

## COVID Fatigue: How to Cope with Pandemic Burnout

The COVID-19 pandemic is still taking and disrupting lives. Although vaccines and treatments promise that someday life will return to some kind of normalcy, a growing number of people are experiencing pandemic burnout.

The desire to follow protective guidelines is waning, and a sense of exhaustion is on the rise. What can be done about COVID-19 fatigue?

This article explains what pandemic fatigue is like and where it comes from. It also outlines some steps you can take to reboot if you've grown weary of life in the grip of a pandemic.

### What exactly is COVID fatigue?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines pandemic fatigue as being “demotivated” and exhausted with the demands of life during the COVID crisis. The WHO warns that this fatigue could ultimately lead to a longer, more devastating pandemic.

Here's a key fact: Pandemic fatigue is *completely* natural.

At the beginning of the pandemic, your short-term survival skills kick in. Fear keeps you motivated. But over time, fear subsides and frustration grows. Exhaustion — and complacency — set in.

### How to know if you have COVID fatigue

What burnout looks like can vary from one person to the next, but here are some common symptoms:

- **Feeling cynical and emotionally exhausted.** Two of the most common burnout symptoms are feeling emotionally drained and cynical about the world around you. Researchers have observed these symptoms in people who have worked in demanding environments during the pandemic.
- **Being less effective on the job.** Burnout happens when you've run out of personal resources. Self-doubt creeps in and, over time, you may not be able to pay as much attention to work tasks. Researchers have noticed that some people with pandemic-related burnout begin feeling like a failure at work.

- **Having a deep sense of anxiety about the future.** Your anxiety may be related to your own future or the future of your community and the wider world. Researchers think this anxiety comes from the fact that you can't predict when the pandemic will end. When things are unpredictable, people often feel they have no control over their lives.
- **Being less willing to comply with health guidelines.** As the pandemic drags on, more people are tiring of restrictions such as mask-wearing and social distancing. Growing tired of inconvenient public safety measures may be natural, but experts say it could prolong the pandemic even further.

### **Strategies for dealing with COVID burnout**

The first thing to know about pandemic fatigue is this: Under prolonged extraordinary stress, it's completely normal to burn out.

Let's take a closer look at what research has revealed about how to cope with this type of burnout.

#### **1) Keep your routines**

During times of crisis, public health experts explain that sticking to your daily routines helps maintain good mental health. But how do you hang onto your routines when you're suddenly working from home or you're out of work altogether?

In times of upheaval, narrow your focus to those routines that are necessary for maintaining your livelihood and basic health needs like eating well and getting good sleep. These often have the biggest influence on how stressed you feel.

Researchers call other habits, such as exercising and socializing, "secondary routines." They're also important to your mental health. You may need to adapt or replace these habits to fit into your new daily schedule.

#### **2) Strengthen ties with your most important relationships**

Finding and fostering new relationships takes lots of time and energy. If you're feeling fatigued and overwhelmed, it may benefit you more to lean into established relationships. These relationships can give you a sense of connection and community without using up too much of your emotional resources, researchers say.

It's important to point out, however, that not all established relationships are healthy ones. If any of your primary relationships are troubled or toxic, the demands of the pandemic may have put extra pressure on you.

Every person's situation is unique, and you're the expert on your relationships. If you're ready to remove yourself from a destructive or abusive relationship, there are resources that can help you do this, whether there's a pandemic going on or not.

### **3) Be aware of addictive behavior risk**

Mental health experts note that when there's economic uncertainty, food insecurity, and isolation, people feel more stressed. Extra stress can lead to more anxiety and depression. In those circumstances, people who've had disordered eating or substance use issues may notice more symptoms.

In one small study, 38 percent of people being treated for an eating disorder said they had an increase in symptoms during the early part of the pandemic.

The researchers of this study recommend that you:

- plan relaxing and enjoyable activities
- practice deep breathing
- meditate
- keep a diary of positive experiences during the day

### **4) Build your resilience**

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from hard circumstances. Professional athletes are great at it because they are used to recovering from exhaustion, injury, and extreme demands on their minds and bodies.

Resilience may be a personality trait, but it can also be built up intentionally. Researchers studying COVID burnout offer these strategies for strengthening resilience:

- Believe in yourself. Remind yourself of all you've successfully overcome in the past. Self-belief is an important resilience skill.
- Pay attention to the present moment. Developing a mindfulness habit can increase resilience.
- Exercise. It doesn't just improve your body's resilience; there's evidence that it builds brain resilience, too.

### **How to avoid feeling overwhelmed by COVID-19 news**

During the pandemic's first surge, lots of people tracked the news hourly or daily. As pandemic fatigue set in, some people turned away from the media. Maybe it was causing anxiety. Maybe it was just too much.

If you feel overwhelmed by COVID-19 news, health experts recommend two strategies:

- Limit your newsgathering to a specific time. Some people find it helpful to check the news just once per day — and at the same time daily.
- Consider the source. Seek information from trusted, reliable sources. Studies show that when pandemic-related news coverage is laced with highly emotional commentary, it increases anxiety. And anxiety can lead to fatigue.

### **When to get help**

It's important to remember that you're not alone. Pandemic fatigue is real and many people are dealing with it. Don't hesitate to reach out for help if you:

- notice that constant, low-grade anxiety is starting to affect your wellbeing, your relationships, or your daily functioning
- are experiencing symptoms of depression
- have lost the motivation to protect your health and the health of others in your care

### **Where to get help**

KGA, your Employee Assistance Program, is there for you 24/7 with confidential support. They offer counseling with licensed mental health professionals via telephone, video, and text/message-based platforms. The EAP is available 24/7 at 800-648-9557 or visit <https://my.kgalifeservices.com/o/xmacorp>