

Tips for coping with anxiety in the face of COVID-19

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Like most members of the Stanford community, the counselors at the Faculty Staff Help Center are working remotely in order to comply with "shelter in place" orders issued for the Bay Area during the COVID-19

pandemic. Counselors are now meeting with people via Zoom or by phone.

The center offers professional and confidential counseling to individuals, couples and families, including bilingual counseling, to address both work and personal issues. The counseling services are free.

The center has an online appointment request form for scheduling counseling appointments. The first session with a clinician is designed to assess whether the center is the correct resource for individuals. If it is not, the center's staff will help guide them to the appropriate resources. The employee benefit at the Faculty Staff Help Center is for up to 10 sessions.

In a Q&A with Stanford Report, Rosan Gomperts, director of the center and a licensed clinical social worker, discusses practical steps individuals can take to reduce anxiety during the COVID-19 ([coronavirus](#)) pandemic.

What steps can we take to reduce anxiety in these unsettling times?

It's important to pay attention to our physiological experience. Sometimes we have feelings even before we can think about them.

In the morning, we might be waking up with a sense of anxiety or disequilibrium, or simply not feel as grounded as we're used to feeling. Then, it might quickly come to us: Oh, I'm not going to the office. My kids aren't going to school. My kids are coming home from college. Around the world, everything is in an uproar.

At that moment, it's important to remember that you're OK, that you're

lying in your bed and that nothing dangerous is happening to you at that moment. It's a good time to do a breathing exercise. Breathe in for a count of three, then breathe out for a count of six. Taking just three or so breaths like this can really help lower our physiological response. The idea is to double the number of exhales you're taking. Any time you are aware of feeling anxious during the day, you can take a few breaths like this to calm your nervous system.

What else can we do throughout the day?

You can also give yourself calming messages that focus your attention on the present moment. Right now, everything is fine. I'm doing what I can. I, like everyone else, have to cope with what is happening, and I can make it through this trying time.

Paying attention to what we have control over is important. There are many things we cannot control about this situation and not knowing how long it will last can feel unnerving—but we can control some pieces of the day and it's important that we focus on these things and not the things we can't control.

If you're worried about something, you might ask yourself if you can do anything about that concern. If you can't, you need to try to let those worries dissipate as much as possible through breathing and calming thoughts.

It is also important to limit the time we spend listening to news about the virus. Just like during 9/11 when we spent a lot of time telling people to limit their media consumption, the same holds true now. Read known media information sites but don't keep the TV on all the time listening to the news. For most of us, this creates a feeling of overload and stress.

If you already have a mindfulness practice (or have learned the skills at

some point), this is a great time to try and practice every day, or as many times as possible during the day for at least five minutes or so.

There are great apps for learning meditation skills as well. The Stanford Health Improvement Program offers the Headspace meditation app for a discounted rate, and that is a great way to start learning mindfulness meditation.

Even if your work hasn't slowed down, you may have more free time in the evening. Do anything that helps you relax, such as catching up with your favorite TV shows, reading more or taking the opportunity for walks. It may also be a good time to try something new. Almost all of us have something that we've always wanted to do, such as learning to play the guitar or learning to paint. There are amazing YouTube videos for learning all kinds of things from our homes, and now we may have more time to pursue these hobbies.

How will individuals know if they need emotional support?

We all experience stress and worry somewhat differently. There can be emotional, physical and [cognitive symptoms](#) that we need to be aware of. And if loved ones suggest that they are worried about us—please pay attention. Sometimes others see issues about us before we pick them up ourselves.

Stress can create some of the following symptoms:

- Cognitive signs: forgetting things more often; feeling confused; having trouble concentrating; difficulty making decisions
- Emotional signs: anxiousness; anger; guilt; sadness/depression
- Physical signs: stomachaches; very tight muscles; headaches

- Behavioral signs: irritability; trouble sleeping or sleeping more than normal; crying easily; worrying excessively; wanting to isolate

Please seek professional help if any of these symptoms are not somewhat transient or if they are affecting your ability to function during the day.

Provided by Stanford University

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