggling with change and adapting to the stressors you're facing, contact COLAP at [info@coloradolap.org](mailto:info@coloradolap.org) or (303) 986-3345 for a *free and confidential* well-being consultation. 



**Sarah Myers** is the executive director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). She is a Colorado licensed attorney, licensed marriage and family therapist, and licensed addiction counselor. Myers is also a licensed post-graduate level teacher and certified trauma and abuse psychotherapist. She has over 20 years of experience specializing in stress management, psychoneuroimmunology, compassion fatigue, professional burnout, and behavioral health issues for legal professionals.

**Coordinating Editor:** Sarah Myers, [smyers@coloradolap.org](mailto:smyers@coloradolap.org)