

Managing Fear and Anxiety over COVID-19

Any type of infectious disease outbreak can lead to stress and anxiety, and this is accentuated when it is caused by a new disease with impact that is not fully understood in the early phases. There are actions that we can all take to manage our fear and anxiety, which are useful not only in the current situation, but in all areas of our lives.

Get Accurate Information

Events that are beyond our control can make us feel powerless, and lead to anxiety and even panic. The most effective way to reduce our fear is to increase our feeling of control. You can do this by:

Limiting your exposure to graphic news stories

Getting accurate information from credible sources

- [WHO: Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) \(includes situation reports\)](#)
- [CDC: COVID-19, Wuhan, China](#)

Accept uncertainty

The inability to tolerate uncertainty plays a huge role in anxiety and worry. Chronic worriers can't stand doubt or unpredictability. They need to know with 100 percent certainty what's going to happen. Worrying is seen as a way to predict what the future has in store - a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work.

Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. You may feel safer when you're worrying, but it's just an illusion. Focusing on worst-case scenarios won't keep bad things from happening. It will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present.

As a way to manage this, start by tackling your need for certainty and immediate answers. Accepting that future uncertainty is a part of this type of situation and focusing on the present will help you to manage your fears more effectively.

Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more dangerous than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every negative thought as if it were fact. You may also discredit your own ability to handle life's problems, assuming you'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions.

Although cognitive distortions aren't based on reality, they're not easy to give up. Often, they're part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring, you must retrain your brain.

Start by identifying the frightening thought, being as detailed as possible about what scares or worries you. Then, instead of viewing your thoughts as facts, treat them as hypotheses you're testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and fears, you'll develop a more balanced perspective.

Stop worry by questioning the worried thought:

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to reassure a friend who had this worry?

Be aware of how others affect you

How you feel is affected by the company you keep, whether you're aware of it or not. The people you spend time with have an impact on your mental state.

Ways to manage this:

- Keep a worry diary. You may not be aware of how people or situations are affecting you. Maybe this is the way it's always been in your family, or you've been dealing with the stress so long that it feels normal. You may want to keep a worry diary for a week or so. Every time you start to worry, jot down the thought and what triggered it. Over time, you'll start to see patterns.
- Spend less time with people who make you anxious. Is there someone in your life who drags you down or always seems to leave you feeling stressed? Think about cutting back on the time you spend with that person or establish healthier relationship boundaries. For example, you might set certain topics off-limits, if you know that talking about them with that person makes you anxious.

Practice mindfulness

Worrying is usually focused on the past or the future - on what has happened or might happen and what you'll do about it. The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present. In contrast to the previous techniques of challenging your anxious thoughts or postponing them to a worry period, this strategy is based on observing and then letting them go. Together, they can help you identify where your thinking is causing problems, while helping you get in touch with your emotions.

- Acknowledge and observe your anxious thoughts and feelings. Don't try to ignore, fight, or control them like you usually would. Instead, simply observe them as if from an outsider's perspective, without reacting or judging.

- Let your worries go. Notice that when you don't try to control the anxious thoughts that pop up, they soon pass, like clouds moving across the sky. It's only when you engage your worries that you get stuck.
- Stay focused on the present. Pay attention to the way your body feels, the rhythm of your breathing, your ever-changing emotions, and the thoughts that drift across your mind. If you find yourself getting stuck on a thought, bring your attention back to the present moment. Using mindfulness meditation to stay focused on the present is a simple concept, but it takes practice to reap the benefits. At first, you'll probably find that your mind keeps wandering back to your worries. Try not to get frustrated. Each time you draw your focus back to the present, you're reinforcing a new mental habit that will help you break free of the negative worry cycle.

Learn to relax

Calm Breathing: This is a strategy that you can use to calm down quickly. We tend to breathe faster when we are anxious, which can make us feel dizzy and lightheaded, and even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow and gentle breaths. Breathe in through the nose, pause, and then breathe out through the mouth, pausing for several seconds before taking another breath.

Stay Connected

- Practice your spiritual rituals: prayer, meditation, yoga and other religious practices can help us to feel connected to a higher power if that is something meaningful to you.
- Talk to someone you love or trust. Sharing our concerns with someone is one way to stay grounded. Choose your confidantes carefully. Know who to talk to about situations that make you anxious. Some people will help you gain perspective, while others will feed into your worries, doubts, and fears.
- You can always contact the Family Consultation Service in confidence at: FamilyConsultationService@WBFN.Org.

Adapted from:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/anxiety_self_help.htm

<http://www.anxietybc.com/resources/selfhelp.php>

Elements courtesy of Staff Welfare Office, International Criminal Court.