

Dear Fellow Spartans,

In just a few short weeks, our world has changed. Like most people on the planet, those of us within the MSU Community – faculty, staff, students, and our families and friends alike – are finding ourselves struggling with a similar feeling, an unsettling discomfort that comes with so much ambiguity and uncertainty. At any given moment, we may feel *overwhelmed, lonely, isolated, sad, anxious, frustrated, angry, confused, exhausted, stressed, bored, guilty, lethargic, fearful, or unmotivated*. At other times, we might also feel *happiness, calm, peace, gratitude, excitement, or even joy*. These feelings might come and go throughout the course of even a single day. We might even feel two or more of these emotions simultaneously. Sometimes, all of this feeling might leave us exhausted and overwhelmed.

And, that's all completely normal.

Yes, that's right: it's normal to feel a huge range of emotions during a time like this. But, it can also be hard to feel so much all at once. The good news is that there a number of helpful steps you can take right now.

- **First and foremost, validate the experiences of each other.** It's critical to acknowledge that while we are all in the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. Although we share many universal experiences during this COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital to also recognize the specific impacts for some in our community. Specifically, we recently learned from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services that “as of April 19, 2020, African American residents comprise 33% of cases and 40% of deaths due to COVID-19 in Michigan, despite comprising only 14% of the state's population.” Moreover, we also know that trauma survivors may be deeply impacted by the stressors of uncertainty and loss during this time, thus compounding the concerns they may be facing.
- **Learn the difference between coping strategies that help you, and those that don't.** Most of us have at least a few familiar strategies that we will pull out when we start to feel stress. Some of those do a great job at taking good care of our mind and body, and over time result in helping us feel a little bit better, even if things are still hard. But, some other coping tactics might leave us feeling better right away, but then have us feeling much worse later. Pay attention to your choices and what you are doing to take care of yourself, and consider that there is a difference between *comfort* and *care*. Comfort may give us temporary relief, but causes problems over time (for example, heavy drinking as a way to cope with the stress of isolation). Care, on the other hand, tends to our emotional, physical, and spiritual needs *over time*, even if the effects aren't quite as immediate (for example, exercise to help with feelings of sadness about isolation).
- **Recognize and validate grief and loss.** Everyone around us is experiencing some form of loss right now. The loss of opportunities, loss of experiences, loss of normalcy, loss of control, and the loss of certainty. For some, this also includes the loss of life of our loved ones – families, friends, neighbors, and colleagues throughout Michigan, the U.S., and the world. An essential component of coping during this time is recognizing and validating the loss we are all experiencing. When we experience loss, the feeling that comes with it is grief, and it's important to take the time to take care of ourselves while we grieve. Practice self-compassion. Treat yourself as you would treat a friend who was dealing with a loss. Check in with yourself. Take the time you need to feel those feelings.

- **Try to stay in the present.** When faced with so much uncertainty, our brains have a tendency to try to protect us from danger by focusing our attention on the potential threats and risks. That often has us thinking a lot about the future, trying to anticipate what problems might come in an effort to be prepared. The trouble with that is that we actually have very little control of the future, and human beings tend to feel worse when we focus on what we can't control. When you notice that you are doing that, try to return to the present moment, which is the only place where we do have some control. Explore meditation techniques that help our brains come back to the now.
- **Choose to focus on what you can control.** Times like this remind us that there is so much of the world that is out of our control, but spending too much time reflecting on what is out of our control can lead to feeling overwhelmed. Remind yourself daily what is in your control: for example, how you treat others, what you eat and drink, how you support your community, how much news you consume. Consider learning to accept what is, and to "let go" of things outside of your control. Uncertainty, although uncomfortable, is not necessarily dangerous.
- **Create a routine schedule.** We all do our best when our days have some structure and consistency to them. Creating to a realistic routine will assist with providing you with a sense of normalcy, and can give you a sense of control. Remember to build in time to take care of your emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual needs.
- **Be kind to yourself and to others; many of us are not going to be as productive and focused as we were before all of this.** Our current social distancing measures were put in place to stay safe, not to ensure we stay as productive or operational as normal. You may not have all the resources you once did, at least not right away, or in the same way. Also, when people are dealing with so much loss and change, we can expect that they will not be able to concentrate and focus as much as they are able to typically. It's important that we accept and roll with that reality. Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can right now. Develop a flexible and realistic set of expectations for yourselves and each other, and choose compassion over judgement during inevitable moments of frustration.
- **Practice gratitude.** As social distancing practices continue, we are likely to stumble upon some unintended benefits of our current circumstances. Seeing these unanticipated changes as opportunities may prove fruitful. Perhaps you have more time to connect with family and friends. Maybe you are able to be more active during the daytime hours. This may be a good time to re-engage an old hobby, re-connect with an old friend, dust off an old book, or get back to an instrument you once loved playing.
- **Social distancing ≠ social isolation.** Though we need to follow the guidelines of social distancing in order to ensure public health, we must also prioritize social support and connection. Stay connected with others through virtual means. Reach out and help others in need. Not only is this important for our communities, but also for ourselves in fulfilling a greater sense of purpose beyond our own needs.

Remember: this moment is temporary. Although none of us know exactly when this will end, it will not last forever. True, it is likely that the road ahead will be different than before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the current circumstances will end eventually.

Although you may be physically separated, you are not alone. As Spartans, we will continue to be here for one another. Please know that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) are operating remotely and continue to be available to serve our Spartan community.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a confidential counseling service provided at no cost to MSU faculty, staff, retirees, graduate student employees, and their benefits eligible family members (partners, spouses, and children). To make an appointment to meet with an EAP counselor, contact them by sending an email to eap@msu.edu, or call 517-355-4506, Monday through Friday between 8:00am and 4:30pm. We would be happy to answer any questions about the program and our ability to assist you with your concerns. For more information, feel free to contact the EAP, or visit their website at <http://eap.msu.edu>.

Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) offers registered MSU students (undergraduate and graduate) assistance with a wide range of concerns, including depression, anxiety, homesickness, issues with adjustment, acculturation, or relationships, LBGQT concerns, trauma, eating or body image, and other personal mental health issues. If you are an MSU student, the following options are available to you:

- If you have not previously been to CAPS (or are not currently in our care) and would like to talk with a counselor, please complete a brief survey at this link to get started: https://msu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9GNsDVC3VIH3wnr
- If you are in crisis, you can call us at 517-355-8270 and press “1” after the prompt to speak with a crisis counselor 24/7
- If you have any other questions or need to reschedule your appointment, please email us at caps@msu.edu or call us at 517-355-8270 and press “3” to leave a message at the prompt.
- For more information about CAPS services at this time please visit our homepage at www.caps.msu.edu

Sincerely,
Dr. David Weismantel
University Physician

Dr. Weismantel would like to acknowledge the important and amazing work of Dr. Elizabeth Koschmann, PhD and her program, TRAILS to Wellness, for providing influence and insight in the creation of this statement. Source: [TRAILS to Wellness](#) provides [information and resources](#) to support student and community mental health during COVID-19.