



## How to Take Care of Your Mental Health

New problems may arise as the pandemic progresses

by Michelle Crouch, [AARP \(https://www.aarp.org\)](https://www.aarp.org), April 9, 2020 | Comments: 4



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[En español \(/espanol/salud/vida-saludable/info-2020/cuidar-tu-salud-mental-durante-el-coronavirus.html?intcmp=AE-HLTH-TOSPA-TOGL-ES\)](https://espanol/salud/vida-saludable/info-2020/cuidar-tu-salud-mental-durante-el-coronavirus.html?intcmp=AE-HLTH-TOSPA-TOGL-ES). | As it upends normal life, COVID-19 is causing people to feel anxious, angry, frightened, frustrated and sad. All these feelings are normal during this pandemic, mental health experts say.

But as the crisis stretches on, the prolonged isolation, financial uncertainty and fears about the coronavirus will almost inevitably trigger a spike in mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, insomnia and substance abuse.

Notably, nearly half of Americans said the COVID-19 pandemic is already harming their mental health, in a recent poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation. And almost 1 in 5 said it has had a “major impact” on their mental health.

To boost your overall outlook, psychologists recommend getting plenty of sleep, eating balanced meals, going outside if you can and staying physically active. Self-compassion is also important; acknowledging your feelings can help you cope in a healthy way.

AARP asked psychologists for tips on how to handle specific mental health challenges during this stressful time.

## **"I can't stop worrying about COVID-19."**

If anxiety about the virus is dominating your thoughts, your first step is to reduce your exposure to news and social media. Psychologists agree that a constant cycle of negative headlines is linked to anxiety and stress.

"News puts your brain on alert, even if you don't realize it," says Jameca Woody Falconer, a licensed psychologist and faculty member at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. "I have patients who watch the news around the clock, flipping from channel to channel, and it just amps up their cortisol levels."

Consider limiting yourself to 30 minutes a day or just checking the news once in the morning and once in the evening.

Falconer also recommends connecting regularly with friends and family members by video chat or phone. "When you're alone with your thoughts, your anxiety can spiral," she says.

If your anxiety is interrupting your ability to function or to perform ordinary activities like paying bills or showering, that's a sign it's time to consider professional help.

Most therapists across the country are offering virtual sessions, and Medicare and many private insurers have expanded their coverage to include teletherapy. Ask your primary care provider for a referral, or use the national Crisis Text Line. Texting HOME to 741741 connects you to trained volunteer crisis counselors who reply quickly and are available 24/7.

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**For the latest coronavirus news and advice go to [AARP.org/coronavirus \(/health/\)](https://aarp.org/coronavirus(/health/)).**

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## **"I'm so anxious I can't sleep."**

Psychologists say fears about the virus are keeping many of their patients up at night. "It's a big deal," says Kristin Daley, a clinical psychologist and sleep expert at BASE Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Worry and fear release fight-or-flight hormones in your brain that make you feel agitated and hyper-vigilant, she explains, making it harder for you to enter the restful state needed for sleep.

If you can't get your brain to turn off at night, Daley suggests setting aside some “worry time” each day, when you write down your concerns. “After dinner take 10 minutes where you just bullet-point everything your head is talking to you about. Say, ‘OK, brain, what have you got for me?’ “

Then write down the steps you're taking to protect yourself, such as handwashing and wearing a mask. Also, try to acknowledge that you've controlled everything you can. “When your brain starts to chatter at you at night, remind it that you have already listened and will listen again the next night,” she says.

At bedtime have an idea of a restful place where you can go mentally, Daley advises. “I tell my clients to think about your favorite vacation or your happy place. Then gently unhook yourself from that worry and get yourself to that good place.”

Further, don't forget basic sleep hygiene: Avoid long naps, put away screens for the hour before you turn in, try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, and keep your bedroom cool and dark.

## **"I'm angry at my parents (or someone else) for not taking social distancing seriously."**

It can be maddening to see others ignoring health guidelines when you're doing everything you can to stay safe. It's especially upsetting if your older parents are the ones taking unnecessary risks, since their generation is the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Still, when you talk with your parents, try not to sound bossy, demanding or judgmental, says psychologist Lynn Bufka, senior director of practice at the American Psychological Association. Instead, start from a place of love by saying something like, “I'm concerned about your health and well-being.” Then see if you can find out what's behind their reluctance. “Maybe they're afraid of being lonely or disconnected or don't want to burden you with running errands for them,” she says. Or, perhaps, they don't know how to do online ordering, and you can help with that.

