

COVID-19: Frequently Asked Questions about Mental Health

Updated March 27, 2020

The outbreak of COVID-19 can feel overwhelming for people and communities. Fear and anxiety about a disease, especially a new virus, can be stressful. There are online resources to support you. Please reach out if you need help.

Information follows about how to cope with mental health and stress and anxiety during this time:

- [Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Individuals](#) (p.1)
- [Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Parents of Young Children](#) (p.3)
- [Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Adolescents and Young Adults](#) (p.4)
- [Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Health Care Workers](#) (p.6)
- [Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Older Adults and Individuals with Disabilities](#) (p.7)

Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Individuals

- What should I do if I have an existing mental health condition?
 - **RESPONSE:** People with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms.

Additional information may be found at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [website](#).

- What if I am feeling anxious or stressed related to COVID-19?
 - **RESPONSE:** Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. The emotional impact of an emergency on a person can depend on the person's characteristics and experiences, the social and economic circumstances of the person and their community and the availability of local resources. People can become more distressed if they see repeated images or hear repeated reports about the COVID-19 outbreak in the media.

Reactions during an infectious disease outbreak can include:

- Fear and worry about your own health status and that of your loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs

Feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness and uncertainty are normal during a pandemic.

Fortunately, being proactive about your mental health can help to keep both your mind and body stronger.

- What can I do to support myself?
 - **RESEPNSE:** Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19. Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Try to do some other activities you enjoy to return to your normal life. When you do read news, avoid media outlets that build hype or dwell on things that can't be controlled. Instead, turn to information sources that provide reliable information about how to protect yourself, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Recognize the things you can control. Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs.

Make time to unwind and remind yourself that strong feelings will fade. Connect with others. Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member. Maintain healthy relationships. Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking.

Maintain proper infection control techniques such as hand-washing and social distancing.

Make preparations for a couple of weeks at home, in case this becomes necessary. Consider what you may do if you are stuck at home and what you can do to put this time to positive use. If you have the resources to plan for disruptions in daycare, shopping, school, etc., it may be worth thinking these through proactively.

Check how realistically you are viewing the situation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has continually pointed out that the vast majority of individuals, even if they do get sick, will not become terribly ill. Avoid dramatic media and stick to credible sources of information, such as the CDC. Social media is not a great source of information.

Keep yourself grounded. Exercise, meditate. Talk to your friends on the phone if you can't see them in person. Try to get regular sleep and a healthy diet. It is not unusual for individuals to experience disruptions in both eating and sleeping during a crisis, and it is very important to try to maintain healthy habits, and to avoid strategies such as using drugs or alcohol to handle stress.

Practice mindfulness. By learning to be more mindful, we can decrease our stress levels, feel happier and focus on what's really important. Put on some music, take a break, think a positive thought, and breathe, breathe and breathe.

- What are some of the things you can't control?
 - **RESPONSE:** All you can do is pay attention to those things above that you can control. Worrying will merely aggravate the situation **and put unnecessary stress on your body.**

The infection is likely to spread through the population in unpredictable ways. There is nothing you can do about this. If you follow precautions you are less likely to get sick, but there are no guarantees.

There is some benefit to planning. But after you have a plan, move on and focus on living your life rather than worrying about the virus. Don't try to control other people's reactions. Listen and help people work through the facts concerning the virus, but understand that hyping or denying the existence of a threat is not helpful.

Call your health care provider if stress reactions interfere with your daily activities for several days in a row.

