

Coping with Stress during a Pandemic

Pandemics can be stressful...

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic may be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a new disease and what could happen can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Public health actions, such as social distancing, can make people feel isolated and lonely and can increase stress and anxiety. However, these actions are necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19. **Coping with stress in a healthy way will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger.**

Stress during an infectious disease outbreak can sometimes cause the following:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones, your financial situation or job, or loss of support services you rely on.
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns.
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating.
- Worsening of chronic health problems.
- Worsening of mental health conditions.
- Increased use of tobacco, and/or alcohol and other substances.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations

How you respond to the COVID-19 pandemic can depend on your background, your social support from family or friends, your financial situation, your health and emotional background, the community you live in, and many other factors. The changes that can happen because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways we try to contain the spread of the virus can affect anyone.

People who may respond more strongly to the stress of a crisis include:

- People who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 (for example, older people and people with underlying health conditions).
- Children and teens.
- People caring for family members or loved ones.
- Frontline workers such as health care providers and first responders, retail clerks, and others.
- Essential workers who work in the food industry.
- People who have existing mental health conditions.
- People who use substances or have a substance use disorder.

- People who have lost their jobs, had their work hours reduced, or had other major changes to their employment.
- People who have disabilities or developmental delay.
- People who are socially isolated from others, including people who live alone, and people in rural or frontier areas.
- People in some racial and ethnic minority groups.
- People who do not have access to information in their primary language.
- People experiencing homelessness.
- People who live in congregate (group) settings.

Take care of yourself and your community

Taking care of your friends and your family can be a stress reliever, but it should be balanced with care for yourself. Helping others cope with their stress, such as by providing social support, can also make your community stronger. During times of increased social distancing, people can still maintain social connections and care for their mental health. Virtual communication (like phones or video chats) can help you and your loved ones feel less lonely and isolated.

Healthy ways to cope with stress

- **Know what to do if you are sick and are concerned about COVID-19.** Contact a health professional before you start any self-treatment for COVID-19.
- **Know where and how to get treatment** and other support services and resources, including counseling or therapy (in person or through telehealth services).
- **Take care of your emotional health.** Taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and react to the urgent needs to protect yourself and your family.
- **Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories,** including those on social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
- **Take care of your body.**
 - Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate.
 - Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Get plenty of sleep.
 - Avoid excessive alcohol use and drugs.
- **Make time to unwind.** Try to do some other activities you enjoy.
- **Connect with others.** Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.

- **Connect with your community- or faith-based organizations.** While social distancing measures are in place, consider connecting online, through social media, or by phone or mail.

Know the facts to help reduce stress

Knowing the facts about COVID-19 and stopping the spread of rumors can help reduce stress and stigma. Understanding the risk to yourself and people you care about can help you connect with others and make an outbreak less stressful.

Take care of your mental health

Mental health is an important part of overall health and wellbeing. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It may also affect how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices during an emergency.

People with pre-existing mental health conditions or substance use disorders may be particularly vulnerable in an emergency. Mental health conditions (such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia) affect a person's thinking, feeling, mood or behavior in a way that influences their ability to relate to others and function each day. These conditions may be situational (short-term) or long-lasting (chronic). People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment and be aware of new or worsening symptoms. If you think you have new or worse symptoms, call your healthcare provider.

Call your healthcare provider if stress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row. Free and confidential resources can also help you or a loved one connect with a skilled, trained counselor in your area.

Suicide

Different life experiences affect a person's risk for suicide. For example, suicide risk is higher among people who have experienced violence, including child abuse, bullying, or sexual violence. Feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and other emotional or financial stresses are known to raise the risk for suicide. People may be more likely to experience these feelings during a crisis like a pandemic.

However, there are ways to protect against suicidal thoughts and behaviors. For example, support from family and community, or feeling connected, and having access to in-person or virtual counseling or therapy can help with suicidal thoughts and behavior, particularly during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recovering from COVID-19 or ending home isolation

It can be stressful to be separated from others if you have or were exposed to COVID-19. Each person ending a period of home isolation may feel differently about it.

Emotional reactions may include:

- Mixed emotions, including relief.
- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones.
- Stress from the experience of having COVID-19 and monitoring yourself, or being monitored by others.
- Sadness, anger, or frustration because friends or loved ones have fears of getting the disease from you, even though you are cleared to be around others.
- Guilt about not being able to perform normal work or parenting duties while you had COVID-19.
- Worry about getting re-infected or sick again even though you've already had COVID-19.
- Other emotional or mental health changes.

Children may also feel upset or have other strong emotions if they, or someone they know, has COVID-19, even if they are now better and able to be around others again.