If they're still not receptive, it's important to try to let go of some of your anger, Bufka emphasizes. “Being angry is just going to deplete your own emotional resources, and it's not going to change their behavior. Acknowledge that the only thing you can control is yourself.”

If you feel your frustration building, try taking slow, deep breaths — in for a count of 4, out for a count of 6 — picturing yourself “blowing away” your exasperation. Or write down what you'd like to say to your parents — every angry, biting word — then wad up the piece of paper and throw it into the bin.

## **"I'm drinking more than usual."**

Sales of alcoholic beverages skyrocketed in March as Americans turned to drinking (or prepared to do so) to cope with coronavirus-related worries and fears. While there's nothing wrong with enjoying a glass of wine after dinner, it's important to have other ways to manage stress during this time, Bufka says.

Drinking too much can exacerbate health conditions like high blood pressure and heart disease and can deepen feelings of depression, anger and anxiety. Heavy alcohol use can also weaken your immune response — exactly the opposite of what you want to do during a pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines “heavy drinking” as eight or more drinks per week for women and 15 or more per week for men.

If you're concerned that you may be drinking too much, Bufka recommends setting limits (maybe you imbibe only on certain days or wait until dinner to have your first glass) and seeing if you can follow them. "If you find yourself coming up with reasons why it's OK to have a drink anyway, or you wonder the next day why you had three glasses of wine, then it's time to reach out and get some support," she says. Call a substance abuse hotline, or ask a friend to be your accountability partner.

## **"I feel sad, unmotivated and alone. Am I clinically depressed?"**

A lot of people these days feel sad, for good reason, and that doesn't mean you have depression, Daley says. Give yourself permission to mourn the things you're missing — eating out at restaurants, travel, spending time with friends, and so much more — and even to cry a little.

Signs of clinical depression include trouble sleeping, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, bouts of crying, social withdrawal and decreased activity. Also, many people who are depressed find that they no longer enjoy the things they once found pleasurable.

"The challenge is that most of those are also the characteristics of quarantine," Daley says.

To lift your mood, try to get outside each day. Sit on your porch, or take a stroll, remembering to keep the proper distance from others. Research shows that spending time outdoors and getting sun on your face are closely linked with happiness, says David Cates, director of behavioral health at Nebraska Medicine in Omaha.

"If you can't actually go outdoors, the literature says that even looking through a window at nature or looking at virtual photos of nature can be helpful," Cates notes.

Try to schedule a variety of activities each day so you have things to look forward to, and find ways to connect with friends and family members. Mindfulness, meditation, yoga and other forms of self-care can also boost your mood.

If you're still feeling down, and especially if you're having suicidal thoughts, seek professional help. The federal government's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached at 800-273-TALK (8255).

### **More on Mental Health**

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- [Staying connected at home \(/health/conditions-treatments/info-2020/staying-connected-during-coronavirus.html\)](/health/conditions-treatments/info-2020/staying-connected-during-coronavirus.html).
- [Teletherapy for mental health \(/health/conditions-treatments/info-2020/teletherapy.html\)](/health/conditions-treatments/info-2020/teletherapy.html).

## **"My spouse is driving me crazy."**

Living with someone else always requires some give-and-take, but that's particularly true if you're stuck in the house all day while social distancing and your spouse is the only person you see.



JODI JACOBSON/GETTY IMAGES

Cates recommends sitting down with your partner to establish boundaries and a basic daily schedule. “Make sure you include uninterrupted alone time for both of you.”

You can create space for yourself, too, by going outside or into another room and putting on headphones.

Exercise is critical to reduce stress and irritation during a quarantine, he says. While you may not be able to play tennis or basketball, there are plenty of free online fitness videos available, from cardio routines to yoga classes.

Meanwhile, make sure you set aside time to have fun with the people who share your space. Work on a puzzle together, head out for a walk, or see if you can still win at Scrabble. Even better, try a new activity, like an online class.

## **"I'm going stir-crazy trapped at home."**

Instead of thinking of yourself as trapped, change your mindset and consider this a time to focus on yourself and your goals, Cates suggests. Can you learn a magic trick to show the grandkids? Is there an easy home improvement project you can tackle? Have you always wanted to learn a language?

