



COVID-19: Strategies for managing stress

For employees

COVID-19 has seen rapid changes to our way of life (e.g., study, work, social gatherings), and disrupted plans due to travel restrictions and **physical distancing** measures as part of our effort to slow the spread of transmission.

Looking after our wellbeing in times like this can help to reduce stress, and is crucial in enabling us to still take calm and effective action in the midst of this global health event.

People are naturally concerned for their own and their loved ones' health and safety.

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds globally and locally, it's normal for people to have a wide range of reactions, including:

- feeling stressed or overwhelmed
- anxiety, worry, or fear
- racing thoughts
- sadness, tearfulness, loss of interest in usual enjoyable activities
- physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate, stomach upset, fatigue, or other uncomfortable sensations
- frustration, irritability, or anger
- restlessness or agitation
- feeling helpless
- difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- feeling disconnected from others
- apprehension about going to public spaces
- trouble relaxing.

It's important to recognise the seriousness of the public health challenge facing our community, and be mindful that reacting from a place of panic and fear is usually unhelpful, especially in the long-term.

Strategies to manage stress and anxiety

Focus on the things you can control

Anxiety and stress are normal responses to a highly unpredictable situation such as this. Some anxiety can be helpful in motivating us to take action against the uncontrollable nature of the situation.

- Learn how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. Following hygiene principles and teaching them to your children can keep anxiety at bay.
- Seek accurate information and limit or avoid unhelpful media and misinformation. Being exposed to constant, alarming, anxiety-inducing stories convinces us that there is something to panic about, and further perpetuates misinformation and uncertainty.
- Maintain your day-to-day activities and a routine as much as possible. Routines and rituals confer a sense of controllability and predictability, thereby helping us cope with anxiety and stress.
 - Give yourself a “commute” by going for a walk/run before and after work.
 - Arrange with your employer to work from home, if possible.
 - Having a routine can minimize impulsivity and oppositional behaviour in children.

Follow sources like the [Australian Department of Health](#) or the [World Health Organisation](#) for the most up to date information

Staying active

Exercise doesn't just improve physical health; it also mitigates stress through the release of endorphins and elevation of mood. Even with the closure of facilities (e.g. gyms, yoga studios, swimming pools, hiking trails) during social distancing, you can still stay physically active with some tips below:

- Go for daily runs, walks, or cycles, as long as you maintain physical distancing rules.
- Exercise in your own home with fitness DVDs and online videos.
- If you have a videogame console, exergames (games that require you to stand up and move) can make home exercise more fun.

A common misconception is that exercise has to be physically taxing, but any form of exercise can help alleviate stress. Try the following activities:

- **Deep breathing exercises.** Rapid, shallow, erratic breathing is a common response to stress. Slow, deep, regular breathing is a sign of relaxation.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** Stressed muscles are tight, tense muscles. By learning to relax your muscles, you will be able to use your body to dissipate stress.
- **Meditation.** Meditation can reverse the physiological signs of stress by slowing the heart rate, reducing blood pressure and stress hormone levels, and slowing the breathing rate.

Staying connected

Social connection is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being, as well as lower levels of depression and anxiety. Most importantly, **social connection helps us become more resilient during stressful life events.**

Remember, **physical distancing does not need to mean social disconnection.** Technology can be used to give and receive support (remotely). You could:

- call, text, or video-chat with friends and family
- share quick and easy recipes and perhaps make a time to cook 'together' virtually
- start a virtual book or movie club
- schedule a workout together over video chat
- join an online group or peer forum.

Emotional regulation

Refers to the process where a person influences which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express their feelings.

Showing compassion

Being compassionate towards others is associated with lower blood pressure reactivity and lower cortisol reactivity. In other words, **compassion acts as a buffer for physiological stress and improves your well-being.**

Building a sense of social solidarity, where everyone feels that we're all in this together, can help us better cope with a crisis situation such as this. Some acts of kindness can be to:

- check in with loved ones regularly with a message of encouragement or affirmation
- cook, pack and deliver a meal to someone in your neighbourhood, while being mindful of physical distancing guidelines
- donate to a cause - e.g. GoFundMe is taking donations for masks and medical equipment to support local hospitals and health centers (search "masks," "PPE," and "N95")
- offer to help vulnerable members of the community with groceries and errands
- pass on relevant information to your friends, family, and colleagues.

