

# How to manage anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak

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## A Q&A with Clinical Psychologist Dr. Brooke P. Halpern, Psy.D., J.D

### How do pandemics in general wreak havoc on our mental health?

Anytime there's any sort of health scare that we don't know much about, stress levels will go up and that's a normal reaction. In the past, we've heard about things like H1N1 (aka Influenza A or Swine Flu) but it was flu-related and flu is a word people are familiar with. The term Coronavirus is new to most people. They're asking themselves, does my medical professional know what this is? Do they know how to treat it? It's natural to feel some fear and anxiety around things that are unknown, but it's our response to those feelings that can be most detrimental to our mental health.

### What coping strategies should we be adopting to manage stress and anxiety at this time?

In times of anxiety, you want to be mindful of your reactions and what works best for you. Here are a few suggestions:

#### Be Mindful of Media

If media exposure bumps up your anxiety or keeps you from sleeping at night, you may want to cut back on this. If you are going to follow media, then I recommend sticking with science-based sources that offer real scientific facts. For some people, this will help lower their stress hormone.

#### Acknowledge Your Anxiety

Notice when you're feeling anxious, then ground yourself by taking a few slow, deep breaths. This will release hormones that move your body away from stress. Another option is to go for a walk or do something to bring you back to the present moment through one of your senses. Get a cozy blanket or other item and notice its texture, or smell something calming. Anything that takes you away from your anxious thought and brings you back into the present will help.

#### Control What You Can

Do 'doable' things like wash your hands, cough or sneeze into your arm, or avoid shaking hands. Even things that are unrelated to the illness, like an easy work task, will lower your stress reaction.

#### Surround Yourself with Calm People

If you have people in your life that ramp up your anxiety, try to steer clear of them and instead seek support from people who are level-headed and calm.

### What can I do if I'm feeling really panicked about catching the virus?

If you've tried mindful breathing or other coping skills and you're still finding it impossible to get away from your anxious thoughts, I would recommend seeking help from a mental health professional.

## **How do I balance washing my hands enough and not becoming obsessive about it?**

If washing your hands often makes you feel calmer then it's OK to stick with that, but if you're doing it every 15 minutes, for example, and it's bumping up your anxiety, then it may be time to seek mental health advice.

## **For those already struggling with anxiety disorders, all of the media coverage can be especially triggering. How do I best cope?**

If you have a pre-existing anxiety disorder it can show up again or become more acute. For some, the way to cope will include being more mindful of their thoughts. For others, it may be medication. If you have an anxiety disorder, it's especially important that you take care of yourself by eating healthy, getting plenty of sleep, and reaching out for help if it becomes unmanageable.

## **How do I offer emotional support to friends, family members, or co-workers who have been quarantined?**

Some people are emotionally fine with being quarantined, while for others it may cause a lot of turmoil. The best thing is to ask them directly what they need. Small gestures like calling, sending a text or email, dropping food supplies at their door are also good ways to show your support.

## **Is the virus making people more anxious or is the hysteria of the media coverage making more people anxious?**

I think it's both. Getting sick is scary and causes stress. The initial concern about the Coronavirus is like a fire alarm and then we have to investigate if something is truly wrong. Often that's a false alarm or just smoke. But the media coverage is causing some people to react like their house is burning down. The media coverage creates a sense that everything is happening right now but, in the moment, most of us are ok, nothing has happened.

## **How do I talk to my child about the Coronavirus, without making them anxious?**

We often think we're protecting our children from our anxiety, but they're really good at picking up on it. Here are a few ways to reduce their anxiety – and yours!

**Use Age-Appropriate Language** – This will increase their vigilance without making them feel scared. For example, we're going to do an extra good job of washing our hands today. NPR released a really great comic strip that explains the Coronavirus to kids from a scientific perspective which is a great jumping-off point.

**Reinforce Good Behaviors (like handwashing)** – Kids will follow what you're doing so set a good example by washing your own hands regularly and showing them how to do it properly. Send younger kids out with hand sanitizer in their bag, and make sure they know how to use it.

**Educate Yourself** – Keeping yourself well informed will help you keep calm for your kids.

**Rehearse How You Will Answer Their Questions** – Limiting media exposure may help reduce their anxiety, but they will have questions and you can prepare how to answer them. For example, people catch germs and get sick, but here are some ways you can control it.

**Have a Contingency Plan** – Think about how you will handle having a sick kid at home. Talk to your employer and plan how you might work from home. If possible, have friends and family on hand in case you get quarantined.

*Dr. Brooke P. Halpern holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology and a Law Degree from the University of Chicago. She completed her Post-Doctoral training at Deep Eddy Psychotherapy in Austin, Texas. Dr. Halpern views psychotherapy as a tool that can help create the emotional space so a person can identify and work towards personal change and growth. She currently runs **Kiva Psychological Services LLC**, a private practice in Evanston, Illinois.*