

Stress Coping Plan for the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Psychology experts in the media have a grab-bag of ideas for coping with stress and anxiety during the pandemic. Here's mine. This coping approach is loosely based on psychological principles such as exposure, acceptance and commitment, scheduling worry, stress management, and active coping. It forms an acronym: CARES.

Commit. Commit to living a life consistent with your most deeply held values. Regardless of how you feel in the moment, what is truly important to you? Family? Relationships? Health? Your education or vocation? Helping others? Commit to living a principled life, rooted in your values. Resist being reactive and living a shallow, frantic life. You *can find* ways to enact your values in your daily life, if you are creative.

Accept. Accept that some fear and anxiety is normal and appropriate. Pandemics are scary. Why wouldn't you have some fear? However, you should not deny or "push away" your fear. Don't avoid it! Let it happen. The problem starts when we refuse to feel our emotions. That pushes the fear into a shallow thinking style of anxiety, and then we avoid feelings, situations, and behaviors. Emotions like fear have information value, and they are very motivating. If you are watching TV and a tiger wanders inside, you would be very afraid! The fear motivates you to run away. But genuine emotions are like the weather, they come and go quickly, even when they are very strong. So let it happen. Accept your feelings. (This is exposure.)

Relax. Learn stress management. There are many approaches, like progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), and others. You can find a wide variety of instructions online, and there are many smartphone apps for meditation and other forms of stress management. Choose an approach that fits you, and take the time to relax. Reducing your overall level of arousal steals the oxygen from the anxiety fire. You experience less stress, tension, and worry when relaxed. Sometimes, distract yourself worries by being fully engaged with something positive-like stress management. One simple example is the popular 5-4-3-2-1 coping technique for anxiety.

Take a deep, slow breath.

5: What are five things you can see? You see the computer screen. You see the clock. You see a window, and a bird outside. Direct your vision to five things in your surroundings.

4: What are four things you can touch? The chair you're sitting on. The keyboard in front of you. Your shoelaces. Feel the hand sanitizer cooling your skin. Acknowledge any four things engages your sense of touch.

3: What are three things you can hear? Listen carefully. Can you hear the clock ticking? Birds singing? The soft whirring of your computer fan? Take a moment to hear all the noises that you typically filter out.

2: What are two things you can smell? Bacon cooking? Perhaps you can go smell the fancy soaps or hair products you have in the bathroom. Smell is a powerful sense for commanding your full attention.

1: What is one thing you can taste? Does the inside of your mouth still taste like toothpaste? Coffee? Tea? If you have some coffee or tea handy, take a sip. Try to detect the subtle flavor notes.

Fully engaging your five senses directs your attention to the present moment, away from stressful thoughts.

Exercise. Going outside for a walk or run is a great way to get some fresh air, which is safe and healthy. More broadly, exercise reminds us that no matter what is going on in the world, self-care such as nutrition, sleep, and physical activity are important for maintaining our physical and mental health. The CDC recommends getting good sleep and eating healthy foods during the pandemic. Exercise is powerful medicine for depression, anxiety, and many other problems. Exercise burns off the stress hormones. Zebras don't get ulcers because they run when they're scared.

Schedule. Set a schedule and stick to it. Schedule times for work, school, chores, exercise, and sleep. Schedules promote healthy habits. Get up at the same time every day. Get dressed—don't stay in your pajamas all day. Eat at set times—don't snack all day. Don't watch news media all day, and don't think about the pandemic all day. Maintaining a regular schedule also provides a reassuring routine that leaves less time for worry. In fact, if you are worried and anxious, schedule your worry for a specific part of the day. It sounds impossible, but people who struggle with worry are often asked to schedule their worry so that it doesn't take over the day. Allow yourself a specific time each day to do all your worrying. When your mind wanders to worries outside the scheduled time, remind yourself that you have already scheduled time for worrying. Keep a small journal handy and write down the topics you want to cover during your worry time. You can control your attention by directing where you want to focus, and you cannot focus on everything at once. Use your ability to control your attention to focus on positive, productive activities, and compress your worry time into an hour or less each day.