

COPING WITH THE FEAR OF CORONAVIRUS

You may have heard a lot about coronavirus disease, also called COVID-19. Anxiety is understandably high as we are learning more about the spread of this disease. The information below may be helpful in managing the fear you may feel. Resources for up-to-date medical information and advice about coronavirus are at the end of the article.

Managing fears

A good way to manage any kind of fear is to become educated about it. The more we know about the real dangers, the more we can take effective steps to avoid or minimize them, thereby putting some fears to rest. Accurate information is an effective antidote to unrealistic fears. The resources at the end of this article are a good source of accurate information.

Monitor your exposure to the news. Media news coverage can arouse emotion and increase fear. It's important to get the facts, but it may not be helpful to hear reports over and over. Be aware of how you and family members respond to news stories. Limit television or online coverage if it becomes distressing.

Put your risk into perspective. The risk of contracting coronavirus in the U.S. is relatively low at this time. It's important to stay aware and informed, but try to make sure your level of fear does not exceed your risk factors. If you have specific concerns, contact your health care professional.

Put this disease in context. The term "pandemic" can be very scary. It means cases of a new disease are showing up around the world and may spread rapidly because people don't have immunity. However, this term doesn't indicate how dangerous it's likely to be. We're exposed to health risks every day. The good health habits you use to reduce the risk of communicable diseases, such as washing hands frequently, are some of the same precautions recommended for coronavirus.

Focus on what you have control over. News stories and images about the spread of a disease can make us feel anxious and helpless. Knowing how to minimize your risk can reduce anxiety. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have information about how to reduce your risk of contracting the virus. They offer advice and directions in the event you must travel to a place where the virus has been identified. A link to travel information is included at the end of this article.

Be always aware, but not always fearful. Awareness means paying attention to news that is specific to where you live and where you may travel. Awareness is not the same as being fearful. Constant fear that isn't reality-based can create stress and be counter-productive. It can be harder to deal with a true risk when everything seems like a danger. We want to focus on what *is* happening, rather than getting caught up in thoughts of what *could* happen.

Notice if fear begins to become panic. Ask yourself if unreasonable fear is changing your behaviors, for example, being afraid to leave your home or letting children attend school even when such measures are not recommended by public health officials. You might find yourself avoiding places or people of a certain ethnicity. These may be signs that you could benefit from additional support.

Take a break from the fears. Try to shift your focus away from stressful thoughts. Spend time doing things you enjoy that help you feel calm and balanced.

If children have fears, give them honest information at a level they can understand. You don't need to explain everything about the virus and risk. Give them only as much information as they request. Encourage your children to talk to you about their thoughts and feelings. Listen to their concerns, and then reassure them. Explain that there are steps that everyone can take to protect themselves. Limit your child's exposure to news reports. Seeing repeated coverage can be disturbing. It can be helpful to watch the news with your child and discuss it afterwards.

We have to walk a fine line between awareness and fear. Try to keep your thoughts in sync with what is actually happening, not what your worst fears may be. Understand that national and international health organizations are working diligently to understand the risks and keep the public safe.

Resources for more information

World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

WHO travel information: www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/travel-advice

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

CDC travel information: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html

Get support.

Talking through concerns and sharing your fears can help you put them in perspective and help you feel calmer. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available 24/7 to offer support to you and your household members.

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