

Coronavirus stressing you out? Here's how to cope | COMMENTARY

By Laura K. Murray
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I recently returned from Zambia, where I am leading a study focused on implementing strategies to build leaders and scale up treatments known to be effective for coping with the mental health effects of violence and substance use. But like everywhere in the world, coronavirus was a major topic of discussion.

Soon after returning home, I was talking with a group of neighbors who know I work on global health issues and were eager for my take on COVID-19.

As I was offering insights from infectious disease experts, one woman quietly excused herself. She said the conversation was making her anxious. I felt terrible, especially because my work is focused on the mental health impacts of traumatic events.

Considerable attention today is rightly focused on the clinical course of a coronavirus infection and how it can vary from the mild to the severe. The pandemic is having something of a parallel impact on mental health: some are taking it in stride, while for others the stress is significant. Most of us will be somewhere in the middle.

Here are a few suggestions for managing COVID-19 risks to our mental health that can be adopted alongside efforts like social distancing to manage disease transmission.

1. *Limit intake of media:* It's a human phenomenon that many of us can't stop constantly watching a disaster unfold — even though we may want to look away. Try to limit your coronavirus check-ins to three or four a day, and preferably with a direct source like [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov), rather than social media or television news channels. Each time you look, set a timer on your phone for 5 to 10 minutes and commit to tuning out after the allotted time. These daily check-ins, especially if you stick with credible sources, will keep you up-to-date on important developments and the latest recommendations from health authorities.
2. *Anchor yourself in daily routines:* Try to keep your day focused on other tasks, goals or activities. If this is challenging, start your day by writing down a list of priorities for the morning, afternoon and evening. Put some objective goals you can accomplish within a set time frame. Sometimes even mundane tasks can have a grounding effect that help us keep things in perspective and avoid a spiral into escalating levels of anxiety.
3. *Do things that bring you happiness or pleasure:* Despite restrictions on certain activities and gatherings, this is still an especially important time to seek out things that bring you pleasure. Play with your pets or children. Cook, garden, read (something other than coronavirus news!) and exercise. Even binge-watching Netflix can be a healthy habit in

these challenging times. There is [evidence that engaging](#) in DOING things you like has a positive effect on your neurochemistry in ways that help ameliorate stress and anxiety.

4. *Reality-test your thought patterns*: The thought patterns circulating through our minds are intricately connected to how we feel and act. Now is a good time to step back and consider what's trending with our internal narratives. For example, what if my constant thought is "This is bad! What is this world coming to?" Not surprisingly, my emotions will more likely skew to significant anxiety. My behaviors also will be less productive, like obsessively watching TV, pacing and perhaps purchasing enough food to last years. If I focus on changing the thought channel to more helpful programming that includes thoughts like, "There are many capable people working on this. We will get through this," my body will respond by dialing down the anxiety and stress. [These feelings](#) are unlikely to disappear, but they should subside sufficiently so I can focus on playing a board game with my 10-year-old for 30 minutes or concentrating on a work-related task.

Anxiety and stress are normal even in the absence of a pandemic. And clearly they are likely to intensify in such a moment as we are now experiencing. But there are approaches and behaviors that can be effective in managing them and preventing fear from becoming incapacitating.

It's especially important for all of our society's leaders — from the business, government, public health and medical sectors, to parents, families and teachers — to adopt calming strategies, as that they can, in turn, project calm that can be of enormous benefit for their constituents, team members, employees families and students.

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