

Managing Anxiety During Self-Isolation



Normal life has been disrupted during COVID-19, which can cause stress and anxiety for many people. If you have a history of anxiety, it is important to be especially proactive with coping strategies for these uncertain times.

Accept that some anxiety is normal, but challenge unhelpful thoughts-

Considering the seriousness of this situation, it's normal to feel anxious. Try not to avoid, ignore, or suppress your feelings. Instead, be aware of your anxiety and accept that you're feeling anxious. Anxiety and stress are usually fuelled by the way we think. Not all our thoughts are facts; many are simply beliefs that we hold. Sometimes we have held these beliefs for so long that they feel like facts. Behind most anxious feelings there is a thought. When you notice the feeling, ask yourself what is the thought behind it. Then ask yourself: Is it *true right now* or is it coming from a perspective of a worst-case scenario, or a "what if"?

Using Past strategies- What has worked for you before that helped manage your stress and anxiety? You can still rely on many of those same strategies. One challenge is people may have stopped the activities they used to participate in to keep well such as exercising and spending quality time with friends. While your *method* of doing these activities may require reinvention, they can still be maintained during isolation. For instance, perhaps you start a running program or take virtual fitness classes online, or regular video chat becomes your way of socializing.

Avoid or limit substances that can heighten the stress response- Although having some drinks may seem to lessen your stress level at the moment, alcohol overall has a depressive effect on your brain. Caffeine can overstimulate our nervous system and fatigue your adrenals. Sugar can cause mood and energy swings.

Take up a relaxation practice- Anxiety affects our mind and our body. Meditation and guided relaxation can assist with calming both. For particularly high amounts of nervous tension in the body, try progressive relaxation. As an exercise to release tension,



starting at your toes, pick one muscle and squeeze it tight. Count to five. Release, and notice how your body changes. Repeat this moving all the way up your body.

Practice Self-Care- Self-care is highly important at this time. Lean on social supports, reserve time for reflection, get enough sleep, eat healthily, move your body, and engage in enjoyable activities. Do the things you would typically do to support your health and well being, but be sure to use caution and follow health and safety guidelines while doing them.

Manage your news consumption- Seek information from reliable news sources only. Set short, defined periods of time to check in on the latest news. Mindful information consumption can still keep you informed but will lower your stress response.

Practice nostril breathing with a longer exhale- When you notice your anxiety building, bring your attention to your breath. Start to gradually shift to breathing through your nose only. Nostril breathing helps us to tap into the parasympathetic nervous system. This aspect of our nervous system promotes feelings of peace and relaxation; the opposite of the sympathetic nervous system, which activates a stress response. Once you get the hang of breathing through the nose, lengthen your exhale by partially narrowing the back of your throat when exhaling. This will slow the exhale down, which will further elicit a parasympathetic (rest & recover) response. This is a sure way to change your state of being.

Focus on what you can control- Anxiety is often caused by (or made worse by) the feeling of being out of control of our environment. In moments of uncertainty and overwhelm, controlling your little corner of the world helps you maintain your mental health. Organize your bookshelf, purge your closet, put together that furniture, plant something in your garden. It helps to anchor and ground us when the bigger things seem chaotic.

Remind yourself that this is temporary- It seems in the midst of self-isolation that it will never end. Please take time to remind yourself daily that although this is challenging, it is a season of life and it will pass. We will return to our regular routines; feeling free, safe, and experiencing physical contact once again.

Shift your awareness to gratitude- When you notice nervous feelings coming up, turn your attention to something you can feel grateful for. No matter what is happening around us, we can always find something we can appreciate. The energy of gratitude and fear have a hard time co-existing in the same space, and gratitude is the fastest way to feeling better.

Reach out for help- If you are still struggling, know when to ask for additional help. If you are having trouble functioning in your daily life, virtually consult with your doctor or therapist for an action plan that works for you.