- Where can I find additional resources?
 - **RESPONSE:** Here are some additional resources
 - CDC: [Mental Health and Coping with COVID-19](#)
 - CDC: [Taking Care of Your Emotional Health](#)
 - SAMHSA: [Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Emotional Distress](#)
 - The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress: [Coronavirus and Emerging Infectious Disease Outbreaks Response](#)
 - CDC: [Strategies to Help Children Cope With a Disaster](#)
 - SAMHSA’s FACT SHEET: [Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
 - SAMHSA’s FACT SHEET: [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#)
 - SAMHSA’s FACT SHEET: [Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers during Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
 - SAMHSA’s Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. This toll-free, multilingual, and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its territories: 1-800-985-5990
 - **Help is always available through the following resources:**
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 Crisis Text Line: Text TN to 741 741

Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Parents of Young Children

- How can I help my children?
 - **RESPONSE:** Children react, in part, to what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with the COVID-19 calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

Not all children respond to stress in the same way. Some common stress-related behavior to watch for in children include:

- Excessive crying and irritation
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown, like toileting accidents or bedwetting
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

- What can I do to support my child?
 - **RESPONSE:** Take time to talk with your child about the COVID-19 outbreak. Answer questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that your child can understand: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/share-facts.html>. Limit your child’s exposure to media coverage of COVID-19. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can become frightened about something they do not understand.

Reassure your child that they are safe. Let them know it is okay if they feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope from you.

Help children find positive ways to express disturbing feelings such as fear and sadness. Every child has his/her own way to express emotions. Sometimes engaging in a creative activity, such as playing and drawing, can facilitate this process. Children feel relieved if they can express and communicate their disturbing feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

Help your child to have a sense of structure. When it is safe to return to school or child care, help them return to their regular activity. Be a role model; take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members and rely on your social support system.

Create a safe physical and emotional environment by practicing the 3 R’s: Reassurance, Routines, and Regulation.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has more resources and information about children and anxiety:

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/FAQ.aspx#anxietyfaq2

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has more information about talking to children about coronavirus (COVID-19):

https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/Docs/latest_news/2020/Coronavirus_COVID19_Children.pdf

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Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Adolescents and Young Adults

- What should I do if I have an existing mental health condition?
 - **RESPONSE:** People with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms.

Additional information may be found at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website, <https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-preparedness>.

- Everyone is worrying about the coronavirus pandemic, but everyone I know is healthy. Should I worry?
 - **RESPONSE:** Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Adolescents and young adults often feel like nothing can go wrong. While this is normal, and can help reduce your worries, make sure you take steps to stay healthy.

Recognize others may be hiding their worries in many ways. Some people become very irritable, angry and even start fights with others. Sleep and eating may become disrupted. Especially if other frightening things have happened, some youth may develop nightmares or have panic attacks. Still others may increase their use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs to escape from what is going on.

- What can I do to help cope?
 - **RESPONSE:** Limit your screen time. Limit your time watching, reading or listening to news stories. Avoid scrolling through your friends Instagram or Snap posts about illness and COVID-19.

Go outside or get some exercise. Draw, write in a journal or use music to express your thoughts and feelings. Do things that make you feel good and are also good for you.

Plan the things you *can* do: wash your hands, carry wet wipes or other items when you are out in public. Recognize the things you can control, like having good hygiene.

Reach out to your friends and family. If you can, talk about how you are feeling. Talk about anything positive — laugh, joke. Make sure you get enough sleep and stick to your pre-COVID-19 routine as much as you can. Let someone know if you are not able to do your usual activities because of your worrying.

- My school is closed. Now what?
 - **RESPONSE:** Keep up your usual routine. Even if school is not required, maintaining structure to your days will help you feel in control. Routine is comforting. Schedule activities to help

distract you and to keep you connected with your friends. If you need to practice social distancing, you can still connect with others. Ask your family or other supports to reach out to you as well.

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Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Health Care Workers

- What should I know?
 - **RESPONSE:** As a health professional, you may feel overwhelmed. As a person working with individuals who are potentially ill, you also likely have concerns about the risk of becoming infected yourself. You may also be concerned about your own financial security and family in the event of a quarantine or infection.

It is important to look after yourself and maintain a balanced view of the situation. There are some things you can control, and other things that you can do nothing about. The challenge is to separate these things so that you can take reasonable steps to protect yourself, but also let go of worries and anxieties that simply get in your way. It will be important to help your clients make the same distinctions.

