

Coping with Stress around COVID-19

An *INTERFACE* Guide

As we sit in our homes, waiting for this unprecedented period of stress to pass, we might be seeking tips for managing our anxiety. We know that stress can manifest in a multitude of ways. We might experience emotional responses, including worry, fear, anger, or sadness. Physical reactions, such as sweating, rapid heartbeat, digestive issues, aches and pains, tension, and changes in sleep and appetite may occur as well. Finally, we may experience cognitive symptoms, such as confusion, brain fog, memory problems, and trouble concentrating. So, how do we keep these symptoms under control, cope with the anxiety that comes with this crisis, and help our families endure this stressful time? Here are some tips for coping with anxiety relating to COVID-19:

Social distancing, NOT social isolating.

Socialization is vital for our emotional wellbeing, and we know that isolation has a powerfully detrimental effect on our overall health and wellness. Socially distance yourself from people outside your home, while maintaining connection to your household/family members. Stay connected with friends and others via Facetime, texting, phone calls, Skype, etc. Other ways to connect include playing online games together, or watching movies/TV shows together via Netflix's new feature, *Netflix Party*.



Manage exposure to the News and social media.

Only refer to reliable, trustworthy sources, such as the CDC and NIH, and try to limit exposure to false information that is often disseminated via social media.

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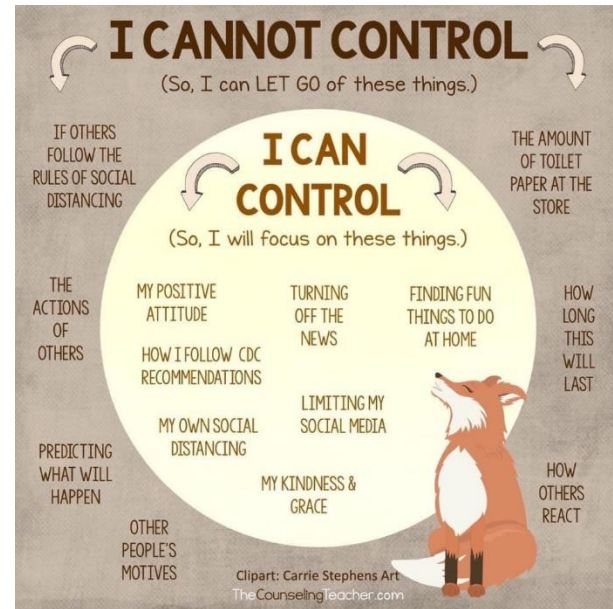
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Focus on the things you can control.

When we ruminate on things that we cannot control, our anxiety often increases. Try to pay attention to the things you can control, such as washing your hands often (for 30 seconds), staying home if you have any symptoms, using hand sanitizer, and practicing social distancing.

Hone in on the present.

Perseverating on the past (i.e, regretting our mistakes) and the future (i.e. “what if?”) can exacerbate anxiety. Focus on the present: *what can I do right now to help myself and my family?* It is okay if your mind slips and you start worrying. Do not judge yourself, be patient, and gently remind yourself to come back to the present. Remember to have self-compassion!



Get outside and move!

According to the CDC, we should be avoiding large crowds and practicing social distancing. However, we can still go outside to get fresh air! Go for walks (while maintaining distance from others), sit outside in the sun (don't forget sunscreen!), or have a spontaneous yoga session out on your lawn. If you are working from home, home-schooling, or otherwise following a sedentary routine, take breaks by stretching, walking, or meditating.



Look into telehealth services.

Some therapists are offering tele-therapy via video-chatting platforms or over the phone. Talk to your current provider about telehealth and check to see if your insurance covers this service.* If you do not have a current therapist, call our helpline or utilize other resources to find a clinician. Hotlines, such as Call-2-Talk (508-532-2255) and Samaritans (877-870-4673), can also help provide in-the-moment support.

* See our Client Guide to Teletherapy (Insert link)

Utilize strategies that have been helpful in the past

Try to recall grounding techniques or other strategies that have been helpful for managing your anxiety in the past: some examples might be meditation, mindfulness, exercise, deep breathing, cuddling with a pet, watching a funny TV show, or listening to music. If you are looking for some grounding techniques, you can find examples here, offered by Dr. Sarah Allen, PhD: <https://www.healthline.com/health/grounding-techniques#soothing-techniques>.

Recognize vicarious trauma.

If you are a responder, such a doctor, police officer, or nurse, recognize the impact that others' trauma can have on you (vicarious trauma), make time for self-care and caring for your family, and do not be afraid to ask for help.



Helping your Children through their Anxiety

Being a parent might feel especially stressful during this time, as you not only have to manage your own anxiety, but also that of your children. Below, find some tips on how to help children cope with anxiety, offer children support, and teach them about this pandemic:

Provide a space for questions.

Your children might have a lot of questions about the virus. They might inquire about their safety and express concern over what they should do and what is going to happen in the future. Answer them honestly, while talking to them in an age-appropriate manner. Consider how much information is appropriate and what information they can handle. This includes regulating their exposure to the media. Validate their emotions and make it known that is okay to feel upset, scared, or worried. Let them know that you're doing everything you can to keep them safe. Remember to stay calm and manage your own emotional responses, as children do pick up on the emotions of those around them, especially those of their caregivers.

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Reinforce the importance of proper hygiene.

Remind your children to stay clean and healthy by washing their hands and avoiding touching their eyes/nose/mouth. Check out this story-book format that parents can use to explain COVID-19 and hygiene practices in an accessible way:

<https://www.autismsociety-nc.org/wp-content/uploads/Germs-Social-Story.pdf>



Try to follow a daily routine.

Continue with any routines that were once in place, when possible. Having structure can help relieve a child's anxiety. Try to plan and organize activities and maintain regular mealtimes and bedtimes. Write up a to-do list or schedule, if that helps.

Practice coping strategies in kid-friendly ways.

Think about techniques that are accessible to children, such as drawing, journaling, imaginative play, or using the five senses. Some helpful examples can be found here: <https://copingskillsforkids.com/calming-anxiety>. When possible, modify grounding techniques, meditation, and mindfulness to be more child-friendly. Check out this video from the Wall Street Journal for tips around meditation for children!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IMH1rqWFQA>



Note: if you have financial/employment concerns, you can contact 1-866-4USWAGE (1-866-487-9243) to ask about the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

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