If that's overwhelming, start with small, achievable daily goals, like listening to an audiobook for 30 minutes, exercising for just 10 minutes every day or reorganizing one drawer at a time.

"It's important for us to feel like we're doing something meaningful, and there's something magical about achieving something and saying, 'OK, I did that,' " Cates says. "Then you can slowly build on it. It's like priming the pump."

Connecting with friends and family regularly can also help ease cabin fever, he says. Schedule a happy hour with buddies over Zoom, check in with an old college pal, or call your aunt who's in a nursing home.

"There are probably people in your orbit who are lonely," Cates says. "Reach out and give them a call. There is nothing more important for their mental health — and yours — than social support."

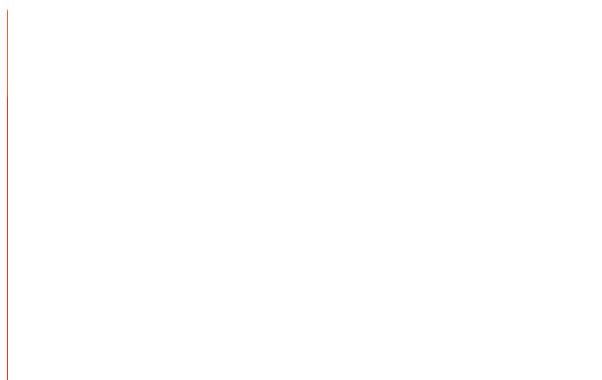
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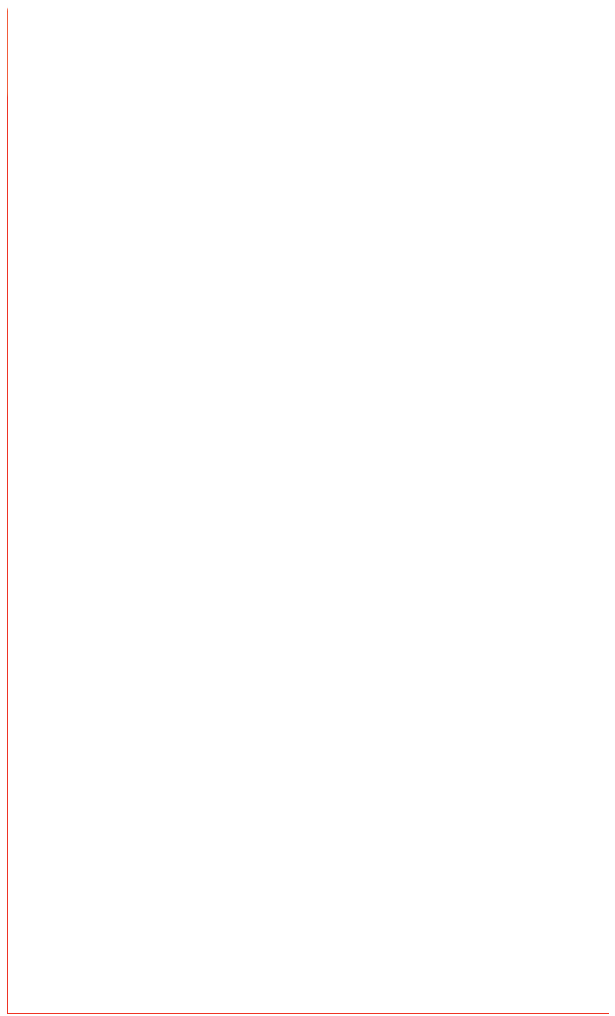
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## Devin Alexander: What I'm Cooking Now

The chef shares recipes for easy, healthy comfort food

by Devin Alexander, [AARP \(https://www.aarp.org\)](https://www.aarp.org), April 6, 2020 |  Comments: 7

 sheet pan out of the oven with freshly baked potato chip crusted chicken

PHOTOS COURTESY DEVIN ALEXANDER

Having maintained a 70-pound weight loss for decades, and having helped others transform their health on NBC's *The Biggest Loser*, I naturally think of food during this coronavirus pandemic. How are we, a society struggling with obesity, going to survive being stuck in our homes without gaining more weight?

