

## **Coronavirus Anxiety: Coping with Stress, Fear, and Uncertainty**

Fears about COVID-19 can take an emotional toll. But you're not powerless. These tips can help you get through this stressful time.

### **Understanding your anxiety**

It's a frightening time. We're in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, with cities and even entire countries shutting down. Some of our friends and family are in areas that have already been affected by coronavirus. You may be bracing for what may come. And all of us are watching the headlines and wondering, "What is going to happen next?"

For many people, the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus is the hardest thing to handle. We don't know how exactly we'll be impacted or how bad things might get. And that makes it all too easy to catastrophize and spiral out into overwhelming dread and panic. But there are many things you can do—even in the face of this unique crisis—to manage your anxiety and fears.

### **Stay informed—but don't obsessively check the news**

It's vital to stay informed, particularly about what's happening in our community, so you can follow advised safety precautions and do your part to slow the spread of coronavirus. But there's a lot of misinformation going around, as well as sensationalistic coverage that only feeds into fear. It's important to be discerning about what you read and watch.

- ★ Stick to trustworthy sources such as the CDC, the World Health Organization, and your local public health authorities.
- ★ Limit how often you check for updates. Constant monitoring of news and social media feeds can quickly turn compulsive and counterproductive—fueling anxiety rather than easing it. The limit is different for everyone, so pay attention to how you're feeling and adjust accordingly.
- ★ Step away from media if you start feeling overwhelmed. If anxiety is an ongoing issue, consider limiting your media consumption to a specific time frame and time of day (i.e. thirty minutes each evening at 6 pm).
- ★ Ask someone reliable to share important updates. If you'd feel better avoiding media entirely, ask someone you trust to pass along any major updates you need to know about.

Be careful what you share. Do your best to verify information before passing it on. Snopes' Coronavirus Collection is one place to start. We all need to do our part to avoid spreading rumors and creating unnecessary panic.

- ★ Focus on the things you can control.

We're in a time of massive upheaval. There are so many things outside of our control, including how long the pandemic lasts, how other people behave, and what's going to happen in our communities. That's a tough thing to accept, and so many of us respond by endlessly searching the Internet for answers and thinking over all the different scenarios that might happen. But as long as we're focusing on questions with unknowable answers and circumstances outside of our personal control, this strategy will get us nowhere—aside from feeling drained, anxious, and overwhelmed.

When you feel yourself getting caught up in fear of what might happen, try to shift your focus to things you can control. For example, you can't control how severe the coronavirus outbreak is in your town, but you can take steps to reduce your own personal risk (and the risk you'll unknowingly spread it to others), such as:

- ★ Washing your hands frequently (for at least 20 seconds) with soap and water or a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- ★ Avoiding touching your face (particularly your eyes, nose, and mouth).
- ★ Staying home as much as possible, even if you don't feel sick.

- ★ Avoiding crowds and gatherings of 10 or more people.
- ★ Avoiding all non-essential shopping and travel.
- ★ Keeping 6 feet of distance between yourself and others when out.
- ★ Getting plenty of sleep (which helps support your immune system).
- ★ Following all recommendations from health authorities.

### **Plan for what you can**

It's natural to be concerned about what may happen if your workplace closes, knowing that your child or children have to stay home from school for remote learning, you or someone you love gets sick, or you have to self-quarantine. While these situations can be scary to think about, being proactive can help relieve at least some of the anxiety.

- ★ Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of. Try not to get too hung up on “perfect” options. Include whatever comes to mind that could help you get by.
- ★ Focus on concrete things you can problem solve or change, rather than circumstances beyond your control.
- ★ After you've evaluated your options, draw up a plan of action. When you're done, set it aside and resist the urge to go back to it until you need it or your circumstances significantly change.

### **How to stop “what-ifs” from spiraling**

Relinquishing our desire for certainty and control is easier said than done. If you feel yourself start to spin out into negativity or panic, grounding yourself in the present moment can stop the negative spiral and allow your rational brain to come back online.

