

Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks

What you should know

When you hear, read, or watch news about an outbreak of an infectious disease, you may feel anxious and show signs of stress. These signs of stress are normal and may be more likely or pronounced for people who live in or have loved ones living in parts of the world affected by the outbreak. In the wake of an infectious disease outbreak, monitor your own physical and mental health. Be aware of the signs of stress in yourself and your loved ones. Learn strategies to relieve stress and reach out for help when needed.

Be aware of signs of stress and overload

What follows are behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive responses that are all common signs of anxiety and stress. You may notice some of them after you learn about an infectious disease outbreak.

Your behavior

- Increase or decrease in energy and activity levels
- Increased alcohol/drug use including prescription use
- Increased irritability
- Trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Emotional outbursts
- Pulling away from friends or loved ones
- Not finding pleasure in activities that were once enjoyable
- Difficulty communicating clearly

Your body

- Stomachaches or headaches
- Eating or sleeping too little or too much
- Dizziness or tightness in chest
- Being easily startled

Your emotions

- Anxiety, worry, or fear
- Depressed or feeling overwhelmed by sadness
- Uncertainty or frustration
- Feeling resentful or angry
- Feeling helpless and hopeless

Your thinking

- Confusion and trouble remembering things
- Trouble thinking clearly
- Easily distracted and difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions

Know when to get help

You may experience serious distress when you hear about an infectious disease outbreak, even if you are at little or no risk of getting sick. If you or someone you know shows signs of stress (see above) for several days or weeks, get help by accessing the EAP or contacting your physician.

Learn strategies to relieve stress

You can manage and alleviate your stress by taking time to take care of yourself. The following strategies can help.

Keep things in perspective

Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak. You will want to stay up to date on news of the outbreak, particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have gotten sick, but make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.

Get the facts

Find people and trusted resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself and your family against illness, if you are at risk. You may turn to your family doctor, a state or local health department, U.S. government agencies, or an international organization. (Check out the section below for trusted sources of information about infectious disease outbreaks.)

Maintain good health

- Eat balanced meals and drink plenty of water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol or other drugs.
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get regular physical exercise.
- Keep a regular routine.

Use practical ways to relax and destress

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in activities you enjoy.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities and do something fun after a difficult task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, watch a movie or take a bath.
- Connect with others and talk about your feelings with loved ones and friends.
- Take regular breaks and focus on positive aspects of your life and the things you can control.

Pay attention to your body, feelings, and spirit

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event, and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions, and behavior around past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common after an event like an infectious disease outbreak, even when it may not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who may be experiencing stress about the outbreak. Talk about your feelings regarding the outbreak, share reliable health information, and enjoy conversation unrelated to the outbreak to remind yourself of the many important and positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation and mindfulness activities.
- Reach out and help others in need.
- Seek professional help if needed.

Questions about the Coronavirus? Where to go for answers and credible information:

Enrich your knowledge about the current COVID-19 outbreak from trusted organizations. Get updated information about how you and your family may be affected and how to protect your health. At this time, the risk for Americans is considered low. However, because this outbreak is changing, the best course of action is to consult the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the most trusted organization charged with monitoring and controlling the coronavirus in the U.S.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
<https://www.cdc.gov>