

Coping with Stress and Anxiety Amidst COVID-19

Acknowledge your feelings. In situations that are uncertain and evolving such as this, it's normal and certainly understandable to feel stressed, anxious, or upset, among other emotional responses. Allow yourself time to notice and express what you're feeling...without judgment. You can do this by writing your feelings and thoughts down in a journal, talking to trusted others, and/or expressing them through a creative endeavor.

Breathe. When we are stressed or anxious, our breathing becomes more shallow and our lungs are not being filled with air from the bottom-up. This, in turn, promotes more stress. Learning how to breathe "correctly" is important for all of us but especially when we are stressed and anxious. To do this, take a moment and exhale to empty your lungs then slowly breathe in picturing your breath going all the way down to your diaphragm and filling your lungs from the bottom to top (when I'm doing this, I like to picture my lungs like empty balloons being filled up by a faucet to make a water balloon – they fill from the bottom, up). When your lungs are filled, there will be a natural pause, then exhale. Don't rush this – you don't want to get light-headed. Do this a few times then notice how your body feels more relaxed.

Pay attention to your thoughts. Your body responds to what you think about, so if you are having a lot of worry thoughts, your body is going to be tense and you are going to experience emotional distress. Notice your thoughts and if they are not serving you well, change them. You can direct your thoughts once you begin paying attention to them. One way to do this is to think about the things that are in your control (which is especially important when our thoughts are filled with all the things that are truly out of our control!). Another way to do this is to think about the things you are grateful for. And yet another way is to practice mindfulness, which is basically tuning into the present moment: what do you see, feel, hear, smell, taste? For example, if you are washing dishes, notice the feel of the water, the smell of the soap, the feel of the sponge and the dishes, the movement of your hands, etc. Be in the present moment rather than in the run-away worry thoughts.

Maintain healthy activities. This includes eating with an eye on nutrition with healthy meals and snacks, physical exercise like walking, running or stretching, getting enough sleep and maintaining a regular sleep schedule, and doing things you enjoy and give you energy.

Set limits around news and social media. It's understandable to want to keep informed, but it is good and necessary to take breaks from it. Set up boundaries that work for you that keep you informed while not taking up most of your time and energy, such as checking in on social media for 10 minutes every few hours. Set an alarm on your cell to help keep the boundary.

Stay connected to others. Although we are keeping our physical distance from most people at this time, we can still give and receive support and care to/from each other with the use of technology. Connecting with supportive family and friends through regular video calls, texts, phone calls, etc. can bring a sense of comfort and stability. Talking through our concerns, thoughts, and feelings with others can also help us find helpful ways of thinking about or dealing with a stressful situation.