

Coping with Anxiety During COVID-19

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During the COVID-19 pandemic and state of emergency called on by our governments, it is natural to feel uneasy or nervous. Social distancing has many people working from home, and some are feeling isolated without being able to see family and friends. So, what can you do to feel calmer? When anxiety becomes more problematic and you're finding it difficult to cope it can be helpful to try some of the following tips:

1. Limit your exposure to the media

How often are you watching the news, listening to the radio, or surfing social media to see the latest updates about COVID-19? Are you looking only at reputable sites? It is helpful to gather accurate information about the virus but how much is too much? Repetitive exposure to information about the pandemic can increase stress. Limit the time that you keep focused on the virus and find balance by incorporating other leisure activities like reading for pleasure, watching a movie, playing video games, and listening to music. Also, it is very important that you do not seek information about the pandemic just before going to bed. It is important that you focus on leisure activities at least two hours before going to bed in order to be calm and restful.

When you do look for information related to the virus make sure you are reading from a reliable resource such as:

The World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/>

The Center for Disease Control & Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/>

Public Health Ontario: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/respiratory-diseases/novel-coronavirus>

The Ontario Government Website: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2019-novel-coronavirus>

2. Maintain a healthy lifestyle

It is important to continue to carry out healthy activities like eating a healthy well-balanced diet, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, and taking breaks. Avoid the use of alcohol and drugs to cope. For example, research indicates that exercising for at least 30 minutes per day reduces our anxiety and stress and boosts our immune system. Research also indicates that being outdoors is beneficial for our wellbeing.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, do not stay in bed for longer than 20-25 minutes. Get out of bed and engage in a pleasant and relaxing activity. Do not read about the virus. When you are feeling sleepy, then you can return to bed.

3. Maintain a daily routine

Although you may be working from home or off from work it is important to continue to keep a routine in place to help you adjust to the changes that social distancing have created. Create a schedule for time allocated to work, play, and family time, and incorporate activities that you enjoy that can still be carried out while isolated from the public.

4. Use relaxation methods and meditate

During times of distress it can be helpful to take some time to practice calming techniques:

- Practice **deep abdominal breathing** by taking a deep breath into your abdomen for a count of four through your mouth or nose and breathe out slowly through your mouth for a count of 5 to 6. Your abdomen should inflate on your breath in and deflate on your breath out. Practice this for a minimum of 5 minutes each day.
- Practice **progressive muscle relaxation** by tensing and relaxing muscle groups starting with your feet and working your way up to your head. Tighten your muscles for 10 seconds and release for 10 seconds as you work through each muscle group and remember to breathe deeply and calmly.
- Practice **mindfulness meditation** by changing your focus from your worries and the future and instead focus on your breath. Your mind will wander to thoughts but gently and non-judgmentally bring your attention back to your breath. If you are new to meditation, start with practicing for a few minutes each day and slowly build up to 20 minutes or more per day.

For those of you who are new to mindfulness, there are many excellent websites that offer free tools and resources, including guided meditations:

tarabrach.com

jackkornfield.com

uclahealth.org

rickhanson.net

mindfullivingsummit.com

mrsmindfulness.com

5. *Think positive and catch negative thinking*

All human beings like predictability and certainty. Unfortunately, we are living in a time of intense uncertainty and a lack of predictability for the near future. This can be very stressful for us. Research indicates that when we are faced with uncertainty, we tend to fear the worst case scenario. There are many stories at the present time about dire predictions regarding the virus. However, we also need to focus on the best possible outcomes or the most realistic outcomes.

We need to remember that all of us have a negativity bias, that is, we seem to have Velcro for negative events and Teflon for positive events. This means that we are likely to recall or ruminate on negative events and to dismiss, neglect or overlook positive events. In this way, negative events tend to impact us more than positive events. As a result, we need to be intentional about focusing on positive events that are taking place currently. We need to combat negative thoughts by changing our focus to the positives in our life. When negative or catastrophic thoughts start, we need to catch them as soon as we get them, picture a stop sign, and look for evidence against the negative and reframe what we are thinking. For example, it may be important for us to remember that four out of five people known to have had the virus had only mild symptoms.

