

Taking Care of Your Mental Health in Times of Uncertainty

Adapted from: <https://afsp.org/taking-care-of-your-mental-health-in-the-face-of-uncertainty/>

A large part of anxiety comes from a sense of what we think we should be able to control, but can't. We may feel helpless about what will happen or what we can do. When things feel uncertain or when we don't generally feel safe, it's normal to feel stressed. Sometimes stress can also take a toll on our mental health. We don't always know it's happening. You might feel more on edge than usual, angry, helpless, or sad. You might notice that you are more frustrated with others or want to completely avoid any reminders of what is happening. For those of us who already struggle with our mental wellness, we might feel more depressed, fatigued, or less motivated to carry out our daily activities.

It's important to note that **we are not helpless** in light of current news events. We can always shape our response. If you are struggling, here are some things you can do to take care of your mental health in the face of uncertainty:

- 1. Separate what is in your control from what is not.** There are things you can do, and it's helpful to focus on those. Wash your hands. Remind others to wash theirs. Take a vitamin. Do some dishes or laundry. Limit your consumption of news (do you really need to know what is happening on a cruise ship you aren't on?).
- 2. Do what helps you feel a sense of safety.** This will be different for everyone, and it's important not to compare yourself to others. It's recommended that you limit attendance at large social events, but find other ways to feel connected. Depression and isolation feed into each other.
- 3. Get outside and move, even if you are avoiding crowds.** Movement facilitates a healthier mental and physical state despite whatever else is going on. No matter the existing threat, your body and immune system will be improved through 20-30 minutes of movement, allowing you to better manage anything from a pandemic to a bunion. Get into the sun or natural beauty. Take it one step at a time.
- 4. Challenge yourself to stay in the present.** Perhaps your worry is compounding—you are not only thinking about what is currently happening, but also projecting into the future. When you find yourself worrying about something that hasn't happened, gently bring yourself back to the present moment. Notice the sights, sounds, tastes and other sensory experiences in your immediate moment and name them. Engaging in mindfulness activities is one way to help stay grounded when things feel beyond your control.
- 5. Stay connected and reach out if you need more support.** "Social distancing" ≠ "social isolation." Talk to trusted friends about what you are feeling. If you are feeling particularly anxious or if you are struggling with your mental health, it's ok to reach out to a mental health professional for support. You don't have to be alone with your worry and it can be comforting to share what you are experiencing with those trained to help.

We are in this together, and help is always available. You can always reach out to the **Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741** or call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK**.

CORONANXIETY: How to Find Your Chill

Adapted from: <https://stateofanxiety.com/coronanxiety/>

What if...? → Worry → Anxiety → Demoralization & Exhaustion

Taking precautions is sound practice. But thieving Starbucks napkins and one-ply toilet paper from gas stations is unhealthy paranoia. Fear is contagious, but fortunately so is normalcy. So what can you do keep you cool and stay healthy during these anxious times?

- 6. Go on a brain diet.** The antidote to feeling better in a world seemingly gone mad can be as simple as limiting your media consumption. You can't control the turmoil, but you can dramatically limit your exposure and counter the negative with some positives like Upworthy, The Good News Network, and YouTube cat videos. You may like being up to date on news, but at what cost to your internal peace? Make a media exposure limit and stick to it.
- 2. Find the humor. It's there.** Anxiety and humor cannot coexist – sort of like Clark Kent and Superman, or humidity and good hair. Using humor in trying times causes a mental and emotional shift that yields a new perspective in approaching difficult situations. Luckily, many people cope with stress by getting creative, so jokes and memes help keep us connected and our spirits boosted.

3. Forget panic – radically accept the moment. In shocking times, our brains shift to a self-preserving form of denial where the logic-loving prefrontal cortex can shut down. This allows the amygdala – the blaring alarm system part of the brain – to take over. Freedom from suffering requires acceptance from deep within us of ‘what is.’ Let yourself go completely with *what is*. Stay rooted in the moment (aka, mindfulness). Acceptance is your only way out and through. But it requires an internal commitment – not once, but over and over.

4. Crack a (half) smile. A half-smile is slightly turned-up lips with a relaxed face – like a celebrity DUI mugshot. This tactic is proven to be effective in turning around cycles of negative moods. Because emotions are a combination of thoughts, sensations, and behaviors, changing just *one* of these components can result in significantly altering the course of the emotion. Smiling signals a feeling of levity to the brain despite stress.

5. Throw a counterpunch. Anxiety tells us to fight or run or shut down, but often it helps to do the opposite. Each time you cope with your fear in a healthy way, you “rewire” your brain and weaken anxiety’s hold on you. No one overcomes anxiety who consistently avoids, so facing your fear in some way is key. While avoidance may make you feel better in the short-term, it prevents you from learning that anxiety is not as painful or crushing as you think.

6. Stay away from any venue large enough to host a buffet or Jimmy Buffet. At least for now.

Additional Tips from the Buffalo State Counseling Center

13. Only check reliable sources. Stick to sources with a mission to inform you without generating ad revenue from spreading panic, like the CDC, WHO, or health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/coronavirus/

14. Remember that we are all on the same team. It reduces paranoia and anxiety to focus on shared goals – helping each other be healthy, stable, and successful. Government officials, school administrators, and healthcare workers are checking the same CDC website you are and doing the best they can to respond. Everyone is eager to share helpful information, and the moment it becomes available it will be disseminated by reliable sources.

15. Support your immune system with good health practices. Don’t forget that the best protection and treatment for COVID-19, stress, or any other health concern is having a healthy body. There are things that you know you should do, and this is the time to be sure you’re actually doing them. To that end, every day you should:

- **Get enough sleep** – a regular sleep schedule is the #1 strategy for staying healthy and staying psychologically flexible during stressful times.
- Eat a nutritious diet including fruits and vegetables, and don’t skip meals or subsist of snack foods.
- Avoid alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs – don’t destabilize your brain or compromise the natural defenses of your lungs.
- Drink enough water (just don’t share your glass!).
- Set boundaries with stressors, including stressful people and social media.
- Keep in touch with people who love you and make you feel like yourself.
- Use healthy distractions – Sometimes you want to know more (good, reliable) information, but other times you need to turn away and let your brain relax. We’ve all heard “you are what you eat,” and that applies to our media too. Consider a comedy or something to engage your curiosity and calm, listen to upbeat or hopeful music, read a page-turner - something that helps you focus on something other than worry.
- Do something productive or creative, even if it’s small – finishing a task gives you a boost and builds momentum for larger tasks.
- Stop and breathe. The internet has endless resources for mindfulness, breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, etc. You can search for terms like “square breathing” or “relaxation exercises for sleep.”

16. Practice universal precautions. It may not feel like you are “doing enough” to wash your hands, avoid touching your face, cough/sneeze into your arm, etc., but these simple steps have a massively beneficial effect – both for you and all the people in your community.

17. If/when your life is disrupted, allow yourself to grieve. Concerts, weddings, ceremonies, and other important life events are getting canceled, and it’s disappointing even if it’s the right thing to do. Acknowledge it, feel and express your feelings, and be understanding with yourself and those around you. See #14.