

FAQ about COVID-19 and Your Emotional Well Being

Is it normal to feel anxious?

In situations involving loss, trauma, or something completely unknown, we often talk about having normal reactions to abnormal events. The current global pandemic is certainly an abnormal event and feeling anxious is to be expected. That said, it is important not to let normal anxiety intensify or persist to the point that it is causing other physical or mental health concerns.

What contributes to our heightened anxiety or even panic during situations like this?

- Information overload and uncertainty. Fact-based, verified information is useful. However, panic often ensues as a result of getting too much low-quality or conflicting information. As well as too much exposure to information of any kind. The goal of television and social media is to get you to spend more time watching television and using social media. People consume too much information, much of it not from reliable sources.
- People. Human beings are social creatures, so we look to each other for cues about how to act. So when we perceive that large numbers of people are acting a certain way due to perceived threats, the behavior can spread like a social contagion.

How do I deal with fear?

- Acknowledge that it IS a lot that we are coping with, and of course you feel afraid.
- Have patience with and compassion for yourself, and others. This is unprecedented and all of us are doing this for the first time.
- Fear is a necessary evolutionary response to threats, both real and perceived. The goal is to minimize the primitive biological response, “fight or flight” as much as possible so that it is not activated disproportionately to actual imminent danger.
- One of the best ways to minimize the flight or flight impulse is to take charge of your thinking. Fear and anxiety that are triggered by uncertainty during turbulent times can lead to persistent negative thinking, inaccurate predictions, and catastrophizing. It is helpful to reframe negative predictions into more realistic, manageable alternatives. Try to challenge thoughts that may be contributing to irrational or unwarranted fear.

- Get verified information from trusted sources like the WHO, CDC, and your local Public Health Department and only check it once a day.

What are the tips that I and my family can employ to stay emotionally strong?

Maintain routines and positive habits that work for you. While we may have to shift some behavior, we will still be able to do many things that help sustain our energy and outlook. During times of disruption and uncertainty, it is particularly helpful to maintain our existing healthy practices which can provide a sense of comfort and normalcy. In short, focus on what is within your personal control - your actions, the ways that you treat others, how you treat yourself, your thought patterns, and act accordingly.

These routines and positive habits include:

1. Get 7-8 hours of sleep per night
2. Eat healthy and nutritious foods
3. Get at least 30 minutes of exercise each day
4. Connect with people who are sources of support
5. Practice gratitude
6. Create and maintain healthy boundaries between work and personal life
7. Practice mindfulness
8. Engage in activities and communication that feel meaningful to you
9. Find ways to laugh and find humor in our shared circumstances

How can I maintain a positive attitude when everything feels so disastrous?

- Begin by accepting what you can and cannot control, and focus on what you can control.
- Find creative ways to reframe a seemingly negative situation as having unexpected positive benefits. For example, given the shelter in place orders, many have found ways to devote time to home projects, creative endeavors, and meaningful connections with friends and family. Others have begun to take advantage of and enjoy the outdoors and natural world more than they previously did.
- For a lovely example of a positive reframe, see this [poem by Lynn Ungar called Pandemic](#).

- If you find your mind going down a catastrophic path, for example thinking, “My elderly father is so vulnerable, he’s going to get sick and have only my elderly mother to care for him. They’ll never be able to manage,” bring your attention to what you can control.
- You can stay in close contact with your father.
- You can order food and make sure that he has all of his medications.
- You can have conversations with him that are distracting and not ONLY focused on the pandemic.
- You can see this time as an opportunity to connect more (by phone and video) with your father in meaningful ways.
- Turn your attention to the good. To quote philosopher Simone Weil, “If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.”

How can I help others who might be displaying distress?

- Start by demonstrating compassion and withholding judgment. There will be a wide range of how people experience and cope with their own feelings of fear and anxiety.
- Listen. Without trying to offer solutions. People benefit from feeling heard.
- Be reassuring to others, this will also have a calming effect on you.

What are key points to keep in mind during a crisis to maintain your emotional health?

- Stay connected to your social support. While we hear about the importance of “social distancing” as a good public health practice, maintaining “social connection” is a critical emotional health practice. We may not be able to physically meet with others in the same way right now, but we need to be connected. We are social creatures and feeling isolated or lonely is never helpful to our emotional health.
- Take care of your physical health
- Deep breaths every hour
- Engage in daily exercise
- Limit use of alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and sugar
- Sleep
- Disengage from unproductive and anxiety producing conversations.

Where can someone get help if they need it?

If you are concerned, a good option is to connect with a licensed mental health professional. [Employee Assistance](#) is a free, confidential resource staffed by licensed mental health professionals who can provide direct support as well as connect you with referrals covered under your insurance plan. You can contact us by phone at (510) 643-7754 or by email at employeeassistance@berkeley.edu