It is important to recognize that health care workers can suffer secondary trauma as a result of their emotional involvement with distressing situations. Check in with yourself, noting if you have any symptoms of anxiety or depression. These could include sleeplessness, fatigue, irritability, depression, anger, illness, guilt and withdrawal. There are resources available online to help you cope. Please use them if you need them.

Think about what you need to help yourself and those you are helping to handle the stress involved in this situation — what are some of the things you can control?

Make sure you understand how your employer will address the outbreak. Remember that your reaction to the situation may not be the same as those of your colleagues or your

clients. Everybody reacts differently to stressors, including those brought on by this outbreak. Respect other people's feelings.

Maintain proper infection control techniques such as hand-washing and social distancing.

Make preparations for a couple of weeks at home, in case this becomes necessary. Consider what you may do if you are stuck at home and what you can do to put this time to positive use. If you have the resources to plan for disruptions in daycare, shopping, school, etc., it may be worth thinking these through proactively.

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Keep yourself grounded. Exercise, meditate. Talk to your friends on the phone if you can't see them in person. Try to get regular sleep and a healthy diet. It is not unusual for individuals to experience disruptions in both eating and sleeping during a crisis, and it is very important to try to maintain healthy habits, and to avoid strategies such as using drugs or alcohol to handle stress.

What are some of the things you can't control? Worrying will merely aggravate the situation.

All you can do is pay attention to those things above that you can control.

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There is some benefit to planning. But after you have a plan, move on and focus on living your life rather than worrying about the virus. Don't try to control other people's reactions. Listen and help people work through the facts concerning the virus, but understand that hyping or denying the existence of a threat is not helpful.

Visit the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress page on Sustaining the Well-Being of Healthcare Personnel during Coronavirus and other Infectious Disease Outbreaks: https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf.pdf

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Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Older Adults and Adults with Disabilities

- What are warning signs and risk factors that older adults and adults with disabilities may be experiencing emotional stress or anxiety?
 - **RESPONSE:** Older adults and adults with disabilities who are impacted by an infectious disease outbreak are faced with difficult challenges. Many older adults already struggle to maintain social connections and meaningful activities because they may not have many friends and family members nearby, they may not drive, children are grown and they are likely retired. When asked to further limit contact with the public to reduce exposure to COVID-19, they may experience increased loneliness and isolation.

Additionally, many older adults and adults with disabilities are reliant on help from family, friends or paid caregivers. Fear of not having access to this care if the caregiver becomes sick can cause stress and anxiety.

Warnings signs of stress may include:

- Difficulty concentrating on daily activities
- Loss of interest in daily activities
- Crying spells, irritability or bursts of anger
- Difficulty eating
- Sleep problems, like difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Increasing physical distress symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains or restlessness
- Increased fatigue
- Feeling guilty, helpless or hopeless

Older adults and adults with disabilities most at risk of experiencing severe emotional stress or anxiety include those with a history of:

- Exposure to other traumas, including severe accidents, abuse, assault, combat or rescue work
- Chronic medical illness or psychological disorders
- Chronic poverty, homelessness, or discrimination
- Those who lost a loved one or friend involved in an infectious disease outbreak
- Those who lack economic stability and/or knowledge of the English language
- Older adults that may lack mobility or independence
- Older Adults who rely upon others for daily assistance

- What can older adults and adults with disabilities do to reduce emotional stress and anxiety?
 - **RESPONSE:** Here are some ways to reduce emotional stress and anxiety:
 - Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19
 - Only consult legitimate sources, like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for information about COVID-19
 - Engage in activities that bring comfort or joy
 - Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate
 - Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs
 - Make time to unwind and remember that strong feelings will fade
 - Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member
 - Call your health care provider if stress reactions interfere with your daily activities for several days in a row
 - Avoid making major life decisions
 - Be especially aware of scams related to COVID-19. The Federal Trade Commission has identified several of them and is offering tips to protect yourself and others: <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/features/coronavirus-scams-what-ftc-doing>.
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