

Strategies to maintain your mental wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic



What's worked for you before to help manage your stress and anxiety? Many of those strategies you can still rely on. Here are some ideas that might be helpful.

Accept that some anxiety and fear is normal

COVID-19 is a new virus and we're still learning about it. The uncertainty about the virus and the changes that are unfolding can make most people feel a bit anxious. This is normal, and it actually can help motivate us to take action to protect ourselves and others, and to learn more about the pandemic.

Remember that you are resilient and be careful with the "What ifs"

In stressful situations, people often overestimate how bad the situation can get, but **underestimate how well they will be able to cope. *People are resilient and have coping skills they use every day!*** Don't underestimate your coping skills.

- Think of difficult or challenging situations in the past that you've managed through. How did you cope?
- Remind yourself that you can handle stress and that if you feel you need support, you can reach out to family, friends, colleagues or professionals.
- Remember our collective resources – from excellent health care and public health response systems to strong and resilient communities.

Seek credible information

Some reliable sources include: [Toronto Public Health](#), [Public Health Agency of Canada](#), [Ministry of Health](#) and [Public Health Ontario](#). Be wary of what is posted on social media, and always consider how reliable it is.

Take care of yourself and stay active

- Eat healthily: As much as is possible, choose more fruits and vegetables, and drink lots of water.
- Get proper sleep: Keep a consistent sleep schedule. Avoid screen time 30 minutes before bed. Use your bed for sleep (not reading, watching TV, using your phone).
- Avoid substance use including smoking and vaping, caffeine and alcohol.

Know when to unplug

While staying informed is helpful, too much information may not provide extra benefit. Limit checking sources to once per day or less if you can. This includes reading or listening to news stories about COVID-19. Consider limiting social media intake. Do something fun and healthy for yourself instead (e.g., read, work, exercise).

Solve problems that can be solved

It can be useful to identify which things are actually problems that need to be solved, and which are just worries. Break each problem down into smaller parts, thinking about what needs to be done now, what can be tackled tomorrow, and what can be delayed or even dropped completely.

- Brainstorm possible solutions, identify the pros and cons, then narrow down to the best option.
- Put the solution into practice and see how it goes. Did it solve the problem? Did it help a bit? Do you need to consider another solution from your list?
- Ask others how they see your "problem"? If they agree it's a real problem, ask for feedback.
- Consider writing this process down on paper. You can cross off tasks as you do them, which can combat feelings of helplessness.



Challenge worries and anxious thoughts

Our way of thinking can really fuel stress and anxiety. For example, you might be thinking “I’m going to catch this and die” or “There’s nothing I can do”. These thoughts can be so strong that you believe they’re true. **Not all our thoughts are facts - many are simply beliefs that we hold, even though they can *feel* like facts.**

Start with **catching your thoughts**. When you are feeling anxious or stressed, stop and write down what you are thinking. Your thought might sound something like “What if ...” or “I’m worried that ...”

Once you’ve identified a thought, challenge it. Ask yourself:

- Is this thought true? How do I know it’s true? Is it 100% true and always true?
- What is the evidence or proof for the thought?
- What is the evidence or proof against the thought?
- Has the thing I’m worried about ever happened before? What actually happened?
- How did I cope? What was the end result?



Ask yourself, “**What does worrying do for me?** Is worrying helping me solve a problem or is it keeping me stuck?”

Then, come up with a more balanced thought. For example, “I work in a shelter around so many people who could get sick. I could die from this” could be replaced with: “**I’m a frontline worker, but I’m also following all of the recommended precautions, I have a good support network, and I’m taking steps to stay healthy. I am extremely likely to get through this and be fine.**”

Decrease other stress

COVID-19 is probably not the only source of stress in your life right now. Consider addressing other sources of stress to reduce your overall level of anxiety.

Practice relaxation, prayer and meditation

Choose an activity that works for you and that you’re likely to continue doing. Start slowly and gradually work toward a regular practice. Here are some options:

- Books, videos or apps (e.g. *Calm*, *Headspace*, *Stop Breathe & Think*)
- Any healthy activity you find enjoyable and relaxing (e.g. yoga, cup of tea, TV show)



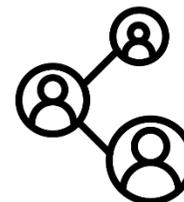
Be kind to yourself

The strategies mentioned here can take some time to work. We need to practice them regularly and in different situations. Don’t be hard on yourself if you forget to do something or if you are not feeling better right away.

Practice social distancing, but stay connected

Social distancing doesn’t mean breaking off all contact from loved ones. Being alone can lead to spending too much time ruminating, increasing stress and anxiety. **It can be helpful to connect with people who are a positive influence in your life, e.g. friends, family, mentor, faith leader.** Try to avoid people who are negative or who generally increase your stress.

- Reach out and get support from these people – either in person (respecting social distancing) or through phone or video calls or text messaging.
- Look for formal support, either online or by phone that can help you during high-stress times. For example, you may turn to a distress line, online support group, or your faith community.



I still can't cope. Now what?

Sometimes, even after trying to reduce our stress and anxiety, we may continue to struggle. If you still feel significant distress around COVID-19 and feel you are not coping well, you may need extra support from someone like your family doctor or a psychologist, psychotherapist, social worker or other health professional. Here are some additional resources:

- **If you’re in distress, call Toronto Distress Centre: 416-408-HELP (416-408-4357) or text 45645.**
- [Canadian Mental Health Association \(Toronto\)](#) provides information, counselling and referral services.
- [Psychology Today](#) has searchable listings of fee-for-service counsellors, many providing services virtually.