



KARYN SHANKS MD

*Heart, Hope, Healing*

# COVID-19: How to Protect Your Whole Self in a Global Pandemic

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | APRIL 6, 2020



We're smack in the middle of a global viral pandemic (COVID-19) unlike anything most of us have ever lived through. It's a stark and sudden reality. We're isolating ourselves and taking precautions. And we're scared.

What else can we do? What else *should* we do? How do we take care of our *whole* selves?

**Right now, *protection* has two dimensions:**

- **Physical protection:** both for ourselves and others.
- **Emotional protection:** from excessive fear related to information overwhelm and uncertainty.

We want to be informed, do the right things, and stay well.

But we also have to protect ourselves from too much information, the wrong kind of

information, and loss of balanced perspective caused by uncertainty about our world and our futures.

## Physical Protection

We're all following physical isolation protocols designed to "flatten the curve" -the curve that represents an estimate of the number of individuals who will suffer severe COVID-19 illness and death at the projected peak of the pandemic.

While these measures and our sacrifices will not stop the pandemic, the hope is we will slow its progression such that needed scientific knowledge, medical resources, and prevention strategies can catch up. Without them, increasing numbers of communities will experience overwhelm and devastation.

## Physical Isolation

Follow published guidelines established by the experts. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website maintains [updated recommendations](#) regarding COVID-19 symptoms, when to seek help, testing, and how and when to self-quarantine.

The recommendations for sheltering in place are important to protect the most vulnerable in our communities—the estimated 20% of our population most likely to become severely ill as a result of a COVID-19 infection.

Who are the most vulnerable in this epidemic? Early epidemiologic analysis suggests they are as follows: the elderly (particularly those living in care centers), people at any age with chronic illness (the more chronic illnesses, the greater the risk), health care workers on the front lines, and those needing urgent or emergency care for non-COVID reasons who may suffer from lack of resources.

## Vigilant Self Care

In addition to physical isolation, vigilance with the foundational aspects of self-care is crucial to build physical resilience, precisely what we all need as this pandemic moves forward and as more of us are exposed to the virus.

It has been estimated, based on past pandemics, that at least 60% of the population will need to develop immunity from exposure to COVID-19 before the pandemic will recede. This means that most of us will become sick to varying degrees.

Viruses are opportunists—they are the most virulent when they land in a host who lacks the support of a strong immune response. Robust self-care is the critical basis of the resilience

we need in the face of this challenge.

### **The immunity power players are:**

- good sleep,
- [healthy food](#) (whole foods, low sugar, lots of plants),
- movement,
- exposure to Nature,
- community and connection,
- practices to reduce fear and anxiety,
- avoidance of toxins and irritants, and

## Emotional Protection

Fear keeps us alive. It mobilizes us to take positive action, moving us and others out of harm's way.

Excessive fear is paralyzing and soul-killing. It brings its own form of devastation.

## Reframe Your Sacrifices

We're all uncomfortable and making sacrifices right now. It's important to remember why. I like to think of what we're doing as a profound form of **compassionate social activism**. Thought of in this way, it's an active process that we control and is how we serve the higher good of all right now. This reframes our sacrifices into something that's beautiful.

Compassion has been shown in numerous [scientific studies](#) to support immune function in both the [compassionate](#) and the [recipient](#). Reframing our sacrifices becomes powerful medicine.

## Limit the Influx of Information

Information overload—especially when it's negative—overwhelms and incapacitates us, rather than informs and activates us. It's counter-productive and dangerous.

### **Limit your exposure to news.**

Once daily check-ins are enough. Turn to trusted, no-nonsense, non-sensationalistic sources. And, never start your day with it—fortify yourself with positive experiences and practices

first.

### **Limit social media.**

I've found myself going down the rabbit hole of fear-provoking articles and personal narratives of those suffering on the front lines of the pandemic—all posted by well-meaning friends. I recognize these as total soul-sappers and have learned to stay away from them.

By all means use social media to connect with friends and family. Pause at positive posts and soak them in. Strictly avoid the rest.

## Focus on the Things You Can Control

We can't control the world around us. It's chaotic and uncertain and always will be. But we can control ourselves. We can control our homes and our schedules. We can focus on the beautiful *certain* elements of ourselves and our lives.

Structure: calm your nervous system with the illusion of certainty.

Do you get what I'm saying here? If we build a structure into our lives—a routine of positive, supportive habits and rituals, and a schedule for doing them—we know what to do and when to do it. We're creatures of habit. We need the solace and guidance of that right now.

I start my day, every day, with journaling, meditation, tea, and dog in my lap. Now that I can't go out to my gym or attend yoga classes, the next thing on my agenda is my home workout in the basement or a long walk with my dog, keeping to my usual schedule. Then I work during "work hours," virtual visits with clients or writing. Dog walks come later in the afternoon, followed by supper preparation. We have a family supper after everyone's work is complete at around 6. And I'm in bed by 8 to read and get a full night's sleep.

Your schedule and routine will look different than mine. Write it down and stick with it.

### Self-Care

We talked about self-care as foundational to physical protection, but it also provides structure. Self-care practices are key parts of our lives we have full control over. Even during a pandemic in physical isolation. Now more than ever we need the structure, nourishment, and critical physical and emotional support of self-care.

### Meditative Practices

These soothe and calm our nervous systems and are opportunities for us to center and ground ourselves. It's important, now more than ever, to tap into who we are, the essential self we can count on even when our world has been upended. To shift our perspectives—there is so much beauty in ourselves, our lives, and our world that can easily become overshadowed by disastrous circumstances. Remembering and focusing on the good

requires intention and practice.

If you have a meditation practice, turn to its nourishment now. Walk in nature, be present to the beauty all around you, create something, elevate yourself with music, play with your children and pets.

Socially Connect

We're practicing physical isolation right now, not social isolation. Reach out to your loved ones. And be creative—make use of the amazing virtual platforms we have (FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, for instance) and hang out.

How are you preventing and soothing fear right now?

Wishing you all well, my friends!

Love,

Karyn

## **KARYN SHANKS MD**

Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

**[READ MORE ARTICLES](#)**

**[CONTACT KARYN](#)**

**[GET INSPIRED](#)**