

# Mental Health during COVID-19



It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during and after a stressful situation.

Everyone reacts differently, and your own feelings will change over time. Notice and accept how you feel. Self-care during a stressful situation will help your long-term healing. Taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and protect yourself and your loved ones.

## Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a normal reaction to uncertainty and things that may harm us. For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic makes for a very uncertain future. People worry about their own health and the health of their loved ones, both here and abroad. People may also have a lot of concerns around school or work, their finances, their ability to take part in important community and social events and hobbies, and other important parts of their lives. People who already experience a lot of anxiety may find their anxiety worsening. Given that stress has increased for everyone, it may be that it will take less to trigger your anxiety or it may show up in a different way.

It's important to be kind to yourself. This is an anxiety-provoking and stressful time for everyone, and it's okay if you feel more anxious than usual. It is important to take time for yourself to manage your mental health. You are doing the best you can in a time when simply turning on the news can feel overwhelming.

While anxiety is a normal and expected reaction to the pandemic, too much anxiety can start to cause harm. Feeling stressed and fearful every day takes a toll on health and well-being very quickly. When anxiety and fear lead to panic, people may also take precautions that ultimately cause disruptions in their lives, like demanding a lot of tests or medical care when it isn't necessary or stockpiling certain supplies to the point that those supplies aren't available to people who are sick and need those items.

Anxiety can also cause the opposite reaction: denying or refusing to believe that the situation is serious, which is unhelpful. When people deny the severity of a situation in order to avoid anxiety, they may do nothing or they may ignore public health orders or recommendations from health authorities.

A better place is somewhere in the middle. Therefore, it is very important for all of us to take steps to manage our anxiety, especially those who already have Anxiety Disorders and are at greater risk of relapse.

### Tips for dealing with anxiety:

- 1. Take action** - Taking reasonable action can help you take back control and reduce anxiety. Look to trusted organizations and agencies like the Government of New Brunswick, Government of Canada, and World Health Organization for information about steps you can take to reduce your risk of getting sick or passing the illness on to others.
- 2. Take care of yourself** - Eat as well as possible, exercise regularly, get enough sleep, and make time for hobbies.
- 3. Stay connected with family and friends** - Isolating yourself from others, such as staying home from school or working from home for longer periods of time, can affect your mood. Find ways to connect with people you care about in other ways. If you can't see someone in person, you can still reach out by phone, text, or video call.
- 4. Cut back on the amount of time you spend on social media and the news** - It's important to be informed, but constantly checking for updates or reading sensationalized stories can really take a toll on your mental health. Stick to trusted, verified news sources and limit yourself if social media or news stories increase your anxiety.

5. **Talk as much as is helpful to you** - Some people find it helpful to talk through anxiety-provoking situations like coronavirus and the COVID-19 illness, but others may find that conversations make their anxiety worse. If you need to limit conversations, it's okay to tell family, friends, and co-workers that you can't participate. Just make sure you don't ignore all news and important messages—the goal is to take in the information you need and cut down on the excess, not ignore the situation altogether.
6. **Explore self-management strategies** - Explore self-management strategies like mindfulness, yoga, meditation, art, or exercise. Check out free access to various tools to help build anxiety management skills:
  - a. MindShift app – The MindShift app can help to manage anxious thoughts, available for free at [www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com).
  - b. [Calm](#) – Calm is an award-winning app for Sleep, Meditation and Relaxation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they are offering a range of free resources.
  - c. CMHA NB Webinars – The Canadian Mental Health Association NB is offering free webinars related to coping with stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 and can be accessed at [www.cmhanb.ca](http://www.cmhanb.ca).
  - d. [Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty](#) – Strategies for managing anxiety from Psychology Tools.
  - e. [Wellness Together Canada](#) - Government of Canada web portal that provides mental health tools and resources.
7. **Have a plan** - It's hard to predict exactly what will happen next, but preparing for situations like self-isolation can help reduce some uncertainty about the future. Keep two weeks of supplies at home in case you have to quarantine yourself. This includes food, household products, prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, and supplements. Don't forget about your mental health: if you practice self-care activities like art, yoga, or exercise, make sure you have supplies or equipment on hand. If you live alone, consider a plan to check in regularly (just not face-to-face) with a friend, family member, or neighbour.
8. **Seek extra help or support when you need it** - People feel anxious about the future at the best of times, and many people have never encountered a pandemic like this before. It's okay if you need help. Here are some signs you might benefit from extra help and support:
  - a. You can't think about anything other than coronavirus or the COVID-19 illness
  - b. Your anxiety interferes in your daily life—for example, you have a hard time going to work or being in public spaces even when the risk is very low
  - c. You isolate yourself from others when it isn't necessary
  - d. You feel hopeless or angry about the situation
  - e. You have a hard time eating or sleeping well
  - f. You experience physical symptoms like frequent headaches or an upset stomach

