

## Managing and Capitalizing on Anxiety during COVID-19

This page is being written both for health care providers and for citizens at large. It is meant to help with anxiety management during COVID-19.

First, let us all remember that anxiety is absolutely appropriate right now. It is a cognitive and biological response to threat that is designed to urge us to prepare for action against potential risks. Our ability to plan is what gives us an edge over other animals that can only react to fear. Thus far as our anxiety urges us to take smart precautions, and to plan for future needs, it is serving us very well. While anxiety can feel like fear, it is not exactly the same as the in-the-moment fight or flight response. Once we have done our planning and preparation, made our decisions and implemented plans, normal anxiety should begin to dissipate to a large degree.

When it does not, there are many steps you can take to help. First, we can do a quick self-evaluation using our “anxiety thermometer.” This helps us gain insight into what we are feeling and how to what degree we are feeling it.

If we are edgy over a period of days, the first thing to do is make sure that we are eating right, getting a little exercise (remember you do not have to go out of your house to exercise), and getting enough sleep.

If these activities are impaired, then you proceed to the next few steps. Check your thinking. Are you engaged in catastrophic thinking? If so, try to regain perspective by thinking of the worst case scenario, then the best case scenario and then the most likely scenario. This often can ground us again.

If you feel physically feel disregulated you can try to engage in two practices from dialectical behavioral therapy: holding two ice cubes in your hands, or “the diver’s response” where you put some ice into water to lower the water temp to about 50 degrees and then submerge your face in the water, up to your ears, for 15-20 seconds. These activities tend to activate a biological “reset” button that can make you feel better regulated again.

You can also try to run outside or take a brisk walk, just make sure you continue to engage in social isolation and stay 6 feet from people you may meet. You can be polite and firm with people (it’s good practice)!

If you feel lonely and are practicing social isolation, try to FaceTime or video chat with loved ones or friends. Learn how to do Skype! Think how lucky we are to be in a technological age that allows us to see and hear each other when we are physically apart.

Stay away from overdosing on the news. As we all learned during 9/11, you can experience vicarious traumatization by exposing yourself too often to news and other peoples’ stories. If you are seeing repeats of things you have already seen, then it is probably past time to turn off the news.

Try to meditate. The goal here is to engage in a practice called “meta-cognition” In this form of thinking you become aware that you are thinking about things or feeling things. It lets you check in with yourself. Once you understand how you feel, you can do things to self-soothe. This helps especially when you don’t know why you have that headache, stomach ache or stiff neck or back.

If you are having physical symptoms, meditation is also good to help you feel grounded. You can do the mindfulness skill of focusing on your breath, extracting all you can from the experience: how it feels cool as you breath in from your nose, and how organized the air feels as it passes through your sinuses and the back of your throat. How it is dry, how your chest and belly expand, and how it then reverses direction, and how it is warm and misty and disorganized as it leaves your body. Alternatively you can focus on your spine, our physical center. This can feel very centering in its own right. We are aiming in this case for feeling alert and calm, erect, but not too erect. This is good practice for the stance we try to have in daily life.

Another physical way to relax is progressive muscle relaxation. Starting at the top of your head, feel a warm goo slowly drip down, and wherever it covers your body, you relax those muscles, all the way to your toes.

Practice altruism and compassion for others. The more that you help others, the more you get a sense of your own mastery. This develops a win-win situation. This could mean calling a friend to check in, or an elder who is self-isolating. It might be an encouraging word to a co-worker. It could be sharing some of the skills you are reading here! It has been clinically proven that when we care for others, we ourselves become calmer. As some of us are health care providers, consider this as you care for your patients and your mindset about being depleted may change; you can actually begin to feel charged again. You could give a food gift certificate to a neighbor in need or a loved one.

Take breaks: If you feel that you are being pulled in too many directions, find a way to pull away for five minutes and either practice breathing in a 6 seconds in 2 seconds pause and 6 seconds out pattern, or just try to use a phrase from the practice of loving kindness aimed at yourself or others around you such as “may we/I be well, may we/I all find peace, may we/I find comfort.” There is an old story of the greatest Woodsman who is engaged in a contest to keep his title. He and another woodsman (please excuse the sad idea of chopping trees!) are off! The contest shows the greatest woodsman in a great lead chopping trees. But, as he chops and chops, he finds he is getting tired, and his blade is dulled and he is less effective. Someone from the audience shouts to him to stop and sharpen his blade. He, however says that he can’t stop, “must keep going.” At the end of the story, we see his competitor beginning to catch up. For goodness sake, if you are a person helping others, sharpen your blade!

Going back to basics, never under estimate the power of scheduling yourself. Make sure that you know what you will be doing through out your day, so you can anticipate is coming. It is a very powerful way to sit with the greater uncertainty. We do not know what the virus may bring/do, but you will know that you are brushing your teeth, combing your hair, having your tea. Sitting with uncertainty is a skill we will all be building in the time to come. As we build this muscle, one of the tools that helps us stay calm and centered is routine. Make sure that in your routine you plan for some source of pleasure in your day, whether it is listening to a favorite tune, watching something familiar on television, or practicing an instrument. Make a list of fun things you will do every day, week, month and year.

If it gets to the point that you need more help, then reach out to a mental health practitioner, whether it is a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or mental health counselor. They are still available, even if on line!

We wish you all the best of mental and physical health and well-being