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Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You’re listening to The Friday Fix! Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

Today I’m talking about crisis fatigue.

You might have heard people use the phrase crisis fatigue during the pandemic. It refers to that level of burnout most of us started feeling just a few months into the pandemic.

Some people felt in constant crisis over their health or a loved one’s health. Other people were in a state of crisis because they were at risk of going hungry or losing their housing.
But all of us were uncertain about what was going to happen and for many people, there was almost a constant state of heightened stress.

Our bodies aren’t meant to stay in a state of heightened stress over a long period of time. But that constant flood of stress hormones leads to serious problems, like sleep issues, appetite changes, changes in mood, and loss of interest in doing fun things.

The pandemic isn’t the only crisis most people are dealing with either. Just turn on the news and you’ll hear about a whole bunch of crises—from the price of gas and the rise in inflation to the climate crisis and the war in Ukraine.

You might also be dealing with a personal crisis—like a health problem, the loss of a loved one, or an eviction notice. And you might find when one crisis resolves—or you get a temporary reprieve—another one pops up.

Sometimes, there’s a domino effect. You might lose your job which leads to an eviction notice. Without health insurance, you might not be able to take your medication. Without your medication, you might get sick—which makes it harder to find a new job.

After what feels like a constant crisis—or repeated crises—you might start to feel numb and have trouble functioning.

But it often takes a while for those things to set in. When a crisis begins, a surge of stress hormones helps us prepare to take action. But we can’t stay in a state of heightened alert for a long period of time. That’s when the fatigue sets in.

Crisis fatigue happens on both an individual level as well as on a community level.

When a crisis affects an entire community, there’s often a desire to band together to make things happen. People often support one another by saying, “We’re all in this
together!” This camaraderie helps people all pitch in and get things cleaned up after a natural disaster, for example.

But as a crisis keeps dragging on, people often turn against one another as they grow tired and things can get ugly.

We saw this happen during the pandemic. Most people wanted to work together in the beginning. Of course, we couldn’t all agree on what working together looked like during a pandemic, but most people tried to do their part.

But pretty soon, it seemed like no one could get along and people were working against each other because the state of crisis lasted longer than we could cooperate.

We saw this in the healthcare industry. In fact, researchers who have been studying how to better help healthcare workers in the event that we have another pandemic, found that initially, healthcare workers were eager to step up and battle the crisis. But over time, their commitment declined. Some healthcare workers quit. Others kept showing up but were clearly burned out.

The number one reason why their commitment declined? Research shows one of the main reasons was because of a lack of support and a lack of appreciation.

It wasn’t because they lacked mental strength or because they weren’t being paid enough or anything like that. It was because they weren’t getting enough support and they weren’t being appreciated for the fact that they were putting their lives at risk to help others. And they were working around the clock to treat sick people.

While it’s clear we weren’t giving them enough support in terms of resources they needed to do their job well, we also didn’t give them enough emotional support.
Sometimes, in the event of a short-term crisis, people don’t need emotional support. They need help taking positive action. If your mom calls to say there’s a tornado warning at her house, you shouldn’t spend a lot of time talking about how she feels about the tornado. Hopefully, you’ll give her some ideas about what she can do to stay safe. Tell her to go in the basement or a storm shelter.

But if your friend develops a chronic health condition, a few weeks or months into their illness, they may want to talk about their emotional distress with you or maybe someone else who has the same illness. Getting emotional support may help them feel better.

It’s not all that surprising that emotional support is the key to dealing with crisis fatigue. After all, there’s a lot of research that shows social support is the key to getting through tough times.

Take the 9/11 first responders. The firefighters, police officers, and emergency personnel who responded to the scene witnessed horrific things. Some of them developed post traumatic stress disorder. Some of them didn’t. In fact, some people even grew from their experience—known as post traumatic growth. When researchers examined why some people developed serious mental health problems and others didn’t, they found social support was a main factor. The more social support people had, the less likely they were to develop PTSD.

We underestimate the importance of social support. We talk about the coping skills we should use to manage stress, like getting exercise and practicing gratitude. And while those things are important, social support may be even more important.

Social support is key for so many issues. People with depression often feel completely alone with their thoughts and feelings. Connecting with other people helps them see that what they’re going through might be more common than they thought. Somehow, just knowing that other people can relate to what you’re going through goes a long way in the healing process.
But when there’s a crisis, we often suffer in silence for many reasons:

- We don’t want to burden anyone else.
- We don’t want people to feel sorry for us.
- We don’t want anyone to think we’re crazy.
- We don’t think anyone else will understand.
- We aren’t sure what to say or how to say it.

This can be true in a personal crisis, like when you’re dealing with a family members’ substance abuse problem or you’re struggling with a health problem. But it can also be true in a shared crisis, like the pandemic or a natural disaster.

But it’s important to remember that getting support may carry some of those risks. But it could potentially provide some big benefits—like improving your mental health so you can get through a crisis. And reducing the scars the crisis leaves on you.

Keep in mind that support comes in many forms. You might have friends and family you can talk to. But there’s also a chance they either don’t understand or don’t know what to say. It’s not helpful to talk to someone who says things like, “You shouldn’t worry so much,” or “I’m sure everything will turn out just fine.” You need someone who can listen without offering advice.

The last thing you want to do is commiserate with someone and leave the conversation feeling even worse than you did before.

The key to determining if the support you’re getting is actually helpful is to ask yourself whether a conversation leaves you feeling empowered. Perhaps you walk away feeling confident about the next steps you’re going to take or you feel empowered to manage your emotions better.
The same can be said for a support group. There are lots of support groups in communities for people struggling with things like substance abuse, grief, certain physical health conditions and mental health conditions.

During COVID, there many specific groups as well for people who were dealing with grief related to COVID, anxiety, or long-haul issues.

If you're going to attend a support group to help you manage crisis fatigue, use the same rule as if you're getting emotional support from a friend or family member. Ask yourself if the group empowers you. Sometimes, support groups accidentally support the problem. They talk about symptoms, tragedies, and horrors in a way that leaves members feeling even more hopeless and helpless. So make sure any support group you join is talking about coping skills, strategies for doing better, and actionable steps you can take--while also validating how you feel.

If you want to know about local support group opportunities, contact your community health center, your doctor's office, or a local hospital and ask them what's available near you.

You don't necessarily need to attend a support group in person or in your local community. You might also find support from people online. Check out forums on apps like Reddit or look for Facebook groups or online forums where you can connect with other people.

Of course, talking to a therapist can also be a way to get support. If you're able to hire someone you can talk to in-person or online, therapy may help you get the support you need to get through a crisis.

Remember, crisis fatigue is normal. It's not a sign that you're not strong enough or that you're doing something wrong. We weren't meant to live in a state of constant crisis.
But, the best way to manage the crisis is to find some social support for yourself. Having someone you can talk to about what you’re going through can be key to helping you get through it.

There’s an old quote that says, “A burden shared is a burden halved.” It’s true. Sharing your burdens with other people can keep you from feeling like you have to carry the weight of the world around on your shoulders by yourself. So if you are struggling to manage feelings of crisis fatigue right now, talk about and see what happens.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger!

Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who has an incredible ability to stay calm during a crisis), Nick Valentin.