

Psychologische Beratung (PSB)

„Corona-Anxiety“ –

Coping with stress and anxiety in times of pandemic

Anxiety and Stress are natural responses...

Coronavirus is dominating headlines in the news and social media. While the media focus is on the impact on people's physical health and what's being done to prevent the spread of the disease it is equally important to understand the impact of such an outbreak on our mental health and wellbeing.

Anxiety and stress are normal responses to the outbreak of a pandemic: When you hear, read or watch news about COVID-19 you can experience serious distress, even if you are at little or no risk of getting sick. The disease is like an unknown threat and is connecting with our fear centre in the brain, touching on underlying fears: Fears around contracting the virus, fear of isolation or fear of losing loved ones who may be vulnerable and at risk. Once this fear centre has been activated, stress symptoms and stress reactions follow.

In times of pandemic it is important to monitor your own physical and mental health. Knowing the signs of stress enables you to take adequate measures to relieve stress.

What follows are behavioural, physical, emotional and cognitive responses that are all common signs of anxiety and stress. If the level of distress is so high that you feel paralysed and unable to cope with daily life, don't hesitate to seek professional help.

Recognizing stress:

Your Behaviour:

- An increase or decrease of energy and activity levels
- An increase in alcohol, tobacco use or other drugs
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Having trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Crying frequently
- Worrying excessively
- Wanting to be alone most of the time

- Blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty communicating or listening
- Having difficulty giving or accepting help
- Inability to feel pleasure or have fun
- (...)

Your Body

- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Having headaches and other pains
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled
- (...)

Your Emotions

- Being anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling heroic, euphoric or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness
- (...)

Your Thinking

- Having trouble remembering things
- Feeling confused
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Having difficulty making decisions
- (...)

Strategies to relieve stress:

- **Set limits** on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak.
- **Facts versus fiction:** Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information.
- **Keep yourself healthy:** Eat healthy foods, and drink water. Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol.
- Get enough **sleep and rest**.
- Get **physical exercise** – if possible outdoors.
- Don't ignore your anxiety. **Acknowledge your feelings** and remember that fear is a natural response to threat.

- **Do something you can control:** Washing the dishes, cleaning the bathroom, helping other people.... Or keeping a journal about how you feel.

- **Let it go:** Allow yourself to worry, put it in writing in a notebook and then put that away. Let it go: "There is a time for everything: time to worry (worry time) and time not to worry (worry-free time).

- **Bring it back to the present:** With anxiety our mind is 10 steps ahead, so bring it back to the present: 'What can I hear right now?', 'What can I see?' Can I name three objects that are blue (or green or yellow...)? Feeling the movement of the in- and outbreath in the body...

- **Think about your thought process:** Be aware of what you are thinking: Sometimes we are catastrophising, we are focusing on all the 'what ifs?' Bring your mind back to the present moment (see above) and stay with what you actually know.

- **Use practical ways to relax:** Progressive muscle relaxation, breathing techniques, mindfulness; you can find a lot of guided practices online that are offered free of charge.

Acknowledgment

This article is based on the following two sources:

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), Coronavirus anxiety: How to cope if you're anxious about the outbreak, 28.02.2020, <https://www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/2020/28-february-coronavirus-anxiety-how-to-cope-if-you-re-feeling-anxious-about-the-outbreak/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 'Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks', <https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4885.pdf>