


Managing Anxiety Related to COVID-19



During this stressful time of dealing with COVID-19 as well as the impact of social distancing on one's well-being, experts within MUSC's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences provide several helpful tips below.

Anxiety is understandable and a normal feeling during situations of uncertainty. The health, financial, and psychological impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented and at this point, includes a lot of unknowns. It is a different kind of threat that South Carolinians are not used to. We are accustomed to being able to track the direct path of a hurricane and plan accordingly. However, COVID-19 is a threat that it more difficult to directly track. This can increase anxiety and worry.

Some anxiety is adaptive. It can help us prepare. We do need to prepare, but not panic. When feelings of anxiety, worry and panic are overwhelming, they can interfere with our ability to cope. Therefore, practicing ways to manage overall anxiety and worry may be helpful during this time of preparation and response to COVID-19.

Below are several concrete suggestions to cope with anxiety during the next several weeks.

If you or your loved one is feeling overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety and worry related to COVID-19, we recommend seeking professional help. The National Disaster Distress Hotline at 1-800-846-8517 available 24/7 to provide crisis and support. If you feel that you are in immediate crisis please call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room.

Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences

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Follow guidelines from CDC for effective strategies for preparation.

Engaging in activities to become better prepared can also help improve our sense of control and reduce anxiety. Washing hands, keeping hands away from face, keeping physical distance from others are behaviors that individuals can do to do their part to prevent spread of the virus and that can help individuals feel a greater sense of purpose. Limit exposure to social media, especially social media sites that instill a sense of panic. Identify one or two reputable information sources to follow updates and check only once or twice a day. We suggest the Center for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>, as well as MUSC's website with updated local information, <https://muschealth.org/patients-visitors/coronavirus-information>.

Limit children's exposure to media.

Children can be exposed to highly distressing information about COVID-19 via the Internet, radio and television news outlets, and rumors among peers. Caregivers should provide information to children in a developmentally appropriate manner. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides useful information on how to have discussions with children about COVID-19. https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

Balance.

Given the inundation of news feeds, social media feeds, and daily discussions about COVID-19, try to intentionally balance these stories with positive ones that are occurring across the world.

Limit isolation.

Although health officials are encouraging the limitation of physical contact, this does not mean we should limit being social. Isolation can increase anxiety and depression. Maintaining connections to others to combat feelings of isolation is important. The specific ways we engage in social behaviors may need to be altered given the current need for social distancing. Regular texting, phone calls, and video calls with family and friends, especially elderly friends and family are especially important.

Practice self-care activities.

This includes good sleep hygiene, daily exercise, and eating healthy. Social distancing does not mean we have to be "shut in." Try to get outdoors in unpopulated areas as much as possible.

Limit unhealthy coping strategies.

Limit unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol and drug use as this may inadvertently exacerbate anxiety.

Practice relaxation techniques.

Deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and imagery relaxation techniques may help take the edge off of anxiety. There are a number of apps and websites that can guide individuals through these types of coping strategies.

Be present.

Learning to be present in the current moment can help calm one's body if feeling overwhelmed with emotions. Mindfulness is about acknowledging emotions and thoughts, but not necessarily "getting caught up in them." It is how to be present with the here and now without judgment of the experience and learning to take action with intention. Mindfulness is a skill that requires practice. There are a number of apps, readings, and resources that can assist someone in learning and practicing such skills.