



## **Dealing with Stress and Anxiety in These Uncertain Times**

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This article will be using the words stress, anxiety, and worry interchangeably, referring to a feeling of unease, apprehension, or fear that is to some degree within normal limits, and does not interfere with daily functioning. If you or someone in your family with has it to a degree that does interfere, or it is causing severe distress, please seek out the assistance of a mental health professional.

### *Stress was an epidemic even before the COVID 19 outbreak*

Even before the COVID 19 virus hit, we have been dealing with an epidemic of anxiety. We are all under more stress than ever before. Our lives are faster paced, for children the expectations of school and even sports are greater than ever before, as much as we may like technology this also adds to our stress (especially for teenage girls), we get less sleep and take fewer vacations, and there are fewer social supports of family and community that would help us cope better.

It is important to understand that stress is cumulative, you do not get used to it; it builds and builds. The corona virus may be putting many of us over the top. This can cause people to react to a minor issue in major way because of all the underlying stress.

Having said that, stress can be adaptive too. We worry about something because it can warn us of impending danger. It can also motivate us to problem solve to address the cause of the stress. In this current situation, one thing to worry about is when others aren't

worrying, because if they aren't worried, maybe they are not taking appropriate precautions to stop the spread of the virus. So, some stress is good, just not so much that it overwhelms you.

*Indications of stress:*

*physical symptoms*

*irrational or exaggerated thoughts*

*behavior problems*

*academic problems*

The first step in dealing with stress is to identify it. Stress is manifested in the body, in the mind, and in one's actions.

In the body, it can be the heart racing, sweating, physical shaking, and/or tiredness because of the release of adrenaline.

In the mind, it can be negative or exaggerated thoughts such as "everyone is going to get sick," "this will never end," or "I can't deal with this." You may also hear children say things like, "I can't do this, It's too hard, I hate this, or I'm bored," when they are actually anxious about something.

Behavioral signs of stress can be the fight or flight response.

fight – anger, aggression, externalizing negative feeling

flight – avoidance, procrastination, inattention, internalizing negative feelings

Children can also manifest stress academically as a

discrepancy between potential and achievement,

or, ironically perfectionism and over-achievement

*Be aware of and acknowledge the stress in an empathetic manner, both with yourself and others*

How do we actually deal with all the stress in our own and our children's lives?

The first thing is to be aware of and accept your own and others' feelings. When we aren't aware of our feelings, actions tend to be triggered automatically, rather than responding in a more rational manner. We also need to accept the feelings. You can't just make them go away, and you also can't tell others how to feel. It is counter-intuitive, but embracing your anxiety is the first step in coping with it. The more you try to avoid dealing with it, the worse it tends to get.

Stress can be hard to recognize in others because, as I stated before, it can get expressed as anger, withdrawal, academic or behavior problems.

And know that it is okay to be stressed. The worst thing someone can do is to feel bad about feeling bad. Anxiety is normal, and as noted above, can be adaptive. In these times, if you aren't feeling anxious, then something might really be wrong with you.

It is necessary to take care of your own feelings before you try to take care of someone else's. Make sure you live a balanced life and have time for family, friends, fun, and sometimes just doing nothing. If you try to reassure someone when you are stressed out, they will pick up on your emotion more than the message. No offense, but you aren't that good an actor at pretending to be okay when you aren't. So make sure you are okay first.

If you are talking to a child about their anxiety, start out by empathizing with them. We all have a need to be heard and understood, and just by recognizing their feelings and reflecting back to them, helps them deal with it.

By the way, the opposite of empathy is reasoning; different parts of the brain are involved. When you empathize, you are addressing the amygdala in the brain. When you reason with someone, you are addressing the prefrontal cortex where self-control and problem solving

are done. And strong feelings can interfere with thinking, which is why you have to address the emotions. You need to first identify and accept the anxiety, not fight it.

### *Breathe and take care of your body*

Breathing and other mindfulness exercises, such as meditation and visualization, help reduce stress. You need to address both the body and the mind. Mindful breathing lowers the overall physiological arousal. When adrenaline shoots through the body, the muscles get tight, which leads to shortness of breath, which actually stimulates the body to produce more adrenaline. It can become a vicious cycle.