Consider tele-health or e-health services, online support, and online or app-based self-management tools. You can learn more and find resources at [www.gnb.ca/coronavirus](http://www.gnb.ca/coronavirus).

9. **Pre-existing mental health conditions** - People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms. If you experience stress reactions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak for several days in a row and are unable to carry out normal responsibilities because of them, contact your health care provider or your local addictions and mental health centre.

10. **Be compassionate to yourself** - Many people who struggle with anxiety can be really hard on themselves. They may berate



themselves when struggling and feel deeply ashamed and embarrassed. It's normal and expected that there will be times that are more difficult than others, when it feels as though anxiety has got the better of us, even after putting in all of the hard work and using every skill that we know. In these moments, it's important to be kind and avoid judging ourselves, and pick up from where we left off, understanding that the aim isn't perfection and that recovery isn't a straight line.

## Avoidance Behaviours

Although for most the physical distancing and self-isolation recommendations come as a significant restriction on their usual activities, some people are hearing the self-isolate recommendations and taking it as permission to not leave their home under any circumstance. For people with an anxiety disorder who have difficulty being in public, such as people with panic disorder, agoraphobia, or social anxiety, staying inside where social interaction can be avoided may feel like a holiday. Similarly, if being in public produces anxiety because of associations with past traumas, being asked to stay home may be a welcome change. Although it might be relieving to avoid anxiety-provoking situations, it will eventually lead to more anxiety when these public health restrictions are lifted. You will be out of practice in managing your anxiety.

### Tips:

1. The best way to prevent a relapse of problematic anxiety is to continue to challenge yourself and avoid avoidance as much as you can. Push yourself to continue to have social interactions (while respecting safe physical distancing).
2. If you already receive care for panic disorder, agoraphobia or social anxiety, continue with your treatment plan. Connect with your care providers to find out options for maintaining your treatment during this time.

## Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) & Contamination Fears

COVID-19 is a serious threat and we need to be concerned and do what we can to prevent the spread of it. Distinguishing between appropriate concern and excessive anxiety can be tricky. OCD feeds off of uncertainty and doubt, and obsessions and compulsions can change depending on what is happening around you. Compulsions for checking may turn into obsessively checking the news. Or current guidelines may be a trigger for those whose OCD symptoms include compulsive hand washing or cleaning of surfaces. Often people with anxiety and contamination concerns do not use outside guidelines to disengage, but rather internal feelings of anxiety which leads to excessive handwashing or other maladaptive behaviours. With less to occupy your time, you may find that you are spending more time ruminating on your obsessive thoughts.

### Tips:

1. Create rules around when - and how often - you read the news, and be selective about where you get information from (for example, limit checking to once a day, at the end of the day, from the Government of Canada website).
2. To keep compulsions from getting worse, stick rigidly to guidelines. Wash your hands as frequently as the current guidelines tell you to, and not a second more. Wipe surfaces before and after preparing food, not whenever the thought that they may be dirty pops into your head.
3. Avoid large gatherings, but don't stop yourself from leaving the house if you are well and just want to go for a walk in the fresh air.
4. If you are in any doubt, ask yourself what function carrying out a behaviour has – is it genuinely to reduce the spread of the virus, or is it to calm my anxious thoughts?
5. To counter ruminating on obsessions, set yourself a routine to keep some structure in your day. Take advantage of the extra spare

time and build enjoyable activities into your day that you don't always have the chance to do.

