



## Ways to Overcome the Emotional Effects of Social Distancing

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Like many in our community, I'm also feeling anxious and fearful of the unknowns related to the current COVID-19 crisis. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. For the next several weeks, everyone in our community will be practicing social distancing. The closure of schools, colleges, nonessential businesses, restricting gatherings, and other types of in-person interactions are efforts aimed at stopping or slowing down the spread of infectious diseases.

Not surprisingly, social distancing can result in us feeling *even more* anxious, fearful, depressed and lonely. And those with preexisting mental health conditions might experience new or worsening symptoms since social distancing equates to less social in-person interactions, the behaviors known to improve our well being and reduce the symptoms associated with depression and anxiety.

So, the question is, “What can we do to address our emotional health during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Below are a few recommendations you can do immediately to support yourself and your emotional health during these stressful times:

- **Observe and describe your emotions in a nonjudgmental way.** Some people naturally run hotter than others when it comes to experiencing strong emotions like anxiety. This strategy entails observing your surroundings or circumstance and then describing your observations in words. Think along the lines of a reporter. The purpose of this technique is to help calm down strong emotions so you can think more rationally and act more skillfully. For most of us, it's impossible to reason when we're emotional.
- **Have a distress tolerance plan.** We're all experiencing anxiety with today's new realities. Having a distress tolerance plan in place for calming down strong emotions is beneficial for taking care of our emotional health. A distress plan can include making time for taking warm baths, watching funny movies, playing games on your iPhone, or exercising. These are all great ways to calm down strong emotions so our rational brains can take over.
- **Take regular and frequent breaks from watching, reading or listening to the news.** Being exposed to the news 24/7 about the pandemic is not only emotionally upsetting, but it's also bad for our physical health. Research studies show that exposure to prolonged periods of stress can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, stomach issues, headaches, elevated blood pressure, cardiac disease and problems sleeping.
- **Take care of your body.** Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- **Make meditation a daily self-care practice.** Studies analyzed in JAMA (The Journal of The Medical Association) showed that meditation does help manage anxiety. The focus of mindfulness meditation is to train the brain to stay in the moment, which in turn, decreases our stress levels.
- **Create meaningful interactions with your family.** Although a pandemic is not what one would ever hope for, try to take advantage of the extra time you might have for connecting with your children, partner, pets and friends. Playing board games, cards and watching movies together are great ways to deepen connections and for creating memories, even during stressful times.
- **Use social networking sites and virtual platforms for staying connected.** In addition to texting, I've been using FaceTime to connect to friends and family while practicing social distancing. Seeing the other person's facial expressions and hearing their voice creates a deeper, fuller and richer social interaction. Deeper and richer social interactions definitely help to combat depression or loneliness brought on by social distancing.
- **Connect with nature.** As much as possible, go for a walk, a run or a bike ride. Research consistently shows that connecting with nature decreases symptoms associated with anxiety and depression.

- **You're not alone.** Remember yourself you're not alone. We're all affected by the pandemic and most of us are experiencing an increase in our stress levels. It's unavoidable. Simply knowing we're not alone can reduce feelings of loneliness.

Let's stay connected during these stressful times. I'd like to hear from you. Please share your suggestions or recommendations that could help others or questions you may have regarding caring for your emotional health during the pandemic.

Be well and be safe!



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