How to Cope with the Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

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In just a few weeks, the world has changed dramatically for many people. Even if COVID-19 hasn't yet reached your area, you've likely heard of the new coronavirus and its widespread impact. If you follow current events, this new concern may seem overwhelming on top of the already high tensions of another contentious election season, threats to the climate, and other worries.

You've probably seen several handwashing reminders on social media, and your store shelves may currently lack essentials like toilet paper, soap, paper towels, and shelf-stable foods. Your school, or your children's schools, may be closed. If you go out—carefully maintaining a distance of six feet—you might notice this new, deadly virus pops up in every conversation.

If you live with anxiety, or any other mental or physical health issue, you might feel more stressed and anxious each day. And while preventing loss of life is a key priority in the management of any disaster, the significant impact of a pandemic on mental health cannot be denied.

COVID-19 FACTS

If you have some doubts about the reality of this pandemic, you're not alone. After all, news and information about this virus vary—even elected officials disagree. Some people don't consider it much of a concern at all, while others might seem ready for an apocalypse scenario.

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It's often difficult to know whom to trust in turbulent times, but try to set those doubts aside. COVID-19 isn't a hoax, and this virus isn't going to disappear. Medical professionals around the world emphasize that its spread will likely continue. To mitigate risk and keep yourself and others safe, it's important to make sure you're getting accurate information about this virus and the ways it can spread.

If you live in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website is an excellent choice for accurate, up-to-date information. Your local hospital's website may also have current information. Other good sources include news broadcasts and other sources that provide unbiased information, or information without a political slant.

COVID-19 causes the following main symptoms:

- Fever
- Cough

- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue and other flu-like symptoms

If you or someone you love has a confirmed or even possible case, you may feel terrified, but keep in mind that although the virus can cause serious symptoms, even death, *many* people have mild cases.

The current mortality rate is between 3 and 4 percent. However, this rate doesn't provide an accurate picture of COVID-19's actual mortality rate. The pandemic is still progressing, and experts don't yet have full knowledge of how many people have the virus.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF COVID-19

There's no denying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on emotional well-being.

Dr. Fabiana Franco, GoodTherapy Topic Expert, explains: "When our daily routines are in turmoil, especially when this turmoil relates to how we interact with others, it can feel quite overwhelming. We should be mindful of the fact that these challenges, understandably, can cause anxiety and fear."

Symptoms of anxiety and stress may show up in your mood and behavior, whether you recognize them or not. Signs you might notice include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Loss of concentration or focus
- Appetite changes
- Restlessness or jumpiness
- Anxiety-related stomach issues
- Irritability, shorter temper than usual, and other mood changes
- Ever-present feelings of nervousness or worry

ANXIETY AND COVID-19

People living with existing anxiety conditions, such as panic disorder, general anxiety, or obsessions and compulsions (OCD), may notice worsened symptoms or a sense of losing control. Symptoms of these conditions are challenging enough already without the added stress of a serious global pandemic. Increased severity of symptoms could trigger feelings of hopelessness or depression, even thoughts of suicide.

Health anxiety, a condition marked by persistent fears of contracting serious illness, may reach a level that's difficult to manage for some people. Those with health anxiety may:

- Feel unable to stop seeking out information on COVID-19
- Evaluate themselves for symptoms with high frequency
- Experience extreme anxiety and fear over contracting the virus
- Become trapped in a loop of imagining worst-case scenarios

ISOLATION AND OTHER LIFE CHANGES RESULTING FROM COVID-19

If COVID-19 has reached your state, particularly if you live in one of the hardest-hit areas, your lifestyle may be changing in many ways. If you're currently feeling more worried about how various changes will affect your life than actually getting sick, don't worry. Those feelings are very normal.

Perhaps you've decided to self-isolate or need to self-quarantine due to possible exposure. You might not only face worries about your physical health, you might feel a little concerned about how you're going to make it through two weeks alone at home.

It's understandable to feel frustrated or stressed by this extreme change. You might already have feelings of loneliness or boredom. If you can't work from home, you're probably also feeling some concern and stress around losing your job or missing more school than you can make up easily.

Many people also feel concerned about a potential scarcity of resources. COVID-19 has already had a significant impact on the American economy, and you might worry what that means for the future—not only the far-reaching impact on the world, but the immediate impact on your life after the pandemic. A scarcity mindset can lead to panic and intense distress.

COVID-19 AND DISCRIMINATION

The population most severely affected by this new coronavirus appears to be older adults, particularly those with underlying health conditions. This fact has led some other populations to avoid older adults or actively discriminate against those most at risk.

Other vulnerable populations include unsheltered and homeless communities, groups many people lack compassion and respect for even in ordinary times, and people in prisons or detention centers. While you may not be able to do much yourself to help these populations, your words and attitude can have an impact. Spread kindness instead of stigma.

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You may have heard COVID-19 called "the Chinese coronavirus." This terminology does nothing to increase awareness and compassion. Rather, it promotes discrimination and xenophobia, both of which can cause a great deal of harm in already tense times. This virus may have originated in China, but that has little to do with Chinese people living in the United States. Avoiding or fearing people of Asian descent is unhelpful. It's also an action steeped in prejudice.

