

How to Cope With Anxiety About Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Learn strategies for managing stress during a pandemic

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It's terrifying to learn that an illness such as coronavirus (COVID-19) is spreading across the globe. The early stages of a pandemic can be especially anxiety-provoking. During this time, you don't know how widespread or deadly the illness is going to end up being.

Feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty are normal during a pandemic. Fortunately, being proactive about your mental health can help to keep both your mind and body stronger.

Ways to take care of yourself include:

- Reading the news from reliable sources (and take breaks from the news)
- Recognizing the things you *can* control, like having good hygiene
- Taking measures only if recommended by the CDC
- Practicing self-care
- Seeking professional help from a [licensed mental health professional](#) if necessary

Stay Updated: [A Detailed Timeline of Coronavirus 2019 \(COVID-19\) Cases According to the CDC, WHO](#)

Ways to Manage Stress

The way you cope with stress can go a long way toward ensuring that you're taking helpful action in managing your mental health. Here are ways to help you ease anxiety surrounding coronavirus.

Read news from trustworthy sources.


Avoid media outlets that build hype or dwell on things that can't be controlled. Instead, turn to sources that give reliable information about how to protect yourself, such as the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC).

Develop an action plan.

There are always some steps you can take to decrease risk. It may be as simple as washing your hands well and limiting travel. But recognizing these can remind you to focus on things you have control over. Just make sure the steps you're taking are actions recommended by reputable sources.

Set limits on your media consumption.

Tuning into media stories that talk about how fast an illness is spreading, or how many people are getting sick, will increase your anxiety. Limit your media consumption to a certain time frame or a certain number of articles.



While it's helpful to stay informed, it's also important you don't allow yourself to be bombarded with anxiety-provoking news all day.

Avoid the herd mentality.

Be aware that many people take action that doesn't help. Don't jump on a bandwagon just because other people are wearing masks or performing specific cleaning rituals (unless those things are recommended by the CDC). Otherwise, your actions could prove to be unhelpful—or perhaps even destructive.

Practice good self-care.

Eating a balanced diet, getting plenty of sleep, and engaging in leisure activities are always key to helping you stay as physically and [psychologically healthy](#) as possible during [stressful times](#). Good self-care also keeps your immune system robust.

Seek professional help.

If your mental health is being impacted by the stress of the coronavirus, then you may want to seek professional help. A licensed mental health professional can help you manage your fears while also empowering you to make the best decisions for you and your family.

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Mental Health Concerns


In addition to mental health concerns that may arise as a result of anxiety surrounding a pandemic, it's important to monitor existing mental health conditions to ensure they don't worsen.

Depression and Anxiety

Researchers have found that some individuals may experience mental health problems for the first time during a pandemic. [Adjustment issues](#), [depression](#), and [anxiety](#) may arise.

A study from the Ebola virus outbreak in Sierra Leone, indicated that increased numbers of people reported mental health and psychosocial problems. A study from the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009 indicated an increase in a variety of emotional symptoms, including somatoform disorders (symptoms such as pain and fatigue that can't be fully explained by a physical cause).

Additionally, some existing mental health conditions may get worse. Research suggests that individuals who are especially vulnerable to stress and anxiety may be at the highest risk.



Severe anxiety may also cause an increase in substance use. Individuals who have been in recovery may become more likely to relapse as their stress levels increase.

Researchers from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, found that people who were the least able to tolerate uncertainty experienced the most anxiety during the H1N1 pandemic. Those individuals were also less likely to believe they could do anything to protect themselves.

Caretakers may be at an especially high risk for emotional symptoms during a pandemic as well. They may experience:

- increased depression and anxiety
- increased concerned about protecting their loved ones
- guilt about causing/not preventing a loved one's illness if they become sick

In turn, children often adopt the coping strategies they observe in their parents. Parents who grow anxious during a pandemic may end up witnessing their children develop anxiety right along with them.