The rush for canned this and frozen-appetizer that, coupled with the total clearing of the supply of white rice and pasta in most grocery stores nationwide, brings much cause for concern. Most canned goods are loaded with sodium, and white rice and pasta add little nutritive value. While you should have these nonperishables on hand (if you're able to have groceries delivered or still shop for them yourself), it's wise to eat as much fresh food as possible, to boost your immune system now and to stay healthy for the long term. If you're able to source a few fresh ingredients, here are simple recipes that my family and I are enjoying these days.

# Updated Potato Chip–Crusted Chicken

It's easy to find ourselves wanting to eat for comfort during uncertain times. This chicken dish will satisfy that craving and keep you in fighting shape.

I first ran a version of the recipe in my book *The Most Decadent Diet Ever!*, and it was a huge hit. I've since updated it. The key parts are making sure you soak the chicken in buttermilk for at least six hours, to allow it to become nice and tender, and not overcooking it. When the chicken is no longer pink inside, it's done; go beyond that and you're just drying it out. Overcooking will also cause the breading to fall off or become soggy.

Please note that it's really easy to crush the potato chips if you put them into a resealable plastic bag and pound them with the flat side of a meat mallet or a rolling pin. They need to be pretty finely crushed (like coarse breadcrumbs) so that you can coat the chicken breasts completely.

## Makes 2 servings

### Ingredients

- 2 (4-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, visible fat removed
- 1/3 cup low-fat buttermilk
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/4 teaspoon paprika
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon kosher salt
- Pinch of cayenne, or more to taste
- Pinch of garlic powder
- 1 1/2 ounces (about 1/2 cup) finely crushed baked potato chips
- Olive oil spray

1. Place the chicken breasts between 2 sheets of plastic wrap or wax paper on a flat work surface. Using the flat side of a meat mallet, pound them to an even 1/2-inch thickness.

2. Transfer the chicken breasts to a resealable plastic bag that is slightly larger than the breasts. Pour the buttermilk over the chicken, seal the bag, and then turn the bag to coat the meat. Refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight, rotating once or twice if possible. Note: It is important to soak the chicken to make it tender.

3. Preheat the oven to 450°F. Line a small baking sheet with nonstick foil.

4. Mix the onion powder, paprika, black pepper, salt, cayenne and garlic powder in a small bowl. Add the chips to a medium shallow bowl.

5. Remove one chicken breast from the buttermilk and let any excess drip off. Sprinkle both sides of the breast evenly with half of the seasoning mixture. Then transfer the meat to the bowl of crushed potato chips and cover it on all sides with the topping. Place the coated breast on the prepared baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining breast and seasoning. Discard any leftover buttermilk. Press any remaining chips onto the tops of the breasts.

6. Lightly mist the top of both pieces with olive oil spray. Bake them for 6 minutes, then carefully flip the breasts with a spatula, making sure not to remove the coating. Lightly mist the tops with spray and bake for 4 to 7 minutes, until the coating is crispy and the chicken is no longer pink inside. Enjoy immediately.

**Nutritional information** (1 breast serving): 220 calories; 4.5g fat, 1.4g saturated fat, 0g trans fat; 65mg cholesterol; 290mg sodium; 420mg potassium; 18g carbohydrate; 2g fiber; 2g sugar; 26g protein; 245mg phosphorus



a mason jar full of german chocolate overnight oats

## German Chocolate Overnight Oats

I love this recipe when things are stressful; it's so easy and can be eaten for breakfast or for dessert. For a quick breakfast, follow the recipe as written below. To make it an indulgent treat, add 1/4 cup of a stevia brown sugar blend (such as Truvia Brown Sugar Blend, or add a few teaspoons of brown sugar to regular stevia). The addition of the brown sugar makes it truly taste like a German-chocolate treat.

Note that including the 1/4 cup of brown sugar blend (1 tablespoon per serving) makes it taste like a yummy dessert but also adds 5 grams of sugar per serving. You can make a few servings with the sugar blend and keep them in the refrigerator for a few days to use when a chocolate craving hits. For breakfast, I'd recommend sticking with a zero-calorie natural sweetener.