Right now, take a few seconds to close your eyes and mentally scan your body for tension. Breathe in your nose... slowly out your mouth as you drop your shoulders. Notice the difference? We are usually not aware of all the stress we carry around with us. Periodically doing this kind of mental body scan and breathing can help manage the daily stresses one experiences.

Along with breathing, in general you have to take care of your body. Sleep, nutrition, and exercise all make it easier to cope with stress.

### *Address the thoughts about the situation*

It is important to know what thoughts or cognitions are associated with the stress. It is interesting that if people are thinking things that aren't true, they tend to be more stressed out. If it is bad, but true, it's easier to cope with. And, you can't lie to yourself by thinking "positive" thoughts that you really don't believe. So, if you are thinking: "I am definitely going to get sick and die from the corona virus," you are probably going to be very anxious. If you tell yourself "there is no way anything bad will happen to me," you probably won't believe it, although some people are better at denial than others. If you can truthfully reassure yourself that you are in good health now and know what to do to keep yourself safe, you will cope better.

When working with children, it is important to know what they know. A lot of times they have misinformation, which can make them more anxious. So first ask questions about what they have heard or what they are thinking. Then, correct any misinformation they have, and address their cognitions about it. We want them to be able to make self-coping statements such as, "I am worried and I can deal with it." "I can't hang out with my friends right now, and I will be able to at some point."

A very difficult aspect of dealing with thoughts is that no one can provide 100% certainty of anything. You can't say that you won't get the virus. The ability to tolerate the unknown is the most difficult aspect of coping with anxiety, but it's a reality that is necessary to recognize. But, to reassure you, once it is stated openly, that bad things can happen and that there is no absolute certainty, people are generally accepting of it because it's truth is obvious. It's the extremes of "terrible things will definitely happen," or the denial of reality that make it harder for people to cope.

### *Control what can be controlled*

The source of stress is often beyond one's control, and it is the lack of control that exacerbates stress. Human beings like to have control. So, while we have to tolerate uncertainty, we also have to focus on controlling what we can. Having something to do to address the source of the stress goes a long way to dealing with it. When dealing with something like the corona virus, it is important focus on what to do to be healthy, rather than the virus itself. Knowing that you can do something, such as washing your hands, avoiding large gatherings, getting enough sleep, etc. can give a sense of control, which helps minimize the stress. A perception of helplessness will exacerbate the stress, and we are rarely helpless.

It's the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.

*Distracting yourself is the last thing to try, not the first*

After you accept the anxiety, breathe to calm yourself down, make sure that what you are thinking is true, and control what you can, then it is okay to distract yourself. It is interesting that if you try to distract yourself from the anxiety first, it won't work. The more you try to not think about something, the more you are thinking about it.

If you acknowledge your feelings, breathe, and think true thoughts, *then* you can try to focus on something else. It is important to keep what you are worrying about in perspective. Yes, you could get sick. Yes, there are things you cannot do and places you cannot go right now. But there are also positive things in your life too. Some people see the glass half empty, some see it half full, but the reality is that it is both half empty and half full. Just because there are bad things doesn't mean there aren't good things, and just because there are good things doesn't mean there isn't bad as well. The trick to maintain awareness of both.

So deliberately reflect on the good things in your life that you are grateful for. Other useful distractions can be taking a walk, listening to music, exercising, or engaging in a task that is pleasurable or requires intense concentration. Try some of these things even if you don't feel like it. It doesn't always work at first, but be persistent. Another beneficial distraction can be doing something for someone else; this can both take you out of your own head, and feel good because you are making someone else feel good.

A final suggestion about distraction is to put limits on your exposure to the news. Yes, you want to stay informed, but you don't want to over-focus on it either.

### *Maintain social connections*

A final, but extremely important, activity to deal with stress is ironically also a current cause of stress, and that is being with others. Yes, being around other people can get you sick, but social isolation will make you more anxious. We are social animals. We are meant to be with each other. It is why when bad things happen to one of us, we tend to gather around them to support and comfort them. So it is important not to isolate yourself. Talk

to people. Spend time with those you care about. Stay connected to others, just make sure you are 6 feet away from them and they don't cough on you.

In summary:

*A – Acknowledge, and Accept the feelings*

*B – Breathe, and take care of your Body*

*C – Cognitions need to be true, and take Control*

*D – Distract yourself*

*E – Engage with others*