People of Asian descent living in the United States at the time of the initial outbreak are no more likely to have the virus than anyone else—including yourself.

HOW TO COPE WITH THE MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF COVID-19

As mentioned above, the toll of COVID-19 isn't entirely physical. But it's possible to manage this emotional burden in healthy and productive ways.

These tips can help make it easier to cope with this pandemic and the rapid changes it may bring:

Prepare, don't panic

Making preparations for quarantine or self-isolation may provide a sense of control and relief. While it's not a bad idea to prepare for this possibility, consider that over-preparing—panic buying, if you will—may prevent other people in your area from accessing needed resources.

Most disaster recommendations encourage stocking up on two weeks' worth of basic supplies and nonperishable food items. Avoid buying more than that, unless absolutely needed, in order to allow others to make the same preparations. This is particularly important if you live in a small town with few grocery options.

Practice mindful exposure

Keeping yourself informed on facts about the virus and new updates from federal and state governing agencies *is* recommended. It's important to know what's going on, and hearing about relief coming to your area can help relieve some of your stress.

That said, Dr. Franco cautions against "consuming every piece of media on the virus." Constant exposure to media can increase tension and stress and quickly become overwhelming.

She recommends seeking out trusted sources, like the CDC and World Health Organization (WHO). "Follow their recommended protocols to maintain hygiene and cleanliness," she says.

Stay social

Large gatherings may be banned in many areas, but that doesn't mean you have to forego contact entirely. If you don't live in a high-risk area, you're likely safe to interact with a friend or loved one, as long as neither of you have known exposure. If you're concerned, try social distancing—avoid locations with a lot of other people and maintain a distance of six feet while you spend time together.

"If you do feel uneasy," Franco says, "limit in-person interactions, ask if you can work from home, or take time off if possible. Do what makes you most comfortable."

You can also use digital platforms like Skype, Messenger, and WhatsApp to keep in touch with friends and family around the globe. Even if you can't spend time together face-to-face, it's important to maintain connection with your loved ones. Physical isolation may be necessary, but total isolation is not.

Practice good self-care habits

If you enjoy regular exercise, not being able to get out of your house for a workout or run can add to your stress and anxiety. Exercise helps relieve mental health symptoms for many, so forced idleness can cause a lot of distress.

If you're in good health, you might try things like:

- Running laps around your house, up and down stairs, in your backyard, or around your apartment complex
- Following an online workout video (YouTube has plenty of options, whether you use workout equipment or not)
- Reading up on simple stretches and gentle calisthenics

Comfort food might seem appealing, and there's nothing wrong with enjoying your favorite meal or some

junk food. But try to eat a balanced diet as much as possible, including plenty of whole foods and fresh produce, as long as you have access. These foods can help promote wellness in body and mind. If you're having trouble purchasing food for your family, look into community resources from your local schools. Many affected areas are stepping up nutrition programs to feed hungry families during this time.

You might have trouble sleeping, but try to maintain a normal sleep schedule as much as possible. Avoiding technology, particularly news and other media, for at least an hour before bedtime, can be very helpful.

Dr. Franco also recommends meditation, deep breathing exercises, and other relaxation techniques. These practices can offer relief from stress and help you get better sleep.

Try:

- A warm bath
- Aromatherapy (scented candles, essential oils or relaxing herbs, a bubble bath, or anything else you have on hand that provides a soothing fragrance)
- A calming mantra

Being outdoors, especially in good weather, can also offer health benefits, so get outside as much as possible, as long as you aren't sick or potentially sick. Sunlight and fresh air from your own backyard can still boost your mood.

Do things you enjoy

If you're staying at home, there *is* a bright side: You may have an abundance of free time. Take advantage of this unexpected gift to enjoy books, movies, board and video games with family, or crafts. Taking time for enjoyable activities can not only offer a distraction, it can help keep your spirits up.

Things to try:

- Learn a new language with apps like Duolingo
- Use YouTube videos to teach yourself a new skill, like knitting, baking, or household repair
- Catch up on spring cleaning or projects you haven't had time for previously
- Pick up an old hobby, like art, music, or poetry writing

It's normal to have some anxiety around what could happen. The current situation is unprecedented, and uncertainty can cause a lot of fear. If you're having trouble staying positive, remember you're not alone.

If you don't have a therapist currently, consider reaching out to a telemental health provider who offers HIPAA-compliant support through email, video chat, or text message. You can search for a provider from home using GoodTherapy's directory.

If you do have a therapist and need additional support, it's worth reaching out to ask if they offer HIPAA-compliant online counseling at this time.

Thoughts of depression, fear, and hopelessness can be difficult to manage. If you're having thoughts of suicide or feel in crisis, consider reaching out to a national helpline through phone (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-8255**) or text (Crisis Text Line: **HOME** to **741741**). Trained, compassionate

Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-8255**) or text (Crisis Text Line: **HOME** to **741741**). Trained, compassionate counselors offer free support, 24/7.

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