High anxiety and feelings of helplessness can encourage some individuals to adopt unproven remedies or prevention methods. Some of these methods may be harmful both to individuals and to the community as a whole. So it's important to ensure that any actions you take are actually helpful.

Rumination or Isolation

Personal reactions to increased fears may differ. But many individuals experience increased rumination about the possibility of getting sick. They may also greatly modify their behavior when doing so isn't warranted (e.g., isolating themselves or preparing for catastrophic outcomes).

Individuals with certain vulnerabilities may experience an increase in psychosis or paranoia. This can involve a tendency to incorporate outbreak-related facts into, or as justification for their delusional thinking.

How Do I React?

You may witness people around you panicking. On the other hand, you may experience those don't seem concerned at all when a pandemic is on the rise, assured that it won't affect them. You may find yourself feeling all kinds of emotions—or maybe, you are confused and don't know how to feel.

Responding to the Unfamiliar

People tend to overreact to unknown threats as easily as they underreact to familiar threats. For instance, although car crashes are common, driving or riding in a car probably doesn't feel scary since you most likely do it on a regular basis.

Similarly, you might not be that afraid of the flu. After all, you've survived up until now by either beating the flu or avoiding it. Yet influenza sickens as much as 20% of the population in any given year, and thousands of people die from it.

But the vaccination rate for the flu in the United States is usually less than 50%—most people just aren't afraid of it. The reverse is also true; what we know less about is more likely to make us nervous.

You're more likely to develop serious anxiety surrounding what you're less familiar with. This is one of the reasons why pandemics of the past, like Ebola virus and Zika virus, created a spike in anxiety for most individuals.

Being bombarded with news that constantly talks about death tolls, and reports that emphasize how many are sick, can cause people to overestimate the risks they face in contracting the illness.

However, reliable sources of media can also have positive effects during a pandemic.

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Media's Influence

One reason for this may stem from the way the brain responds to novel threats. A 2013 study published in *PLOS One* found that the amygdala portion of the brain (a part of the brain involved in processing emotional responses) experiences increased activity when faced with unfamiliar threats. This leads to heightened anxiety. The amygdala responds differently when faced with a familiar threat, however.

The media can fuel anxiety by continuously reporting on the “spread” of an illness like the coronavirus. However, when used appropriately, the media can also be an ally in disseminating useful information.

Positive vs. Negative Use of Media

During the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, Australian and Swedish media outlets both reported accurately on the risks of contracting the illness.

Swedish media outlets, however, were more effective because they reported on how viewers could protect themselves and reduce their risk of getting sick. They openly admitted to uncertainties about the epidemic but encouraged people to get vaccinated as a way to help keep other members of the community safe.

Australian media, on the other hand, largely chose to focus the majority of their attention on reporting public agency missteps during the outbreak. This may have negatively affected the likelihood that Australians felt an urgency to rush out and get vaccinations.

Before the pandemic, Sweden and Australia had similar vaccination rates. Following the outbreak, the vaccine rate was 60% in Sweden and 18% in Australia.

As a result, researchers discovered that news reports can reduce panic in the public by recommending concrete, detailed actions for people to take. This approach may prevent individuals from overreacting or taking drastic measures when a new threat emerges.

A Word From Verywell

Fortunately, most pandemics disappear almost as quickly as they begin. But managing your anxiety as you learn more about the outbreak, or discovering how to protect yourself, can be difficult. Fortunately, getting proactive about your psychological well-being can help manage your mental health during these times of uncertainty.

Helpful Links

[Coping With Loneliness During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[How to Transition To Online Therapy](#)

[How to Talk to Your Kids About Coronavirus \(From Verywell Family\)](#)

[What to Do in a Pandemic \(From Verywell Health\)](#)

[How to Wash Your Hands \(From Verywell Health\)](#)

[What Are Coronavirus Scams? \(From Lifewire\)](#)

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