The technique is simple yet effective: Bring your attention to your breath and your body. Focus all of your attention on the here and now: noticing the sights, sounds, and smells around you and what you're feeling in your body. Continue to breathe slowly in and out—gently bringing your mind back to your body and breath every time it drifts—until you feel more calm.

### **Stay connected—even when physically isolated**

Evidence shows that many people with coronavirus—particularly young, seemingly healthy people—don't have symptoms but can still spread the virus. That's why the biggest thing that most people can do right now to make a positive difference is to practice social distancing.

But social distancing comes with its own risks. Humans are social animals. We're hardwired for connection. Isolation and loneliness can exacerbate anxiety and depression, and even impact our physical health. That's why it's important to stay connected as best we can and reach out for support when we need it, even as we cut back on in-person socializing.

Make it a priority to stay in touch with friends and family. If you tend to withdraw when depressed or anxious, think about scheduling regular phone, chat, or Skype, Zoom or Google Hangout dates to counteract that tendency. While in-person visits are limited, substitute video chatting if you're able. Face-to-face contact is like a “vitamin” for your mental health, reducing your risk of depression and helping ease stress and anxiety.

Social media can be a powerful tool—not only for connecting with friends, family, and acquaintances—but for feeling connected in a greater sense to our community, country, and the world. It reminds us we're not alone.

That said, be mindful of how social media is making you feel. Don't hesitate to mute keywords or people who are exacerbating your anxiety. And log off if it's making you feel worse.

Don't let coronavirus dominate every conversation. It's important to take breaks from stressful thoughts about the pandemic to simply enjoy each other's company—to laugh, share stories, and focus on other things going on in our lives.

Emotions are contagious, so be wise about who you turn to for support

All of us are going to need reassurance, advice, or a sympathetic ear during this difficult time. But be careful who you choose as a sounding board. The coronavirus is not the only thing that's contagious. So are emotions! Avoid talking about the virus with people who tend to be negative or who reinforce and ramp up your fears. Turn to the people in your life who are thoughtful, level-headed, and good listeners.

### **Take care of your body and spirit**

This is an extraordinarily trying time, and all the tried-and-true stress management strategies apply, such as eating healthy meals, getting plenty of sleep, and meditating. Beyond that, here are some tips for practicing self-care in the face of the unique disruptions caused by the coronavirus.

- ★ Be kind to yourself. Go easy on yourself if you're experiencing more depression or anxiety than usual. You're not alone in your struggles.
- ★ Maintain a routine as best you can. Even if you're stuck at home, try to stick to your regular sleep, school, meal, or work schedule. This can help you maintain a sense of normalcy.
- ★ Take time out for activities you enjoy. Read a good book, watch a comedy, play a fun board or video game, make something—whether it's a new recipe, a craft, or a piece of art. It doesn't matter what you do, as long as it takes you out of your worries.
- ★ Get out in nature. Sunshine and fresh air will do you good. Even a walk around your neighborhood or by the river can make you feel better. Just be sure to avoid crowds, and keep your distance from people you encounter.
- ★ Find ways to exercise. Staying active will help you release anxiety, relieve stress, and manage your mood. You can cycle, hike, or walk. Or if you're stuck at home, look online for exercise videos you can follow. There are many things you can do even without equipment, such as yoga and exercises that use your own bodyweight.
- ★ Avoid self-medicating. Be careful that you're not using alcohol or other substances to deal with anxiety or depression. If you tend to overdo it in the best of times, it may be a good idea to avoid for now.
- ★ Take up a relaxation practice. When stressors throw your nervous system out of balance, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga can bring you back into a state of equilibrium. Regular practice delivers the greatest benefits, so see if you can set aside even a little time every day.
- ★ Help others (it will make you feel better).
- ★ Be Kind to others: With the right outlook and intentions, we can all ensure that kindness and charity spread throughout our communities even faster than this virus.

At times like this, it's easy to get caught up in your own fears and concerns. But amid all the stories of people fighting over rolls of toilet paper or lining up outside gun stores to arm themselves, it's important to take a breath and remember that we're all in this together. As a quote circulating in Italy reminds us: "We're standing far apart now so we can embrace each other later."