

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH ANXIETY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Living during a time such as this is extraordinary. The last time such a pandemic swept the entire world was in 1918-19, so this is not a situation that any of us has learned how to cope with before.

How people respond to such a situation will vary greatly from person to person, but for most people, stress and anxiety are pretty normal reactions. Some people, however, are simply more vulnerable to feeling a higher level of anxiety and having a stronger stress response.

There are three questions to ask yourself about the level of anxiety you are feeling: is it interfering with what you need to do each day? Interfering with your work? Interfering with your relationships? If you answered yes to any or all of these, it is time to do something about it. But what to do?

If you have struggled with anxiety before, you should try to use what was helpful the last time anxiety reached a problematic level. That should be your first “go to.” For each of us, what works can be different, so regardless of what else is suggested, whatever worked for you before is likely to work again. That might be things you do for yourself, or connecting with a professional. If self-help isn’t enough, it’s time to consider getting professional help.

Even though everyone is social distancing, there are still services available. Some in-person help may be available, and many mental health services can now be accessed virtually, through something called “telehealth.” Check first, but most insurance now covers that.

If anxiety is a new experience for you, there are a variety of things that can be effective in managing it. That doesn’t mean you will feel no anxiety; some anxiety is normal and can actually be helpful. But if it needs to be brought down a notch or two, below are some things you can try at home.

Some possible ingredients for your own personal recipe for the management of stress and anxiety are:

- First and foremost, **routine, structure and schedules are now your friend**, not an annoyance. The schedule should include regular things like bathing/showers, getting dressed, and meals. Each day should include some kind of contact with the outside world (think phone calls, letters, email, Skype, talking to your neighbors from a safe distance.)
- **Turn off the news.** Too much news can be toxic. Pick a time limit (say 30 minutes a day total) and stick to it.
- **Limit time on devices.** Yes, we all need them now more than ever but take breaks to look out at the world around you.
- **Focus on what you can control**, and let go of the rest.
- **Cultivate gratitude.** It’s a powerful strategy. At least once a day catalogue whatever you might still have, starting with the basics we should never take for granted: shelter, food on your table, any person who is a positive in your life, pets that give comfort, skills or strengths that you have.
- **Do something for others.** Expressing kindness is also a very powerful agent for our own happiness.
- **Spiritual practice.** Prayer, meditation, reading scripture can all bring peace and comfort.
- **“Fake it until you make it.”** Smile even if you don’t feel happy. That body-mind connection is a real thing. If you fake being happy, you’ll find yourself feeling happier. If you pretend to be calm, your body will become calmer.
- **Focus on the positive:** Focus on what you *can* do and what you *do have* in your life, rather than what you can’t do or don’t have now.
- **Get things done.** The feeling of accomplishment can be an antidote to anxiety. Make a list of things you can actually accomplish (keeping in mind the constraints we all have now), then

check them off when they're done. Look at the list of what you did and congratulate yourself. Well done!

- **Physical activity** is a great antidote to anxious feelings. Some possibilities that are still an option are walks, stretching, yoga, tai chi. If you're more ambitious you can find online resources for other at-home and more physically demanding workouts. Try to get a buddy for this, either someone at home or via the internet. It can be more fun and easier to stick to.
- **Clear away clutter.** This doesn't mean you have to renovate your closets.... just pick an area or surface to tidy up and clear off. For some people this is very calming.
- **Try to get outside,** and take time to savor it. Take some really good deep breaths. Appreciate the trees and plants. Listen for a bird singing. Watch for other living things from bugs to animals to people. Look at the sky, whether its stormy, cloudy or clear blue.
- **Say "hi" to someone.** Wave at someone when out walking. Call someone you haven't spoken to in a while. Social connection is a powerful mood lifter.
- **Watch or listen to comedy.** Laughter is great medicine!
- **Do something creative.** Drawing, painting, writing, coloring, gardening, making some music. Now is a great time to try a new skill or practice one you left behind.

A COUPLE OF CAUTIONARY POINTS:

- **Be very careful about ways of coping that can by themselves become a new problem.** This includes:
 - **Drinking and the use of "recreational" drugs.** During times like this, these can very quickly turn into a serious problem.
 - **Online shopping.** It can be very easy to run up debt you might not have otherwise.
 - **Gambling.** Keep track of this both in terms of money spent and time spent gambling.

Above all, be kind to yourself. Dump the guilt. These are extraordinary times but you are not expected to be extraordinary. OK is good enough!

IF you find yourself overwhelmed, please do call 211 or go to 211ct.org. Call 911 if you think you need serious help right now.

There is a toll-free parent stress line available for parents and caregivers who need someone to listen, to understand and to talk their feelings out www.talkitoutct.com

Some online apps for reducing stress and anxiety are:

- www.headspace.com User-friendly app for mindfulness activities and the cartoons they use are attractive to youth and many adults. A significant number of mindfulness exercises are free, but to stick with it long-term, a subscription fee is required.
- <https://insighttimer.com> Free guided meditation, grouped by category so you can find activities for anxiety and depression, sleep, boosting self-esteem etc. It has an upgrade option with fees.
- You can find other at www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/top-iphone-android-app