**Makes 4 (about 3/4 cup + 1 tablespoon pecan) servings**

### Ingredients

- 2 cups old fashioned oats
- 2 cups unsweetened vanilla almond milk (or other unsweetened vanilla nondairy milk)
- 2 tablespoons zero-calorie natural sweetener (such as stevia or monkfruit)
- 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/4 cup unsweetened, reduced-fat shredded coconut (use any unsweetened coconut if you don't have reduced-fat on hand)
- 1/4 cup chopped pecans

1. Combine the oats, milk, sweetener, cocoa powder and coconut in a resealable plastic container.

Refrigerate the oatmeal mixture in the covered container or divide it among 4 (8-ounce) mason jars and refrigerate for at least 6 hours (or up to 2 days).

2. Remove the oatmeal from the refrigerator and top with the pecans just before enjoying (divide them evenly among the mason jars if using).

**Nutritional information:** 280 calories; 12g fat, 2.6g saturated fat, 0g trans fat; 0mg cholesterol; 95mg sodium; 350mg potassium; 37g carbohydrate; 8g fiber; 1g sugar; 9g protein; 285mg phosphorus



plated dish of sliced sriracha mayo roasted turkey breast

## Sriracha-Mayo Roasted Turkey Breast

This recipe is a perfect stuck-at-home entrée because you can make it for dinner and then use the leftovers as lean deli meat — with a fraction of the sodium of pretty much any deli meat you'd find in a grocery store.

Sriracha has become super trendy in recent years. You may see it here and assume that this dish will be too spicy for you. But just give this one a try. There are only 2 teaspoons of sriracha on a 2-pound turkey breast, and it's mixed with mayo. I promise that this turkey has just a hint of a kick. The mayo helps keep the breast nice and tender, and the sriracha provides a mild and delicious flavor.

### **Makes 6 (about 4-ounce) servings**

#### **Ingredients**

- Olive oil spray
- 1 (2 1/4-pound) bone-in turkey breast half
- 2 tablespoons light mayonnaise
- 2 teaspoons sriracha sauce

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Mist a 9-by-9-inch casserole or baking dish with olive oil spray.
2. Place the turkey breast on a cutting board and remove all of the skin and any visible fat. Using a fork, poke the meat 25 times evenly over each side as deeply as the tines of the fork.
3. In a small bowl, stir the mayonnaise and sriracha until well combined. Place the breast, bone side up, on the cutting board and, using a pastry brush (or your fingers if you don't have one), rub about 1/3 of the mayonnaise mixture evenly over the meat (don't rub it over the bone).
4. Flip the breast over and place it in the prepared baking dish. Brush the remaining mayonnaise mixture evenly over the top and sides. Without touching the turkey, carefully pour 1/4 cup of water into the bottom of the pan (this will help keep it moist).
5. Cook the meat until a thermometer inserted into it reads 175°F and it is no longer pink inside, about 35 to 50 minutes.
6. Remove the turkey from the oven and loosely tent it with foil for about 10 minutes, to allow the juices to redistribute (the breast will continue cooking to reach 180°F while standing). Transfer it to a cutting board.
7. Slice the turkey into thin slices, cutting on a diagonal and against the grain (if you plan on using leftovers as deli meat, slice only the portion you are about to eat, then refrigerate the remainder and slice it as thinly as possible before eating).

**Nutritional information:** 170 calories; 3.5g fat, 0.8g saturated fat, 0g trans fat; 90mg cholesterol; 180mg sodium; 270mg potassium; 1g carbohydrate; 0g fiber; 1g sugar; 33g protein; 250mg phosphorous



closeup of mediterranean hot and. cold brown rice salad

## **Mediterranean Hot-and-Cold Brown Rice Salad**

This recipe is perfect for times when you don't want to run to the grocery store frequently. To create a super satisfying dish, cook a pot of brown rice, add whatever leftover lean protein and fresh veggies you have, and then pick an ethnic style. In this case, I combined hot brown rice with leftover lean grilled chicken, kale, red bell peppers and onions, then enhanced it with common ingredients you'd find in a Greek dish. If you don't

have those on hand, swap in the Mexican equivalent (such as black olives for the kalamatas, part-skim queso fresco for the feta, cilantro for the basil). Voilà! You have a lean, delicious dinner the whole family will enjoy.