Regulating your emotions

You may find yourself using **counterproductive** behaviours such as:

- keeping your emotions to yourself
- controlling your stress and negative emotions by not outwardly expressing them
- ruminating and dwelling on your negative thoughts
- catastrophising your situation.

There are different strategies to regulate your emotions in these difficult times. Try to **DO** these things instead:

- Acknowledge your emotions. Whatever you are feeling right now, know that it's okay to feel that way. Allow yourself time to notice and express what you're feeling. This could be through:
 - journaling
 - talking with others
 - channelling your emotions into something creative (e.g., drawing, painting, music)
- Keep things in perspective. In the absence of information, our anxious mind will often fill in the blanks with worst case scenarios, which can leave us feeling overwhelmed, helpless, or vulnerable. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to shift your thinking:
 - What are the things within my control?
 - Am I overestimating the likelihood of the worst-case scenario?
 - What strategies have helped me cope with challenging situations in the past that will serve me well during this time?
 - What is a small helpful or positive action that I can take now?
- Find a silver lining. In light of the shutdown of nonessential activities and increased home isolation, focus on the activities you are still able to do, or those that you may have more opportunity to do if you're at home more often.

It is important to get support from someone you trust. Speak to a health care professional or, if available, a mental health specialist if you feel you need more support.

Further health and wellbeing support

Tip sheets and online resources

- Australian Psychological Society (APS): [Tips for coping with coronavirus anxiety](#)
- Beyond Blue: [Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)
- WHO: [Mental health and psychosocial considerations during COVID-19 outbreak](#)
- Ted article: ["I'm incredibly anxious about coronavirus"](#)
- Dr Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap: [How to respond effectively to the coronavirus](#)

Mobile apps

- [Smiling Mind](#) - free mindfulness meditation app to help you look after your mental health and manage stress and daily challenges.
- [Headspace](#) - free "Weathering the Storm" program available to help support the global community through this time including a curated list of calming meditations, help with sleep, and at-home workouts or movement exercises.

Further health and wellbeing support

Crisis support

- [Lifeline](#) - provides crisis counselling and suicide prevention services. Phone: 13 11 14 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). [Lifeline online chat](#).
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) - provides online and phone counselling if you or someone you know is feeling suicidal. Phone: 1300 659 467. [Suicide Call Back Service online chat](#).

General counselling and mental health support

- [Beyond Blue](#) - online and phone mental health support. Phone: 1300 22 4636 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). [Beyond Blue online chat](#).
- [eheadspace](#) - confidential mental health and wellbeing support for young people (12 - 25 years) and their families, including information, support, and health services. Phone: 1800 650 890 (9am - 1am, 7 days a week). [eheadspace online chat](#).
- [MensLine](#) - professional telephone and online support and information service for Australian men. Phone 1300 78 99 78 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). [MensLine online counselling](#).
- [Mindspot](#) - free telephone and online service for people with stress, worry, anxiety, low mood or depression. It provides online assessment and treatment for anxiety and depression and can help you find local services. Call 1800 61 44 34 (8am - 8pm, Monday - Friday; 8am-6pm, Saturday).

Specialist areas

- [1800Respect](#) - confidential counselling, information and support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse via phone or online chat. Phone: 1800 737 732 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). [1800Respect online chat](#).
- [Butterfly Foundation's National Helpline \(ED HOPE\)](#) - confidential service that provides information, counselling, and treatment referral for people with eating disorders, and body image and related issues. Phone: 1800 33 4673 (8am - midnight).
- [Directline](#) - confidential alcohol and drug counselling and referral service. Phone: 1800 888 236 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). [Directline online counselling](#).

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