



## Navigating Your Mental Health During Times of Pandemic

The Coronavirus pandemic is not an individual crisis but a world-wide crisis. It has left many of us with feelings of uncertainty due to changes in work (status, location, schedules), financial stress, and social isolation; concern about contracting Coronavirus or our loved ones contracting it and most of all concern about how long the pandemic will last and what the future has in store for us. The 24-hour news cycle, rumors, and misinformation can sometimes make our lives' feel out of control and cause us to feel as though we do not have the ability to make decisions in our lives during our current situation.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, many of us and those around us, will experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, loneliness, and grief. And if you already have diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, those symptoms can worsen during times like these.

According to the Mayo Clinic (2020), we all need to learn self-care strategies in order cope with life's uncertainty at this time. Self-care strategies are good for your mental and physical health and can help you take charge of your life. Take care of your body and your mind and connect with others to benefit your mental health.

### ***Take care of your body***

Be mindful about your physical health:

- **Get enough sleep.** Go to bed and get up at the same times each day. Stick close to your typical schedule, even if you are staying at home.

- **Participate in regular physical activity.** Regular physical activity and exercise can help reduce anxiety and improve mood. Find an activity that includes movement, such as dance or exercise apps. Get outside in an area such as a nature trail or your own backyard.
- **Eat healthy.** Choose a well-balanced diet. Avoid loading up on junk food and refined sugar. Limit caffeine as it can aggravate stress and anxiety.
- **Avoid tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.** If you smoke tobacco or if you vape, you are already at higher risk of lung disease and COVID-19. Using alcohol to try to cope can make matters worse and reduce your coping skills. Avoid taking drugs to cope unless your doctor prescribed medications for you.
- **Limit screen time.** Turn off electronic devices for some time each day, including 30 minutes before bedtime. Make a conscious effort to spend less time in front of a screen — television, tablet, computer, and phone.
- **Relax and recharge.** Set aside time for yourself. Even a few minutes of quiet time can be refreshing and help to quiet your mind and reduce anxiety. Many people benefit from practices such as deep breathing, tai chi, yoga, or meditation. Soak in a bubble bath, listen to music, or read or listen to a book — whatever helps you relax. Select a technique that works for you and practice it regularly.

## ***Take care of your mind***

Reduce stress triggers:

- **Keep your regular routine.** Maintaining a regular schedule is important to your mental health. In addition to sticking to a regular bedtime routine, keep consistent times for meals, bathing and getting dressed, work or study schedules, and exercise. Also set aside time for activities you enjoy. This predictability can make you feel more in control.
- **Limit exposure to news media.** Constant news about COVID-19 from all types of media can heighten fears about the disease. Limit social media that may expose you to rumors and false information. Look for reliable sources such as the CDC and WHO.
- **Stay busy.** A distraction can get you away from the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety and depression. Enjoy hobbies that you can do at home, identify a new project, or clean out that closet you promised you would get to. Doing something positive to manage anxiety is a healthy coping strategy.
- **Focus on positive thoughts.** Choose to focus on the positive things in your life, instead of dwelling on how bad you feel. Consider starting each day by listing things you are thankful for. Maintain a sense of hope, work to accept changes as they occur and try to keep problems in perspective.
- **Use your moral compass or spiritual life for support.** If you draw strength from a belief system, it can bring you comfort during difficult times.
- **Set priorities.** Do not become overwhelmed by creating a life-changing list of things to achieve while you are home. Set reasonable goals each day and outline steps you can take to reach those goals. Give yourself credit for every step in the right direction, no matter how small. And recognize that some days will be better than others.

## ***Connect with others***

Build support and strengthen relationships:

- **Make connections.** If you need to stay at home and distance yourself from others, avoid social isolation. Find time each day to make virtual connections by email, texts, phone, or FaceTime or similar apps. If you are working remotely from home, ask your co-workers how they are doing and share coping tips. Enjoy virtual socializing and talking to those in your home.
- **Do something for others.** Find purpose in helping the people around you. For example, email, text or call to check on your friends, family members and neighbors — especially those who are elderly. If you know someone who cannot get out, ask if there is something needed, such as groceries or a prescription picked up, for instance. But be sure to follow CDC, WHO and your government recommendations on social distancing and group meetings.
- **Support a family member or friend.** If a family member or friend needs to be isolated for safety reasons or gets sick and needs to be quarantined at home or in the hospital, come up with ways to stay in contact. This could be through electronic devices or the telephone or by sending a note to brighten the day, for example.

**Mayo Clinic (2020)**

**[www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)**

## **Warning Signs For Men**

Men and women experience many of the same mental disorders but their willingness to talk about their feelings may be quite different. This is one of the reasons that their symptoms may be vastly different as well. For example, some men with depression or an anxiety disorder hide their emotions and may appear to be angry or aggressive while many women will express sadness.

- Noticeable changes in mood, energy level, or appetite
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Difficulty concentrating, feeling restless, or on edge
- Increased worry or feeling stressed
- A need for alcohol or drugs
- Sadness or hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts
- Feeling flat or having trouble feeling positive emotions
- Engaging in high-risk activities
- Ongoing headaches, digestive issues, or pain
- Obsessive thinking or compulsive behavior
- Thoughts or behaviors that interfere with work, family, or social life

- Unusual thinking or behaviors that concern other people

## Warning Signs for Women

Women and men can develop most of the same mental disorders and conditions but may experience different symptoms. Some disorders are more common in women such as depression and anxiety. There are also certain types of depression that are unique to women. Some women may experience symptoms of mental disorders at times of hormone change, such as perinatal depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, and perimenopause-related depression. Some symptoms include:

- Persistent sadness or feelings of hopelessness
- Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Excessive fear or worry
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Extremely high and low moods
- Aches, headaches, or digestive problems without a clear cause
- Irritability
- Social withdrawal
- Thoughts of suicide

## Get help when you need it

Hoping mental health problems such as anxiety or depression will go away on their own can lead to worsening symptoms. If you have concerns or if you experience worsening of mental health symptoms, ask for help when you need it, and be upfront about how you are doing. To get help you may want to:

- Call or use social media to contact a close friend or loved one — even though it may be hard to talk about your feelings.
- Contact a minister, spiritual leader, or someone in your faith community.
- Contact your employee assistance program, if your employer has one, and get counseling or ask for a referral to a mental health professional.
- Call your primary care provider or mental health professional to ask about appointment options to talk about your anxiety or depression and get advice and guidance. Some may provide the option of phone, video, or online appointments.

- Contact organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) for help and guidance.

If you are feeling suicidal or thinking of hurting yourself, seek help. Contact your primary care provider or a mental health professional. Or call a suicide hotline. In the U.S., call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or use its webchat at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat).

**We are all in this together and together we will get through this time of uncertainty.**

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