

Coping with Stress During an Infectious Disease Outbreak

When you hear about a disease outbreak like coronavirus, it is normal to feel anxious or have stress responses. These reactions can take a toll on you emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. It's important to recognize the impact of these reactions in yourself and others, and to be intentional about coping with stress in a constructive way and know how to get support.

Common Signs of Stress

Behaviors: Changes in energy and activity level Increase use of substances (alcohol or other drugs) Trouble relaxing or sleeping Wanting to be alone Difficulty listening or communicating Difficulty giving or accepting help Decreased pleasure in things that brought you joy	Emotions: Excessive worry, anxiety, or fear Increased irritability or anger Feeling depressed Feeling guilty Feeling overwhelmed Helplessness Apathy (not caring about anything)
Physical Responses: Physical numbness Tightness in Chest Stomachaches or diarrhea Headaches, muscle or joint pain Loss of appetite or overeating, eating poorly Being jumpy or easily startled Fatigue or lethargy	Thoughts: Difficulty with memory Confusion Having trouble concentrating or thinking clearly Difficulty making decisions Racing or flooding thoughts, rumination Blaming others for things out of their control Feeling heroic or invulnerable

Know How to Relieve Stressⁱ

Keep things in perspective:

Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak. You will want to stay up to date on news of the outbreak, particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have gotten sick. But make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.

Get the facts:

Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself against illness, if you are at risk. Turn to credible resources such as the Washington Department of Health [coronavirus webpage](#) and [information on outbreak preparedness](#), and the CDC's [coronavirus website](#).

Keep yourself healthy:

- Eat healthy foods, and drink water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol.
- Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs.
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.



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Use practical ways to relax:

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities, and do a fun thing after a hard task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family.
- Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.

Pay attention to your body, feelings, and spirit:

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event, and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions, and behavior around past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common after an event like an infectious disease outbreak, even when it does not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who may be experiencing stress about the outbreak. Talk about your feelings about the outbreak, share reliable health information, and enjoy conversation unrelated to the outbreak, to remind yourself of the many important and positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer, or helping others in need.

Focus on What You *Can* Do

During uncertain times, it is common to feel overwhelmed or helpless. Focus on the things you can do to be prepared and protect yourself:

- Wash your hands frequently, with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds. If this is not available, use a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, then throw it away and wash your hands. If tissues aren't available, cough or sneeze into your elbow, not into your hands.
- Routinely clean all frequently-touched surfaces at home and work.
- Please, stay home if you are sick.

When to Get Help

Professional assistance from a counselor can be helpful if you or a loved one are having difficulty coping with stress and its getting in the way of your daily life. Help from EAP can be particularly valuable if stress is impacting your functioning at work or is disrupting your work team. Call the EAP to get started with support—don't wait until you are in crisis to learn ways to cope.

ⁱ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. [Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks.](https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4885.pdf)

