

THE WHAT AND THE HOW: *Managing Anxiety and Other Reactions to COVID-19*

Dr. Scott Grover
Clinical Psychologist, Headington Institute

The coronavirus (which causes the disease officially named COVID-19) has been declared a public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO), which often brings feelings of uncertainty, fear, anxiety and worry to many of us and to our families. It can also lead to changes in mood and behavior. Some may experience a need to “do something” but you don’t know what to do. Others may feel a low mood and feel sad or hopeless.

What We Know About Humans and Uncertainty

Lack of control (uncertainty) fuels stress and anxiety.

The latest neuroscience and brain research show that uncertainty triggers a threat response in our emotional and primitive centers of the brain (amygdala). There are ways to counteract this and trigger the more rational parts of the brain (prefrontal cortex). This can be done through slow breathing from your stomach. Also doing small things to stay in control are helpful. Pulling your attention in to your local community and smaller city can be helpful. Focusing your energy and attention on things in your immediate control and saving the worries for the whole world for later can also be helpful.

Our brains don’t like threats they can’t see.

Viruses are something we cannot see (at least with the naked eye) and that can make it feel scarier. If the “threat” is something easily seen and more easily understood, it makes it easier to cope with. Since few of us are micro-biologists or physicians – this means we aren’t well-versed in the threat and so this produces more fear. For some people learning more about how viruses spread and how long they can last on surfaces can increase their sense of control and reduce fear, for others, too much information can escalate their anxiety.

Threats to our life and wellbeing trigger our amygdala and fight/flight/freeze response and limbic system in the brain.

When this happens, it makes the threat feel larger than it actually is. This can make the threat seem emotionally large even though the threat may be statistically very small. On a statistical note, we, as humans, are far more likely to die in a car crash or be in an industrial accident than contract coronavirus and die from it. In addition, since the threat feels large emotionally, it is confusing when we are told by CDC to “wash your hands and stay home” which for many doesn’t feel like the action (one most people do routinely - washing your hands) matches the proportion of the threat and so it produces more fear. It is recommended to use breathing, mindfulness and keeping the threat in perspective to help get your logical and rational centers of the brain back online.



How You Can Manage Your Anxiety and Reactions

Take things bit by bit.

Psychological segmenting or thinking in short terms or simply – “one day at a time” can be helpful in managing stress. Don't think about the next month or more. Just think about today and tomorrow.

Find routines for exercise.

Exercise washes the brain of stress hormones and is vital for our mental health. Use workout videos or online videos as an aide if helpful. This will help manage stress, anxiety and is more likely to reduce conflict with people you are still in daily contact with.

Reach out to connect with loved ones, family and friends remotely.

Staying socially connected is an important part of your wellbeing. Find things to talk about outside of work.

Limit daily exposure to news and media.

Too much media of any type can undermine or damage your mental health. Consuming more media leads to increases in fear and anxiety for most people. Managing and reducing the amount of time spent consuming media during this period is important. In addition, limiting your exposure to news and turning off news notifications may decrease anxiety and negative emotions. Checking the latest news media or CDC updates 1-2 times a day is sufficient for most people. For the rest of the time, if worries come up about this or an urge to check the news - put it off for later.

Make small attempts to re-frame your narrative of this time.

Some people may be in quarantine or may be in a country where the borders are now shut. Acknowledge any feelings associated with this such as anger or confusion. But also work to re-frame this time. For some of you, your life is very full and busy. This can be taken as a time to reflect on things and bring time to connect remotely with people that you normally don't have time to connect well with. It can also be an opportunity for self-reflection as well.

Prioritize time for strategies to manage anxiety .

Use relaxation techniques, stretching, yoga, mindfulness apps on your mobile device, and exercise.

Focus your attention on things within your control.

It can be helpful to focus your attention on tasks that you can control and scheduling some activities that bring some degree of pleasure/joy and that challenge you (providing mastery).

Take time for activities you normally don't have time for.

Pick activities that provide pleasure and enjoyment. Also pick some activities which provide a sense of mastery or challenge. Learn new things, challenge yourself with a new task or take up a new hobby which has some challenge in it.

For more information or counseling support please email: support@headington-institute.org.