



Managing Anxiety During COVID-19

As the number of diagnosed COVID-19 cases continues to increase, anxiety related to the outbreak is on the rise as well.

Feeling anxiety in response to a threat is a normal human reaction. However, sustained high anxiety can undermine one's ability to constructively respond to the threat or crisis at hand. Drawing from research in the field of cognitive behavioral psychology, the following suggestions can help you cope with coronavirus anxiety.

Take it one day at a time.

Our brains are hardwired to plan for the future. Yet there's no clear timeline for how this pandemic is going to play out. When it comes to processing information and making decisions, the closer to now you stay, the more clearly you will be able to think.

- When you notice that your brain is starting to spin out into future thinking and worry, take a mindful pause and ask yourself, "what do I need to get done today?"
- If one day at a time seems too overwhelming, take on the day hour by hour, minute by minute, and even moment by moment if that's what it takes to stay grounded in the present moment.

Practice self-compassion through positive reframing.

We're all trying to do the best we can under unique and ever-changing circumstances. When best-laid plans or intentions don't come to fruition, it's tempting to get down on yourself for all the things you're not getting to or doing as well as you'd like—which can, in turn, increase feelings of anxiety. Be patient and encouraging with yourself. Look for opportunities to practice self-compassion rather than self-criticism.

- Changing your words can change your thoughts. What would you say to a friend in your circumstance? Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to someone else.
- Challenge irrational thoughts by looking at your situation from other vantage points. Is there substantial evidence for my thought? Is there evidence contrary to my thought? What might a friend think about this situation? If I look at the situation positively, how is it different?

Ground yourself in the "calm."

Taking a moment to pause in stressful situations helps ground you in calmer emotions. Turning your attention away from the parts of your body where you typically feel anxiety, such as your chest or stomach, and grounding yourself in more neutral areas, can help you stay connected to yourself in the present moment without triggering more anxiety. Try these ten-second practices when you feel overly anxious.

- Take five deep breaths.
- Pay attention to the feeling in not-anxious parts of your body (like your feet or your hands).
- Anchor your awareness on a calming word or an external object.



Facing anxiety in the moment will lead to less anxiety over time.

In the words of psychoanalyst Carl Jung, “what you resist persists.” Struggling against COVID-19 anxiety can take many forms. You might distract yourself by drinking, eating, sleeping, or working more than usual. You might repeatedly seek reassurance from friends, family or health experts. Or you might obsessively check news streams, hoping to calm your fears. While these behaviors can help momentarily, avoiding the experience of anxiety—or any emotion—almost always backfires.

- When waves of coronavirus anxiety show up, resist the urge to escape or calm your fears.
- Accept anxiety as an integral part of human experience. Notice and describe the experience to yourself or others without judgment.

Evaluate your emotional response to unexpected change.

As COVID-19 continues to spread, everyday life changes every day. Take a moment to evaluate your emotional response to the changes you’re experiencing. Are you scared, angry, threatened, resentful, indifferent, hopeful? After you’ve determined what you’re feeling, it can help to ask yourself and then act on the following questions.

- Is my reaction justified?
- Is the intensity of my reaction justified by the facts?
- Am I overreacting, or misinterpreting?
- Are there aspects of this situation that I can control?
- Is there another way to look at this? Is there an opportunity here?
- What skill might I develop, or what aspect of myself might I strengthen as a result of coping with this change?

Don’t underestimate human resiliency.

Human minds are good at predicting the worst. But research shows that people tend to overestimate how badly they’ll be affected by negative events and underestimate how well they’ll cope with and adjust to difficult situations.

- Be mindful that you are more resilient than you think. It can help attenuate your anxiety.
- Draw on past experience. Think back to a challenging situation; what helped you to adjust and adapt?

Although you might feel helpless during this stressful time, following the above strategies can help keep anxiety in check and enable you to make it through the epidemic more effectively.

If you or a loved one continue to experience anxiety symptoms that interfere with work, or the ability to maintain close relationships, socialize or take care of yourself or others, it may be time to seek professional help from your doctor or a mental health professional.