



# Managing Your Stress During a Pandemic

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak may be stressful for you and others. Some observers have described the set of feelings people have about this tragic series of events as a form of grief, or mourning the loss of our sense of safety or normalcy. These are difficult times and it is normal to feel worried and scared. You may also notice you feel anxious, lonely, bored, frustrated, concerned, irritable, angry or sad. Some people will have trouble sleeping or dealing with appetite changes, want to use more alcohol, tobacco and/or drugs; and have troubling thoughts. Please know that everyone reacts to stressful events differently and we each find our own ways to cope. Think about ways that you have managed stress in the past and use the ones that have worked best.

Here are some tips that may help:

- **Keep doing the healthy things you already do.** Keep doing the healthy things you already do. Eat healthy foods, take time to be active (e.g. walk, run, yoga) and get 7 to 8 hours of sleep each day. Exercise can help prevent depression and anxiety. Avoid excess caffeine and alcohol. Stay away from tobacco and other drugs.
- **Keep in touch with others.** Talk to family and friends by phone, text, video chat or social media. For more social support, try an online support group.
- **Limit watching or reading news.** While it is important to keep up to date, limit watching news or reading news sites to 1 or 2 times per day. Seek out reliable sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) and World Health Organization (WHO, [www.who.int/en](http://www.who.int/en)). Being exposed to news all the time can add to worries, uncertainty, and fear.
- **Ground yourself.** If you feel overwhelmed and losing focus, use the 5-4-3-2-1 coping technique.
  - Take a deep, slow breath and focus on things around you.
  - 5: Name five things you can see (e.g., chair, window, plant, etc.).
  - 4: Touch four things (e.g., chair you are sitting on, table front of you, etc.). Notice what they feel like.
  - 3: Focus on three things you can hear. Listen to the clock ticking or birds singing. Take a moment to hear sounds you often filter out.
  - 2: Smell two things. Perhaps this is food you cooked or the scent of clean clothes.
  - 1: Find one thing you can taste. Is there a flavor in your mouth from toothpaste, coffee, or juice? If you have something to drink nearby, take a sip. Try to detect the subtle flavors.



- **Stay busy, stick to routines, and focus on what you can control.** Now is the time to revisit hobbies, favorite books, and other pleasant activities will help you feel calmer and more normal. Also, keeping your normal routine as much as possible will help you feel calmer and more normal. Let go of things you cannot control and focus on what you can – your actions, your home life, and your coping skills.
- **Accept your feelings.** Your feelings are real and normal! Instead of fighting or hiding your emotions, allow yourself to feel the sadness, worry, or other feelings that come up. You can expect to feel fear and worry during a time like this. It may help to simply sit with your feelings for a while, and then do something that helps you feel better.
- **Maintain a sense of hope.** Try writing down things for which you are grateful. Each night write down 3 things that are going well or that you are thankful for. Talk about them with family or friends.
- **Pace yourself.** Plan to take breaks in your day to unwind, go for a short walk, or meditate for a few minutes. Do something you enjoy after finishing a hard task.
- **Set a schedule and stick to a routine.** Schedule times for work, school, chores, exercise, meals, and sleep. Schedules give a sense of control, promote healthy habits, and leave less time to worry. Set your alarm to wake you up at the same time each day. Clean up and get dressed – don't stay in your pajamas all day, every day. Eat at regular meal times and plan for healthy snacks as needed. If you find yourself worrying throughout the day, schedule your worry for a specific time of the day. If worries crop up outside of that time, tell yourself that you can set them aside until “worry time.”
- **Think about your values.** What is important to you? Family? Relationships? Health? Helping others? Commit to finding ways of living those values. Shift your focus to things that give you meaning, purpose, or fulfillment.
- **Let yourself have fun.** Make time to do things at home that you enjoy or find comforting, such as reading, watching movies or TV, listening to music, playing games, praying or attending online religious services, and doing puzzles. Express your creativity through hobbies, art, writing and crafts.
- **Challenge your thoughts.** Replace hopeless or self-defeating thoughts with more balanced ones that help you feel a sense of control. Try changing “this is a terrible time” to “this is a terrible time that I can get through.” Words matter.
- **Try a relaxation technique.** Do some deep breathing (breathe in for 3 seconds, hold for 1, and exhale out for 4 seconds), guided imagery (such as, picturing a peaceful place such as a beach, mountain, etc.), progressive muscle relaxation (notice and relax each part of your body in turn), and mindfulness (being present in the moment). Schedule time to practice these each day. Look for an online video or smartphone app to show you how.
- **Practice being in the moment and getting distance from your thoughts.** While brushing teeth, driving, doing work, eating lunch, watching TV, or talking with family or friends, notice any loose thoughts that pop up. Let them come and go like clouds in the sky. No need to change or get rid of them, simply let them be. Say to yourself: “That’s an interesting thought” or “There’s worry.” You can do the same with feelings and sensations (“Ah, there’s frustration,” “I’m noticing nervousness and anxiety”, etc.).