Research indicates that we are likely to be more resilient when we focus on what we can control rather than what we cannot control. That is, we are likely to be more resilient when we become active problem solvers rather than passive observers. Although worries about the virus are normal, there are many steps and actions that we can take such as maintaining social distancing, frequently washing or sanitizing our hands, always coughing or sneezing into our arm, and remembering to not to touch our face.

As well, recognize that health experts and leaders are acting and implementing various strategies for keeping us safe. As of this moment, be aware that several countries have stopped the spread of the virus. These include China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea. As well, be aware that there are 47 research teams across the world that are intensely researching this virus in order to develop a vaccine. There are antiviral medicines that are already in clinical trials. Scientists have hopes for 1) Remdesivir - originally developed for Ebola, 2) Chloroquine - an anti-malaria drug, 3) anti-H.I.V. drugs, and 4) various immune boosting drugs.

As well, there are many businesses and organizations that are actively involved in the production of ventilators, hand sanitizers, and masks.

Focusing on what we are all doing helps us to be more optimistic that we can deal effectively with this virus.

6. *Stay connected to others*

Research clearly indicates that social support is the number one factor for being resilient. Social support reduces anxiety and depression, reduces our sense of stress, and enhances our immune system. Social support involves talking about our experiences and feelings. Social support helps us to obtain a sense of understanding and encouragement and reduces the sense of isolation. Although we cannot meet with others in person, it is crucial that we stay connected with family and friends by phoning, texting, and chatting over video (e.g., on Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp). Talk to someone you trust, who will understand your concerns, and be supportive. We can all still support each other through these times with the help of technology and the Internet.

7. *Engaging in hobbies*

When we are anxious or depressed, we tend to let go of pleasurable activities that we enjoy. Research indicates that engaging in things that we are passionate about can have a positive outlook on our attitude, outlook, and energy.

8. *Gratitude and Acts of Kindness*

Gratitude and engaging in acts of kindness makes us happier and more resilient. It might be helpful to reflect upon our appreciation and gratitude for the healthcare workers around the world who are doing their best to cope with this virus. A helpful practice is to keep a gratitude journal and list three things each day for which we are grateful.

Also, we might want to call someone to express that we are thinking about them and express our love and concern for them. We might consider grocery shopping for an elderly person or those who are self-isolating.

9. *Setting up realistic goals and expectations*

Research indicates that setting up unrealistic goals and expectations or being perfectionistic raises our stress level. When we are stressed or anxious, we might have trouble concentrating or remembering details and facts. We might become easily irritated, frustrated, or agitated with others. We might be lacking energy to get things done. These experiences are normal and to be expected during stressful times. We need to cut some slack for ourselves and others and accept that there may be times that we are not functioning as well as we usually do. As well, we need to set realistic expectations that we might need to engage in social distancing for a period of two months or longer.

10. Self-Compassion

During stressful times, we might become harsh or judgmental towards ourselves the way we are coping or behaving. We might have had a “bad day” when we drank or ate too much. We might be judging ourselves for being “silly” or “stupid” because we are very scared or frightened. Research indicates that we tend to be more accepting, understanding, empathic and encouraging towards our friends and loved ones than ourselves during stressful episodes. There is a simple strategy to combat this. We need to simply ask ourselves: What would I tell someone I care about who is in the exact same situation with similar thoughts and feelings?

If you are interested in obtaining various tools and resources related to self-compassion, these websites offer helpful information:

self-compassion.org

CenterforMSC.org

chrisgermer.com

11. Seeking help

Please note that should you, or someone you care about, be having difficulty functioning such as difficulty sleeping, eating, carrying out daily routines, or increasing your use of substances (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, or drugs) to cope, it may be helpful to seek out professional help from a clinician or psychologist.

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