

Managing Anxiety During the COVID-19

No doubt about it – this is a weird and stressful time. It can be hard to focus, hard to live at home, hard to be separated from friends and partners – hard to be out of a routine. And all of that can lead to anxiety, worry, and spinning your wheels. If you're caught in an anxiety spiral, here are some tips:

Seek accurate information and limit exposure to social media and news reports that provide no new information or inaccurate information. Here are some reliable sources of information:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Take regular breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Try to do enjoyable activities and return to normal life as much as possible and check for updates between breaks.

Keep things in perspective. Take a deep breath and stay focused on what the situation actually is, rather than the worst-case-scenario. It can be helpful to shift your focus to things within your control rather than things outside your control.

Acknowledge reactions. Allow yourself time to reflect on what you are feeling and how you may be reacting to any fears and uncertainties.

Do not allow yourself to be too isolated. This is especially true if you are self-quarantined. Maintaining social networks can foster a sense of normality and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. Stay connected to family and friends by phone or text. This may be a time to focus on developing or exploring hobbies and interests. Social isolation can be very difficult so make sure you have a plan for how to manage it so that you don't become too depressed or irritable.

Develop a routine. Create structure in your day by scheduling a normal bedtime and wake up time; structuring your time with hobbies, homework, reading, scheduling regular phone/video contact with friends and family.

Practice calming rituals. Stay grounded in the present moment, which can help you maintain an internal sense of stability and balance when outside events feel threatening.

Develop some coping statements – this will pass; I can only do what I can do; I am not alone.

Determine what you can control and what you can't. There is a certain amount of uncertainty that we have to tolerate going forward. People who have a hard time with uncertainty tend to experience elevated anxiety. Get accurate facts and information from reliable sources including the US Centers for Disease Control

Take care of your body– Try to eat healthy well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep. Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Take breaks– We’re not machines. Make time to unwind and remind yourself that strong feelings will fade. Try taking in deep breaths. Try to do activities you usually enjoy.

Strengthen self-care. Get adequate sleep, exercise regularly, eat healthy foods, practice mindfulness, spend time in nature and employ relaxation techniques. Try to keep a routine especially if you are self-quarantined. Developing distractions and activities that take your mind off the threat and focus on pleasure and relaxation.

Don’t underestimate your resiliency. Although dealing with a pandemic is not an experience many of us have had, there have been times we have lived through a crisis and survived. Remember that you usually have more strength and coping skills than you imagine, particularly when you are stressed.

Make a plan. If finances are a source of concern and anxiety, make a plan or budget to manage your expenses for the next month. Making a plan always helps manage anxiety even if you have to change the plan as time goes on. This can include thinking about vacations or travel that you may have had to cancel and rescheduling them. Try to make as many decisions as you can and avoid simply leaving them “up in air.” Remember that uncertainty feeds anxiety and plans can always change if needed.

Practice gratitude. Focus on what is going well. We are all in this together, even if some may be better equipped to handle challenging medical and mental health concerns.

Seek professional help if you need it. This is a very difficult time for many of us but particularly for individuals who have pre-existing anxiety and or related disorders. Do not hesitate to reach out for help from a doctor or mental health professional.

Seek supports & use campus resources. Reach out to friends and family and learn about on-campus and off-campus resources that are available. If you or someone you know has high distress that does not seem to be lessening, talk about it with others, or contact the Student Counseling Services (309.438.3655) or the Dean of Students Office. Your campus community is here to help!

Avoid stigmatizing or generalizing. Remember to keep in mind the kindness and empathy with which we strive to treat one another at all times as we address this challenge together. Be aware if your behavior or attitudes change towards others from another country, and avoid stigmatizing anyone who is sick as potentially having the Coronavirus. Often when there is uncertainty, our thoughts can become more less compassionate and more fear-based.

RECOGNIZING DISTRESS - A SELF-CHECK LIST

- Increased worry, fear, and feelings of being overwhelmed
- Depressive symptoms that persist and/or intensify
- Inability to focus or concentrate accompanied by decreased academic or work performance or performance of other daily activities
- Sleep difficulties
- Excessive crying
- Isolating or withdrawing from others, fear of going into public situations

- Unhealthy coping (e.g., increased alcohol or drug use, engaging in risky/impulsive behaviors)
- A feeling of hopelessness and/or a paralyzing fear about the future
- Sudden anger or irritability, or noticeable changes in personality

SEEKING SUPPORT

It's not unusual to experience some — or even several — of the types of distress listed above during times of uncertainty and stress. If you notice these signs in yourself, reach out to family and friends for support, and engage in your usual healthy coping strategies (e.g. moderate exercise; eating well; getting adequate sleep; practicing yoga, meditation, or some other mindfulness activity; take time for yourself; engage in a hobby or other fun activity, etc.).

If your distress continues or gets to the point that you are having difficulty managing your day-to-day activities, then seek professional help. Student Counseling Services continues to offer phone consultations in case of emergencies. If you need to connect with a counselor call SCS at (309) 438-3655 (press 2 after hours or call (855) 256-2188 directly) for immediate access to a counselor. If you are experiencing a mental health emergency, please either call 911 or go to your local emergency room.