Coronavirus (COVID-19): Managing Stress and Anxiety

TIP SHEET

The outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) is impacting people in significant ways, and it's understandable that people are feeling heightened stress and anxiety.

It's important to take care of yourself by using strategies that help you to manage your stress levels and responses to the current state of uncertainty, change and social isolation.

Signs of stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety can result in a range of different physical and emotional reactions. Be aware of signs that might indicate that you're stressed or anxious, including:

- Being short-tempered or irritable
- Headaches
- An upset stomach
- Sleeping difficulties
- A lack of concentration
- Feeling run down
- Tension in your jaw, or shoulders or other parts of your body
- Fatigue or extreme tiredness
- Rumination or racing mind
- Feelings of worry, fear or unease
- Finding it difficult to relax and be calm.

Stay updated, mindfully

In times of crisis, it's recommended that you monitor how much, and what news you're exposing yourself to, as well as when you're consuming it.

Set some boundaries around the amount of time you will dedicate to reading or watching the news, such as 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening. This can keep you updated with the latest information, but also put restrictions on your exposure, as consuming too much media can increase anxiety.

Avoid watching the news before sleep as this can interrupt your ability to fall asleep or sleep soundly.

It's also important that you ensure that you are getting your information from reliable sources, such as the Australian Government's health alerts or the World Health Organization.

Keep your routine

During times of external instability and change, it's important to keep your routine the same, or as similar as possible to maintain structure in your day, which can be beneficial for your mental health. This includes when you wake up, eat, work, engage in leisurely activities, and sleep.

If you're working from home, set boundaries around the time you begin work, have breaks and finish your day. This can maintain your sense of structure and minimise your work spilling over to your personal life.

If you can, try to set up a dedicated place of work in your home to minimise noise and distractions. This can be particularly helpful if you're working from home when you have a partner, housemates, or children who are at home, which can bring its unique set of challenges.

If you're out of work, try to plan your day to maintain or rebuild a sense of purpose and structure. You can stick to your routine by scheduling your tasks for the day, such as cleaning and cooking, as well as leisure time. We also recommend staying informed about the government services that are available for people impacted by coronavirus, including financial supports.

Stay connected

With increased social isolation, people are at greater risk of feeling lonely and isolated. Positive relationships are essential for our mental health and wellbeing, and it's important to spend time talking with friends and loved ones who will be able to provide you with connection and support.

While we are having to physically distance ourselves from others, we can maintain our relationships by using communication methods still available to us, such as the telephone, text messages, email and video conferencing. You can also spend quality time with people you live with.

Stay active

Although, during this time we're spending more time at home, it's important to continue to exercise outdoors where possible, to benefit our mental health and keep us in touch with nature.

This could involve walking, jogging or cycling (while adhering to social distancing guidelines). It's recommended to exercise for at least 15 to 30 minutes, three days a week. If you're finding this hard, even just a 10-minute walk each day can have a positive impact on your mood and re-energise you. You could also exercise indoors by using online videos to work out, practise yoga or other types of activity.

Practise self-care

Self-care involves looking after our physical, emotional and mental health. This means eating a healthy and balanced diet, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, exercising regularly and getting restful and adequate sleep. It also includes making time to do the things you love, such as reading, writing, gardening, listening to music or spending time on a hobby.

Rest and relaxation

Aim for seven to eight hours of sleep each night. It's important to practise sleep hygiene, particularly if you have trouble sleeping. Some useful resources on sleep are provided on the next page of this tip sheet.

Take regular work or study breaks during the day, especially in the current circumstances which may mean you're experiencing a heightened state of anxiety. Try to take 5 to 10 minute breaks each hour to switch off from screens or smart devices and do something calming and relaxing. Some relaxation exercises include meditation, mindfulness, yoga and progressive muscle relaxation.

There are less formal ways to relax, such as listening to music, going for a walk, having a gentle stretch or drinking a glass of water. There are a range of relaxation apps for smartphones that are available to download, which are listed over the page.

Remember to keep things in perspective while in social isolation, and be kind to yourself.

During times of anxiety and stress, we're more likely to focus on the negatives and view things as worse than they really are.

Try to remind yourself that the current situation is temporary, and that by staying home, you are doing your bit in helping to slow the spread of the virus in your community.

Also remember that as a community, we are all in this together, and this new and unprecedented period might even have some benefits, such as enhanced relationships (albeit at a distance) with family, friends and neighbours.

Useful resources

Sleep

Beyond Blue - Sleeping well

https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/staying-well/sleeping-well

headspace – Sleeping well for a healthy headspace

https://headspace.org.au/young-people/sleeping-well-for-a-healthy-headspace

Relaxation apps

Smiling Mind

www.smilingmind.com.au

Breathe

https://au.reachout.com/reachout-breath-app

Need support?

If you're feeling stressed, anxious or overwhelmed by the current situation and would like some support, our counsellors are here for you.

We're committed to supporting people throughout the coronavirus situation. We're continuing to deliver services via telephone, online and video-conferencing appointments, including through our online counselling service.

For more information or to talk to us about how we can support you:

• Visit www.rav.org.au

• Call 1300 364 277

To learn about our typing-based online counselling service or to book an appointment, visit onlinecounselling.rav.org.au

About us

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation with no religious affiliations. We have over 70 years' experience providing family and relationship support services across Melbourne and Victoria. Our vision is for positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships for all Australians.

We provide counselling; family dispute resolution (mediation); family violence prevention, support and recovery services; relationship skills courses; mental health services; workplace services; and professional development and training, along with a diverse range of other services and programs.

Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances. We are committed to ensuring that our services are relevant, inclusive and accessible.

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