6. If you already receive care for your OCD, continue with your treatment plan. Connect with your care providers to find out options for maintaining your treatment during this time.

## Health Anxiety and Associated Physical Symptoms

Many people are understandably health anxious in this current context, particularly as the number of COVID-19 cases is increasing. This worry about health can make us feel that we need to be constantly looking for early signs of the virus and scanning our bodies for any changes. It is normal for the human body to experience a range of physical sensations. When we are not focussed on our physical sensations, they are more likely to go unnoticed. However, if we are on the lookout for early signs of trouble, normal fluctuations in bodily sensations will be noticed and reacted to with fear and anxiety, which can lead to more physical symptoms associated with anxiety. Added to this, if you are on guard for early signs of the virus, it will also be likely that you will misinterpret other body reactions as signs of it. For example, many people have seasonal allergies. The stuffiness that comes with hay fever and the accompanying sneezing could easily be misinterpreted as signs of COVID-19.

### Tips:

1. Be aware that this tendency toward misinterpretation can occur. This might make it less likely that you will fall for it.
2. If you notice any change in sensations, like coughing, sneezing, body aches, or breathing changes, don't immediately jump to the conclusion that you are sick. You might be misinterpreting, or paying too much attention, to a normal sensation or body change. Let some time pass, to see whether the sensations go away on their own. You might find that many sensations that you experience during this time are not actually signs of COVID-19, but rather a normal fluctuation.
3. Of course, if a physical sensation persists and increases in severity, you can contact a health care professional, go to [www.gnb.ca/coronavirus](http://www.gnb.ca/coronavirus) to use their self-assessment tool, or contact 811.
4. If you already receive care for your health related anxiety or physical symptoms related to anxiety, continue with your treatment plan. Connect with your care providers to find out options for maintaining your treatment during this time.

## Generalized Anxiety Disorder & the Fear of Uncertainty

Right now we are living in a time of great uncertainty. We don't know what the future holds for our health, the health of our families, or our economic well-being. The extent of this uncertainty can be very frightening and anxiety-provoking, especially for those who already suffer from anxiety, and can therefore lead to unhelpful coping behaviours. You may find yourself trying to feel more certain about the situation by watching the news all day, or frequently looking up information online and on social media. Unfortunately you won't obtain greater certainty by scouring the internet for more information. In fact, trying to seek out certainty in this manner will likely make you more anxious in the long-run. Another way that many people are trying to cope with their fear of uncertainty right now is through stockpiling. We have likely all been to the grocery store and witnessed the empty shelves, and seen people purchase much more than is required for them or their family. Many people are attempting to hoard food and paper products out of a fear of the uncertainty regarding the future availability of items. As with excessively seeking out information about COVID-19, this unhelpful coping behaviour not only doesn't reduce anxiety or the uncertainty of our future, it can actually make you more anxious and fearful. It is important to keep in mind that efforts to erase uncertainty are futile. Life is uncertain even in the best of times, and we must learn to tolerate some level of it in our daily lives. The more we try to eliminate uncertainty, the harder it is to tolerate the bits that remain uncertain.

## Tips:

1. It is a good idea to stay informed by obtaining your news once a day, preferably at the same time of day, from a reputable news source.
2. Avoid hoarding food and other supplies, and only purchase what is required for you or your family.
3. Recognize that there is a lot of uncertainty right now, and you are not alone in feeling anxious about this. But, also recognize that efforts to try to get rid of all uncertainty will be unsuccessful and are only likely to make you more anxious.
4. If you already receive care for your generalized anxiety disorder, continue with your treatment plan. Connect with your care providers to find out options for maintaining your treatment during this time.

## Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength.

**If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience as a result of COVID-19 is getting to be too much, there are options available to you:**

**[CHIMO Helpline](#) - Help is just a phone call away: 1-800-667-5005**

**[Hope for Wellness Helpline](#) - The Hope for Wellness Helpline offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous people across Canada: 1-855-242-3310**

**[Kids Help Phone](#) - Text TALK to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868 to chat with a volunteer Crisis Responder 24/7.**

**If you experience stress reactions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak for several days in a row and are unable to carry out normal responsibilities because of them, contact your health care provider or your [local addictions and mental health centre](#).**