How to Manage Anxiety About the Coronavirus

First of all, let me highlight the title of this article "How to Manage Anxiety About the Coronavirus."  The key word here is "manage", both because the article cannot offer a miracle cure, but also because anxiety in itself is not a bad feeling.  In fact, anxiety is often a form of protection.  It's what we do with our anxiety and how we respond to events that matter.

Briefly, let's take a look at what anxiety/fear/worry/stress is.

Even though we live in the year 2020, our brain still acts as if we lived in the Stone Age when under threat.  For example, if we were being chased by a bear, it would immediately tell us to go into a flight, fight, or freeze response depending on which action would be most likely to keep us alive.  Then, after the situation was over and we made it out alive, our brain would tell us that we were out of immediate danger and our body would relax.*

*The freeze response is a little bit different, but for the sake of brevity in this article, I won't go into detail here.

Now looking at the coronavirus, or COVID-19, we can see that it brings with it the additional issues of being a long-term and uncertain event that makes direct action difficult.  However, that doesn't mean that there aren't things we can do.  In fact, our anxiety has most likely already been a protective factor, making us more mindful of frequent hand-washing and keeping us away from physical contact with people we don't know.  In other words, thank your anxiety!

Still, we don't want to let our anxiety get out of hand, making us react rather than respond or completely take control of our thoughts.  When I'm feeling anxious or worried, I like to ask myself a few questions in addition to what we just covered.

- What part of the worry is realistic?  What is unrealistic?  (Many of us tend to instantly go to the worst case scenario, without knowing the facts or taking into account how resilient we are.)
- What can you control?  What is out of your control?
- For what you can control, what actions are possible?  (More on these last two in a bit!)

Okay, we've broken down some of the basics around anxiety, so let's move on to other actionable steps specifically related to the coronavirus.

- Practice social distancing, but make sure you connect!  This means talking to family and friends who you love and feel safe speaking to.  Even if we are all feeling a little anxious, talking to others we love can help us regulate emotions and let us know we are not alone.
- If you need additional help sorting through your thoughts and emotions, reach out to a therapist.  Many therapists are currently offering teletherapy sessions for clients.

- Get your news from reputable sources.  For information on the virus and the best ways to protect yourself and others, the best source is the [CDC](#).
- Limit your screen time.  This includes social media and the news.  Pertaining to social media, there is a lot of misinformation out there, as well as a lot of well-intentioned friends continually participating in re-active posting that can elevate our anxiety.  As for news, even if it is 100% trustworthy, our minds and bodies need a break from the constant flow of information, especially before bed time.  This is going to be different for everyone, especially due to different jobs, but I would try to keep social media use down to 20 minutes per day and news to 1 hour per day.
- Don't rush into big decisions.  At [Girls on the Run](#), we teach "Stop and Take a BrThRR" (Stop, Breathe, Think, Respond, Review).  This will keep us from thinking with our primal brain and back into our prefrontal cortex, the rational part of our brain.
- Make time to let your body calm down.  This may mean time outdoors, Yoga, or meditation.  In particular, body-centered meditations that guide you through relaxing each body part will be particularly helpful during this time and many great videos can be found on YouTube.
- When possible, take action. For many of us, this is as simple as washing our hands, covering coughs and sneezes with tissues or your elbow, avoiding close contact with people we don't know, and seeking medical care early if sick.  For those of us who may be feeling sick, your best action is truly to self-quarantine and get better! (Also, I still recommend connection, even if it is through FaceTime or Skype...we need each other!) For those of us who are healthy and have time, we can be helpers in our community, offering to get our more vulnerable neighbors groceries, shoveling driveways when it snows, etc.
- Find the light in the darkness.  Laughing and doing things we enjoy does not mean we are ignoring the immensity of our current situation.  As human beings, we have the capability and capacity to hold the good and the bad.  In order to keep the bad from overwhelming us, it is even more important that we find the enjoyment of playing board games with our family, taking a solitary stroll outside, or read that book we've been meaning to get to.
- Finally, just be kind!  Smile at others.  Be mindful when shopping and your impact on others.  Support local businesses while continuing to care for the earth. Truly, the health and well-being of our community does not lie in the false notion of  "survival of the fittest" but ["survival of the kindest](#)."

Estes Valley, we are "Mountain Strong."

Ray Nypaver
Owner of [Wanderlust Counseling](#)