MindSpot

10 Psychological Tips for Coping with Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Humans are susceptible to many different infectious diseases, including coronavirus (COVID-19). Worrying about diseases is a normal reaction. But, excessive worrying about infectious diseases can affect both our physical and our mental health.

This document describes practical psychological skills to help you and your loved ones cope with anxiety and worry about infectious diseases.

1. Get informed with the right information

We are 'hard-wired' to react to possible threats to ourselves, our families and our communities. These reactions can keep us safe from possible threats. But at times, our reactions may also be excessive and unhelpful, and may cause significant stress and worry. Relying on news from mainstream media or social media, which may sensationalise or exaggerate issues, can further increase our stress and anxiety.

One way to manage our reactions is to access the 'right information', that is, information we can trust. Consider only accessing trusted sources of information (e.g., ABC Radio, Australian Government Department of Health website, World Health Organisation website, etc).

2. Understand history

Events like infectious diseases often follow a predictable course. In the past 50 years there have been multiple national and international episodes of concern around conditions such as tuberculosis, SARS, Ebola, HIV, hepatitis, measles, to name a few. Initially, there is often scepticism, followed by attention, followed by panic, followed by reality, followed by a return to normality. Stock markets and supermarket shelves are good indicators of where we are in the course. Reminding yourself of these patterns can help you to understand the course and plan for the future.

3. Get organised

A good antidote to stress and worry is to get active and organised. If you are worried about something, then do something. Make plans and write your list of what you need to buy, organise, or set-up, and get on with doing it. Tick off each item and turn your 'To Do' list into a 'Ta-Da' list. Whenever you recognise you are getting stressed, ask yourself, 'What do I need to do to help manage this situation?' Remember that family or friends are also likely to be stressed and might need help getting organised. Talk with them about your plans, and if possible, help them to get organised.

4. Balance your thoughts

When we get stressed about our health or risks of infection our thoughts can become dark, brooding, and pessimistic. Thoughts like, "How will I cope if I get sick?", "I can't deal with this", are often triggered by stress, but they don't help us. Negative and dark brooding thoughts will stop you doing things that can help. Remember, our thoughts are not always true or helpful. Challenge your negative thoughts by asking yourself what a friend would say in the same situation, or ask yourself what evidence do you have that you 'won't cope or can't cope'? Whenever you recognise a negative thought balance it with a realistic thought.

5. Shut down the noise

Stress is infectious, and often unhelpful. People tend to talk about things they are worried about; this create lots of 'noise', which can create even more stress. Give yourself permission to switch off 'noise' such as social media, news, or even radio for most of each day. Also give yourself permission to excuse yourself from people who are creating stress. Keep checking in to reliable news sources once or twice a day, but otherwise, turn down the 'noise'. Instead, replace it with things that can help you, including doing things you enjoy, listening to music, entertainment, games, or even meditation.

6. Remember who you are

Most people are good, kind, and sensible. They care for others and the environment and want to make the world a better place. These reflect important 'values'. Stressful times can make it challenging to act in the way that is aligned with our values. But, even when feeling stressed, remember who you are, and what you believe in. Remember to be gentle, kind, and respectful to yourself and to others; other people are probably as stressed and worried as you are. By reaching out and supporting others you will not only be helping them, but also doing something that will help you to feel good about yourself.

7. Keep healthy routines

We all have routines in our daily lives. For example, we tend to get up at a certain time, brush our teeth in a certain way, get ready for the day's activities, and follow many other routines until we go to sleep at night. Major events naturally create changes in routines, particularly if we can't do some of our usual activities. We know that our emotional health is strongly affected by regular routines; these routines not only help to get us organised, but give us a sense of achievement and accomplishment. Some of our routines involve other people, who also benefit from them, for example, family mealtimes or get-togethers with friends. Spend some time thinking about the routines that are important to you and those around you, and find clever and safe ways to keep up these routines or create new ones.

8. Stay engaged

Another key strategy for keeping good mental wellbeing is to stay connected and engaged with people and activities that are meaningful. Reflect on what these are for you and schedule time in your routine to keep doing them. You might have to modify how you stay connected, for example, using Skype or FaceTime instead of face-to-face visits. Examples of how to stay engaged include speaking to family and loved ones, using online forums and chat groups, or calling people. Remember that people really appreciate engaging with others, even if this hasn't been planned.

9. Do enjoyable things that are good for you

When we are stressed we tend to avoid doing things that we normally do, including things which are good for our mental health. We all have activities and hobbies which we enjoy and which give us pleasure. Even if we can't do those things in exactly the same way due to quarantine or isolation, it is essential that we make time and effort to do things that we find valuable and meaningful and fun. If possible, try and do these with others; many activities are more fun to do with company. Making a plan to do fun things regularly will give you something to look forward to, which is another key strategy for staying mentally healthy.

10. Keep looking forward

Remember the famous saying, 'this too shall pass'. It may not feel like it, but things will return to normal. In the meantime, it is important to have confidence that things will improve, that people will recover, and things will get back to normal. In addition to maintaining your long-term goals, also think about things that you will do each day and week, which you can and will enjoy. Again, try and bring others into your plans; they might also benefit from thinking about the future.

To learn more about coronavirus (COVID-19) please visit the Australian Department of Health website, **health.gov.au** or the MindSpot Clinic website, **mindspot.org.au**

Want to know more?

Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions:

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