

Managing Stress and Anxiety

During An Infectious Disease Outbreak

Knowing that there has been an infectious disease outbreak that could affect you and those you love is unavoidably stressful. This resource shares common reactions in these types of situations and gives you tips on things you can do to help manage stress during this time.

Sometimes infectious disease outbreaks happen suddenly and progress quickly. In many cases, however, outbreaks start slowly and it is not until weeks and months later that they become truly global pandemics.

Logistically this is good, as it allows people and organizations to prepare as best they can. Psychologically, however, this can be difficult. This “waiting period”—when everyone is watching and wondering what might come next—takes a toll.

Common reactions during an outbreak

When you recognize threat, your body responds in ways that prepare you to meet the challenge and protect yourself. Hormones and other chemicals are released when you sense danger, and they trigger what are often referred to as “stress reactions.” These reactions usually don’t feel very good to experience, but they are totally normal. They are, in fact, your body’s way of trying to help you survive.

It’s natural to fear the unknown. Here are some things people commonly experience during the period of rising uncertainty and pressure surrounding an infectious disease outbreak:

- Feeling more anxious, worried, and tense than normal.
- Feeling distracted, jittery, and unable to focus on anything very well, or for very long.
- Finding yourself thinking about the outbreak even when you are trying to focus on other things.
- Wanting to research and learn everything you can about the outbreak and what may unfold.
- A general sense of high energy or being alert and in “overdrive”. Periods of high energy can be followed or interspersed with “energy crashes” (sudden fatigue and feeling overwhelmed or helpless).
- Difficulty sleeping well.
- Isolating or withdrawing from others, and/or fear of going to public spaces.
- Craving more of the unhealthy or dangerous things we can use to help ourselves cope with stress and tension (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes, risky sex).

What helps?

What can you do to help yourself cope with the stress during this “wait and watch” period? In general, the more you feel safe and in-control, the better you will cope. That means that one of the best things you can do is to prepare.

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1. Prepare

Stick to 2-3 trusted and reliable sources of information to help you learn about the virus or illness that is at the center of this outbreak and prepare yourself on a personal level. For example:

- Review safety information about the importance of handwashing and other things you can do to lower the risk that you and those you love will be exposed.
- If a quarantine is possible or likely, stock up on necessary supplies to see you through several weeks (e.g., essential medication, food, long-life milk, toilet paper, etc.)

2. Remember

- You will likely be more distracted and feel more anxious. This is not a “business as usual” time, and you should not expect yourself to feel “normal” or to be able to focus on work the way you normally can.
- It is normal to experience some strong emotions or feel like you’re on an emotional roller coaster during this time.
- You can do things to help yourself cope better during this season. Try some of the following strategies...

3. Practice effective stress and anxiety management strategies

- **Limit time spent watching the news and on social media.** News reports emphasizing the rapid spread of the outbreak and the lack of effective treatment will simply fuel anxiety. Spending too much time on social media can have a similar effect.
- **Focus on other things.** Periodically make yourself focus on something else other than the outbreak. Naming what you’re grateful for, as well as books, audiobooks, podcasts, and TV can help with this. Keep this entertainment on the lighter side—no war epics, thrillers, crime dramas, or “end of the world” stuff.
- **Exercise if you possibly can,** even if this means skipping rope and doing workouts at home or in the office. One of the best ways to help your body cope with rising levels of stress chemicals is to use some of them up through vigorous activity.
- **Practice those disciplines that ground, calm, and nourish you.** If you meditate, pray, practice yoga, write, draw, read, cook... continue to do these things if you can. This is a time to do *more* of those sorts of things, not less.
- **Get outside.** Put your phone down and go outside. Even a 10-minute walk outside can be restorative.
- **Connect with loved ones.** Receiving support from (and giving support to) others has a powerfully positive effect on our ability to cope with challenges. So, spend time talking and connecting with family and friends.
- **Reach out for support.** Contact your organization’s staff care program, your doctor, or other support professionals.