## Ingredients

- 3/4 cup cooked short-grain brown rice (reheated if necessary)
- 4 ounces lean grilled chicken, cut into 1/2-inch cubes (can be hot or leftover)
- 1 cup slivered kale leaves
- 1/3 cup (1-inch matchsticks) red bell pepper
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped whole green onion
- 1 tablespoon chopped kalamata olives
- 1 tablespoon reduced-fat feta cheese
- 2 tablespoons light balsamic vinaigrette
- 3 large basil leaves, slivered

Add the rice, hot or cold chicken, kale, bell pepper, onion, olives, half the feta and the basil to a small mixing bowl. Drizzle the dressing over top and toss the salad. Mound the mixture in a rimmed salad bowl. Top it with the remaining feta. Enjoy immediately.

**Nutritional information:** 468 calories; 20g fat, 2g saturated fat, 0g trans fat; 53mg cholesterol; 568mg sodium; 48g carbohydrate; 6g fiber; 7g sugar; 30g protein



devin alexander in the kitchen pouring a blender full of happy tummy greens juice

Chef Devin Alexander

## Happy-Tummy Greens Juice

We've heard it over and over again: "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." And, yes, to keep your immunity strong, it's important to consume the recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables. Yet such a small percentage of we Americans actually do so. I love this green juice because it's refreshing and gives you real veggies and fruit. Plus, ginger is known to both reduce inflammation and support cardiovascular health.

### Makes 1 (about 12-ounce) serving

## Ingredients

- 1 medium (about 5 to 6 ounce) Granny Smith apple, cored and seeded
- 1/3 medium cucumber (about 3 ounces), ends trimmed
- 3/4-inch cube (about 1/3 ounce) fresh ginger
- 1 1/2 cups packed fresh spinach leaves
- 1/2 cup fresh parsley leaves (OK to leave on some stems)
- 6 ice cubes

1. Cut the apple, cucumber and ginger into quarters. Add them to the jar or pitcher of a high-powered blender, along with the spinach, parsley and ice cubes. Blend on high for a few seconds until the ingredients start to combine.

2. Using a spatula, scrape down the sides of the blender and continue to blend until the mixture is completely smooth.

3. Transfer the juice to a 14- or 16-ounce glass. Garnish with a cucumber slice, if desired. Enjoy immediately.

**Nutritional information:** 110 calories; 1g fat, 0.2g saturated fat, 0g trans fat; 0mg cholesterol; 80mg sodium; 870mg potassium; 25g carbohydrate; 6g fiber; 14g sugar; 4g protein; 90mg phosphorus

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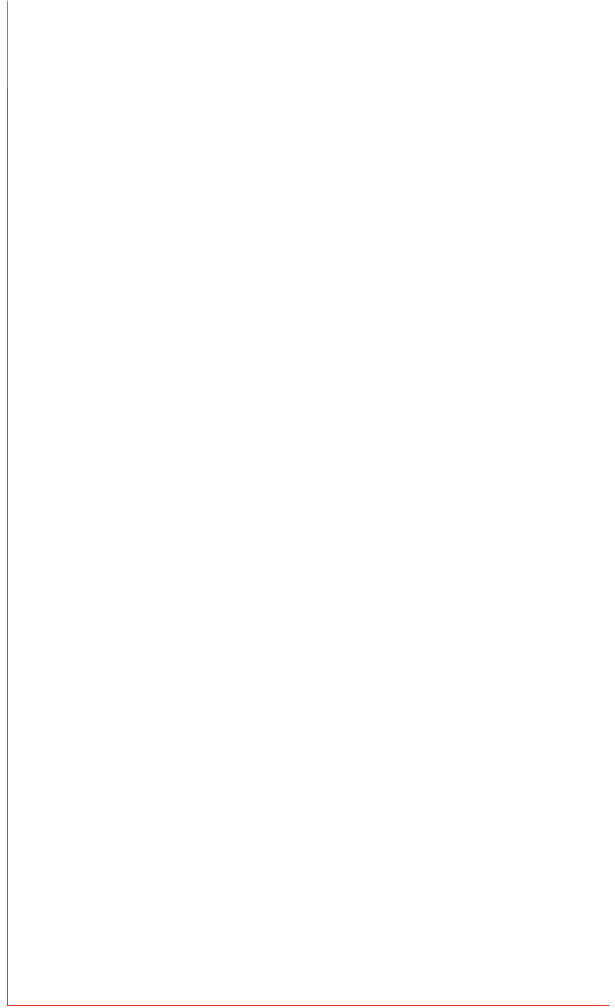
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