

Managing Fears and Anxiety around the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

As information about Coronavirus unfolds and response plans are implemented, there can be a wide range of thoughts, feelings and reactions. Some helpful information and resources are below:

Common Reactions

Please recognize that there can be a wide range of reactions and that over the next few days or weeks you may experience periods of:

- Anxiety, worry or panic
- Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Feeling helpless or confused
- Anger
- Skepticism or bravado
- Social withdrawal
- Overexposure to media
- Hyper-vigilance to your health
- Feelings of loss or grief
- Excitement, relief, curiosity

Managing and Coping

Although Coronavirus is a health issue that is taken very seriously by HUHS, the University and public health authorities, do not let your worry about this virus control your life. There are many simple and effective ways to manage your fears and anxieties. Many of them are ingredients for a healthy mental and physical lifestyle:

→ **Get the facts.** Stay informed with the latest health and campus information through HUHS: www.harvard.edu/coronavirus

→ **Keep things in perspective.** Limit worry and agitation by lessening the time you spend watching or listening to upsetting media coverage. Take a break from watching the news and focus on the things that are positive in your life and things you have control over.

→ **Anxiety is an emotion that tends to seek out confirmation.** While at times this can be validating, it can also intensify the emotion, leaving you feeling helpless and overwhelmed. Acknowledge your emotion with understanding, and then then turn your mind to other things:

"It's understandable I am concerned about the current situation, AND I understand that worry is not an effective way to respond"

→ **Practice mindfulness and acceptance.** Focus on asking "what now" rather than "why." Practice patience with yourself and others. Let things unfold and assume others are trying to do the right thing.

→ **Focus on rational rather than emotional responses and engage in active problem solving.** Find out who is available to answer your questions, provide accurate information and guide you.



→ **Find activities that give you a sense of mastery**, even simple tasks such as packing, making your bed, doing your laundry, going for a walk, checking in on a friend, or practicing a new skill. Purposefully engage in activities that are the opposite of focusing on worry. Listen to upbeat music, watch a comedy, read a book, etc.

→ **Rather than dwelling in thoughts and images of hopelessness**, imagine yourself coping effectively. Notice how you would act, what you would do or say. See yourself being effective.

→ **Think about what you might say to a friend** about the current situation that would support, encourage or reassure them. Now say such things to yourself.

→ **Practice a mindset of gratitude**. Spend time each day thinking about three things you are grateful for. Picture holding these things in your open hands.

→ **Significant plans may be radically altered by the current circumstances**. Try not to dwell in regret. Other rituals, forms of celebrating, ways of connecting, and memorable moments may well emerge from this situation. Inside emergency is the word emerge.

→ **Be aware of ruminating with catastrophic thoughts and language**. Something as simple as saying “that’s interesting” rather than “that’s awful” can be helpful.

→ **Be aware of how your body can reinforce anxiety**. Do not stay in bed. Take a walk outside and notice things around you, especially nature. Take time to breathe deeply. Take care of a pet or plant. Organize or clean your room. Stretch often. Make eye contact with others and smile.

→ **Be mindful of your assumptions about others**. Someone who has a cough or a fever does not necessarily have coronavirus. Self-awareness is important in

not stigmatizing others in our community.

→ **Keep connected**. Maintaining social networks can help maintain a sense of normalcy and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. Keep a sense of humor.

→ **Utilize your thoughts to effectively manage worry**. For example, the WORRY CONTAINER skill is an activity in which you picture in detail a container or box with a lid that closes. Find the thing in your mind that you are stuck worrying about. Imagine moving this from your mind and placing it firmly into the container. This box will hold whatever you place in it. Close the box and firmly move it to one side, perhaps placing it on a shelf. You can go back anytime you want and take the worry out, or you can leave it there, giving you space to focus on other things.

Seek additional help. Individuals who feel an overwhelming worry or anxiety can seek additional professional mental health support.

Resources:

Harvard Students:
CAMHS (Harvard University Counseling and Mental Health Services) - 617-495-2042
HUHS Urgent Care - 617-495-5711

Faculty and Staff:
Employment Assistance Program (EAP) - 877-327-4278

Local outside services: www.huhs.thrivingcampus.com
Services outside of the area, and within the USA:
www.psychologytoday.com

Written by S. Rue Wilson, EdD, HUHS Psychologist



HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Health Services

www.harvard.edu/coronavirus