

CORONAVIRUS AND ITS IMPACT ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH

When you hear, read or watch news about an infectious disease outbreak such as the novel coronavirus, you may feel anxious or stressed. First, this is completely normal. Rather than fight or deny these feelings, try to recognize them in the moment and use them as a way to monitor your own physical and mental health. Knowing the signs of stress in yourself and your loved ones is the first step in relieving stress and knowing when to get help.

The following behavioral, physical, emotional and cognitive responses are all common signs of anxiety and stress. You may experience some or many of them at various points over the coming weeks or months as the situation surrounding the novel coronavirus and COVID-19 continues to evolve.

Behavioral Signs of Stress

- ▶ An increase or decrease from normal energy and activity levels
- ▶ An increase in alcohol use, tobacco use or use of illegal 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

Physical Signs of Stress

- ▶ Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- ▶ Having headaches and other pains
- ▶ Losing your appetite or eating much more than normal
- ▶ Sweating or having chills
- ▶ Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- ▶ Being easily startled

Emotional Signs of Stress

- ▶ Being anxious or fearful
- ▶ Feeling depressed
- ▶ Feeling guilty
- ▶ Feeling angry
- ▶ Not caring about anything
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

Cognitive Signs of Stress

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

Steps to Take to Manage Stress and Anxiety

- 1. Most importantly, separate what is in your control from what is not.** There are things you can do, and it's helpful to focus on those:
 - ▶ Follow the general guidance in the Fund's factsheet, *Coronavirus & COVID-19: Preparation & Response*.
 - ▶ Limit your consumption of news to give your mind a break. Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information.
 - ▶ Keep yourself healthy:
 - ▶ Eat healthy foods and stay hydrated
 - Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol
 - Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs
 - Get enough sleep and rest
 - Get physical exercise
- 2. Do what helps you feel a sense of safety.** This will be different for everyone, and it's important not to compare yourself to others.
- 3. Get outside in nature – even if you are avoiding crowds.** Go for a walk, take the dog for a walk or ride a bike. Exercise also helps both your physical and mental health.
- 4. Challenge yourself to stay in the present.** Perhaps your worry is compounding – you may be thinking about what is currently happening and projecting your worries into the future.
 - ▶ When you find yourself worrying about something that hasn't happened yet, gently bring yourself back to the present moment.
 - ▶ Engaging in mindfulness activities is one way to help stay grounded when things feel beyond your control. Notice the sights, sounds, tastes and other sensory experiences in your immediate surroundings as a way to ground yourself in the present.
- 5. Stay connected and reach out if you need more support.**
 - ▶ Talk to trusted friends about what you are feeling.
 - ▶ If you are feeling particularly anxious or are struggling with your mental health, it's okay to reach out to a mental health professional for support.
 - ▶ You don't have to be alone with your worry and it can be comforting to share what you are experiencing with those trained to help.
- 6. Review this list of mental health resources assembled by the LHSFNA and reach out as needed:**
www.lhsfna.org/index.cfm/health-promotion/mental-and-emotional-health/mental-health-resources.

How to Help Your Children

- Talk with them and share age-appropriate information.
- Answer questions and let them know it is okay to feel upset.
- Reassure your child or teen that they are safe.
- Share with them how you deal with your own stress so they can learn how to cope from you.
- Limit exposure to media and social media coverage of the event. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand.
- Try to keep up with regular routines. If schools are closed, create a schedule for learning activities and relaxing or fun activities.
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members.

[Jamie Becker is the Fund's Director of Health Promotion.]