

Managing anxiety in the face of a virus outbreak

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The coronavirus/COVID-19 outbreak has increased anxiety about the safety and welfare of patients, colleagues, families, and community members. Fortunately, there are a number of strategies to manage anxiety during this stressful period.

- 1) **Prioritize self-care.** To optimize patient care during this outbreak, please prioritize your own physical and mental health. Ignoring one's physical or mental health has a greater likelihood of burnout, which can put patients at risk for unsafe practices or mistakes. Make sure to attend to the hygiene practices that have been widely distributed throughout the Penn Health system. In addition, ensure that you are eating healthy meals, maintaining your exercise routine, and getting sufficient sleep. It can be challenging to prioritize one's own health during a crisis, but failing to do so is not only a risk for you, it also puts those who depend on you at greater risk.
- 2) **Increase awareness of anxiety-driven behavior.** When people feel anxiety, they are tempted to avoid anxiety triggers, regardless of whether the trigger is a real threat. In the short-run, avoidance tends to reduce anxiety, but in the long-run, avoidance exacerbates anxiety. For instance, a person who avoids taking a walk outside during the coronavirus outbreak will likely feel some short-term relief when deciding to stay at home instead. However, avoidance of leaving the home will likely trigger more anxiety in the long-run, because the individual cannot gather information about the relative safety of taking a walk. In summary, avoidance "works" in the short-run, but exacerbates anxiety in the long-run. The more that one can increase awareness of subtle and obvious avoidance behaviors, the easier it becomes to engage in value-driven behaviors as opposed to emotion-driven behaviors.
- 3) **Reducing anxiety-driven behaviors.** Once an individual increases awareness of their urges to avoid even relatively safe activities, they can choose to push themselves to engage in normative activities, which will reduce their anxiety over time. Of course, it is essential to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UPHS guidelines to reduce sources of objective danger during the outbreak. Other than following these recommendations, you should continue to engage in your routine activities to manage your anxiety in the long-run.
- 4) **Building tolerance for uncertainty.** Intolerance of the unknown often triggers anxiety. In the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, there are many unknowns and the landscape of the outbreak changes on a daily basis. Mindfulness practices are known to promote tolerance for uncertainty. Whereas anxiety is often a future-focused emotion (e.g., "What's going to happen tomorrow with the outbreak?"), mindfulness promotes present-moment awareness. Whereas the goal of mindfulness is not necessarily to reduce anxiety, anxiety reduction often occurs as a consequence of staying in the present moment as opposed to dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.
- 5) **Catch your thinking patterns.** Anxiety is accompanied by worry-related cognitions. Often, individuals mistakenly believe that they are engaged in "problem-solving" when they are actually just worrying. For instance, one might ascribe to the belief that "If I anticipate all possible outcomes, I'll be able to handle whatever comes my way." Spending excessive time worrying actually reduces problem-solving abilities. When you catch yourself in a worry spiral, notice where your mind has gone, and gently (and non-judgmentally) redirect your attention back to value-driven behavior. Two additional common anxiety-driven cognitions are catastrophizing and overestimating the likelihood of a negative outcome. In other words, anxiety causes individuals to think that a terrible outcome is more likely than the evidence suggests, and that when the bad outcome happens, they will be unable to cope. To manage anxiety, it can be helpful to observe these cognitive patterns, and to practice challenging them based on objective evidence. For instance, what is the likelihood that X will occur based on the available data? If X occurs, how would I cope with that?

There are many more strategies available to help regulate anxiety during these difficult times. Below are some resources for additional information.

<https://www.med.upenn.edu/ctsa/>

<https://adaa.org/finding-help/coronavirus-anxiety-helpful-resources? zs=CB8Ab& zl=U3K12>