

Coronavirus, Anxiety and Stress

The coronavirus outbreak has caused drastic changes to daily life in what seems like the blink of an eye.

We asked members of the team in Lifespan's Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Services to talk about how a pandemic impacts our mental health, and how we can better manage the anxiety that comes along with it.

The uncertainty of the unknown

The last true pandemic in the world was more than 100 years ago with the Spanish flu of 1918. Alison Jost, LICSW, a clinical social worker, says, "In our global society, a virus which began across the world has arrived at our doorstep in a matter of months, and dramatically changed our daily lives in a matter of weeks. Doctors, scientists, and many others are working hard to learn everything possible about the novel coronavirus, but the fact is that a lot remains unknown."

For most people, that uncertainty is difficult. Jost explains, "As humans, we seek to gather information, solve problems, and create systems. It is only natural, then, that during a pandemic, people across the world are feeling a collective sense of anxiety and unease in the face of the unknown." She notes, "We cannot help but feel distressed when our everyday routines have been disrupted so suddenly and drastically. Going to work, dropping the kids off at school, eating out -- we now long for the very things that just a few weeks ago seemed mundane. We wonder each day when life will go back to normal."

Watch for signs of stress

Everyone experiences stress in different ways and at different times. Cerissa Blaney, PhD, a psychologist, says, "Often, we think of needing help with stress when it becomes too much to handle or we are having significant problems in functioning. However, it really helps to start with stress management strategies and techniques as soon as you begin to notice signs of stress."

The signs to watch for include changes to:

- **Mood or feelings**, including a sense of being overwhelmed, anxious, worried, stressed, sad, apathetic, depressed.
- **Physical sensations**, such as feeling tired, heart racing, nausea, headaches, muscle tension, difficulty concentrating.
- **Behaviors**, including trouble falling or staying asleep, changes to eating patterns, increased alcohol or substance use; isolation from social supports; difficulty keeping track of things, trouble concentrating.

Dr. Blaney also notes that some people may notice they are more irritable and less able to relax. These may also be some of the first signs of stress. Knowing the possible signs to watch for can help you in identifying when some stress management strategies might be helpful for you. However, if you begin to engage in self destructive behaviors or increased substance use, experience feelings of hopelessness, or have thoughts about harming or killing yourself, it is extremely important to reach out for help.

Relieving stress and managing anxiety

“At a time when so much is out of our control and stress levels are high, it can make a big difference to focus our attention on what we can control,” Jost says. “During such unsettled times, it can be greatly reassuring to establish and stick to a consistent daily routine.”

She suggests focusing on the following areas:

- **Sleep:** We know that getting a good night's sleep can significantly reduce stress levels. So, make an effort to go to bed and wake up around the same time each day, and aim for seven to eight hours of sleep each night.
- **Diet:** While comfort foods might seem tempting right now, what we eat really does affect our mood and energy levels, so do your best to eat healthily by incorporating whole grains, lean proteins, and plenty of fruits and vegetables into your diet (hint: apples have a long shelf life).
- **Activity:** With so many of us working from home, it is not uncommon to feel restless and confined. Make a point to get outside at least once every day. Go for a walk, take a jog, or toss a Frisbee with a family member. Research shows that exercise can significantly help with feelings of anxiety and depression, so staying active is one of the best things you can do during these challenging times.

- **Exposure to media:** You might also consider limiting your daily news and social media intake. Having the news on in the background is not only distracting but can also increase stress levels. In your free time, try instead to engage in activities you actually enjoy.
- **Find your supports:** Stay connected with supportive people in your life by scheduling virtual chats with coworkers, friends, and family. We might all be isolated physically, but we can remain connected emotionally.
- **Mindfulness and meditation:** Perhaps you've heard of practicing mindfulness and meditation but aren't sure what it's all about. Now is a great time to check out free apps like Headspace or Calm, which offer guided meditations that are geared toward lowering anxiety and improving sleep.

Seek help

Psychologist Kristy Dalrymple, PhD, says, “We recognize this is a challenging time for everyone. My colleagues and I in Lifespan Psychiatry and Behavioral Health are here to help you through this.” If you would like to see someone for ongoing treatment, the providers in the adult division of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health now offer telephone and video appointments to meet your behavioral health needs during the COVID pandemic. To schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist and/or psychologist/therapist for ongoing treatment, please contact our Lifespan Adult Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Access Center at **401-606-0606**, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. effective Monday, April 13.

Dr. Dalrymple stresses that she and her colleagues are also available for employees of Lifespan. She says, “If you find yourself in need of support, we now offer a free employee behavioral health support hotline. Please call us at 401-606-0606 to schedule a 30-minute confidential telephone support session with one of our experts in behavioral health.”

There are always additional self-help resources that can be found in free mobile apps and other materials that offer ways to cope and stress management strategies such as guided meditation. In addition to Headspace and Calm, Dr. Dalrymple suggests other helpful free apps such as UCLA Mind, and the ACT Companion (use code TOGETHER to access the ACT Companion app for free), which are available on the App Store and Google Play for download.

A collective experience

This is something new to all of us, and it is bound to cause anxiety. Jost says, “Our emotions and questions in this time of uncertainty can feel overwhelming at times, but it can help to remember that none of us is alone in feeling this way. We may not be able to escape the stress of our current situation, but we can support each other in this collective experience.”

She adds, “Perhaps most importantly, we can remind ourselves and one another that our current reality -- as difficult as it is -- will not last forever. Eventually, we will settle back into our routines, and will hopefully appreciate them all the more when we do, knowing what it was to live for a time without them.”

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