



# Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks

When you hear, read, or watch news about an outbreak of an infectious disease, you may feel anxious and show signs of stress. These signs of stress are normal and may be more likely or pronounced for people who live in or have loved ones living in parts of the world affected by the outbreak. In the wake of an infectious disease outbreak, monitor your own physical and mental health. Know the signs of stress in yourself and your loved ones. Know how to relieve stress, and know when to get help.

## **Know the signs of stress.**

What follows are behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive responses that are all common signs of anxiety and stress. You may notice some of them after you learn about an infectious disease outbreak.

### **Your Behaviors.**

- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- An increase in your use of alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs
- An increase in irritability, anger and arguing
- Trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Frequent crying
- Excessive worrying
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Difficulty communicating or listening
- Difficulty giving or accepting help
- An inability to feel pleasure or have fun

### **Your Emotions.**

- Anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling heroic, euphoric, or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

## **Know when to get help.**

You may experience serious distress when you hear about an infectious disease outbreak, even if you are at little or no risk of getting sick. If you or someone you know shows signs of stress (see above) for several days or weeks, get help!

## **Know how to relieve stress.**

You can manage and alleviate your stress by taking time to take care of yourself. The following strategies can help.

### **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 Thinking**

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



## Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks continued...

- **Keep things in perspective.**

Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak. You will want to stay up to date on news of the outbreak, particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have gotten sick, but make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.

- **Get the facts.**

Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself against illness, if you are at risk. You may turn to your family doctor, a state or local health department, U.S. government agencies, or an international organization. (Check out the section below for good sources of information about infectious disease outbreaks.)

- **Keep yourself healthy.**

- Eat healthy foods, and drink water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol.
- Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs.
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.

- **Use practical ways to relax.**

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities, and do a fun thing after a hard task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family.
- Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.
- Take care of your physical health to help lower your stress. Take a break to focus on positive parts of your life, like connections with loved ones.

- **Pay attention to your body, feelings, and spirit.**

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event, and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions, and behavior around past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common after an event like an infectious disease outbreak, even when it does not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who may be experiencing stress about the outbreak. Talk about your feelings about the outbreak, share reliable health information, and enjoy conversation unrelated to the outbreak, to remind yourself of the many important and positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer, or helping others in need.



## How to Talk to Children and Teens about the Coronavirus

Even if children and teens do not appear to be following the virus news carefully, it is likely that they are absorbing the information and stress from adults. They are hearing about it from teachers, siblings, friends and the media and making their own inferences about what it all means. As parents, you play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what is happening and helping them manage their own related worries or anxiety. Below are some tips that can help them keep stress at bay and manage emotions related to the pandemic.

### **Talking to Toddlers and Young Children**

Even though toddlers and young children may not know what is going on, they may pick up a parent's worry and anxiety with their "sixth sense." Preschoolers may be more tuned in to what is happening. They may have questions about germs, doctors, and even death. School-age children will be more aware of what is going on. They have probably had discussions at school and with friends.

### **Provide Reassurance**

- Reassure them that adults are in charge and working to keep people safe, healthy and secure. Try to maintain a sense of calm and control.
- Provide extra reassurance and time together.

### **Be the Source of Information and Encourage Open Communication**

- Engage in age appropriate communication to address concerns about their health and the health of parents, relatives and friends. Offer reassurance that everyone is doing what they can to stay healthy and take care of others.
- Look for non-verbal signs of worry or anxiety. Do not talk about it unless they show signs of distress or ask questions.
- Ask them if they have any questions. If they do, stick to the facts and tell them what you know without exaggerating or overreacting.

### **Keep Healthy Routines**

- Make efforts to maintain your children's normal routines and rituals when possible. If school, daycare or events are canceled, try to create and stick to other routines when you can. Explain that this is part of the precautions grown-ups are taking to prevent people from getting sick.
- Remind them that they can stay healthy by washing hands and make hand-washing fun with songs.
- Identify activities children can do to be helpful from hand washing to writing letters to nursing homes.

### **Limit Exposure to Stressors**

- Children this age will be more interested in what might happen in the future. Stick to the facts and don't burden them with your own anxiety.
- Eliminate or limit exposure to media depending on the age of the child.
- Don't be surprised if they are more irritable and touchy. Be extra patient. Some children may act out scary feelings through misbehavior. Others may become more withdrawn. Pay attention to these cues and ask them to tell you about their feelings.

# How to Talk to Children and Teens about the Coronavirus continued...

## Talking to Pre-teens and Teens

Children in these age groups will likely be very aware of what is going on. They have seen news coverage and discussed the virus at school, with teachers or friends. Talk to your children and answer any questions. This will help you determine how much they know and may help you correct any misinformation they might have. They might have fears about what this will mean for their own health, schooling, schedule or safety.

## Empower your Teen

- Help guide your teen's worry into things they can do – like learning more about how to prevent the spread of the virus including washing hands, healthy eating and getting enough sleep.

## Adjust your Communication Style to Accommodate your Teen... and Listen

- Some teens may want to block out the whole thing. It may appear that they do not care. This might be masking real worries. Ask questions and be ready to listen.
- Others may make jokes. Humor can be a way to help them cope, but discourage them from using humor as the only way to talk about the virus.
- Stick to the facts in your conversations and talk to your teens about what they see on TV or read online. Point them towards reliable sources of information like the CDC or WHO websites.

## Provide Guidance about Information Available

- Talk through the difference between going online to get informed versus media over-use that can fuel anxiety.
- Enforce a tech curfew at night and encourage them to take media breaks.
- Some teens may be very interested in discussing the political or economic implications of the pandemic. For ideas, check out "[Coronavirus Resources: Teaching, Learning and Thinking Critically](#)".
- Seek out positive media. Watch, read and share stories about ways people are responding to the virus in collaborative ways to keep communities safe.

Reference: Walsh, Erin, M.A. and Wash, David, PhD. How to Talk to Kids and Teens about the Coronavirus.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smart-parenting-smarter-kids/202003/how-talk-kids-and-teens-about-the-coronavirus> Reference: Schulten, Katherine. Coronavirus Resources: Teaching, Learning and Thinking Critically.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/learning/coronavirus-resources-teaching-learning-and-thinking-critically.html>.

