

Coping with Stress during Infectious Disease Outbreaks

What You Should Know

When you hear, read, or watch news about an outbreak of an infectious disease, you may feel anxious and stressed. This is completely normal. People who live in or have loved ones living in parts of the world affected by the outbreak may feel very stressed. During this stressful time, pay attention to 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

Below are some common signs of anxiety and stress. You may notice that you are feeling some of them during this time.

Your Behavior

You may experience:

- 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, with outbursts of anger and frequent 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 Body

Your body shows stress by:

- Having stomach aches 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 Emotions

You might be:

- Anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling like a hero, feeling very excited, or feeling like nothing can hurt you
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

Your Thinking

You might be:

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

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Know how to relieve stress

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

Keep things in perspective

Limit how much time you read or watching news about the outbreak. You will want to stay up-to-date on news of the outbreak, especially if you have loved ones in places where many people are 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 trust for correct health information. Learn how you can protect yourself from getting sick if you are at risk. You may turn to your family doctor, a local health department, government agencies, or an international organization. These two organizations are trustworthy sources of information about infectious disease outbreaks:

World Health Organization (WHO)

<https://www.who.int>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov>

Keep yourself healthy

- Eat healthy foods and drink water
- Avoid drinking too much 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 work on hobbies that you love. Pace yourself between 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 early warning signs of stress.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event. Think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions, and behavior around past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common, even when if the outbreak does not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who are feeling stressed about the outbreak. Talk about your feelings and share reliable health information. Enjoy conversations about other things to remind yourself of the positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation or helping others in need.

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Coping-with-Stress-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/sma14-4885>