



THE EMPLOYEE ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER



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EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

May
2020

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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. Know the signs of stress in yourself and your loved ones. Know how to relieve stress, and know when to get help.

Know the signs of stress.

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

You may experience

- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- An increase in your use of alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Frequent crying
- Excessive worrying
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Difficulty communicating or listening
- Difficulty giving or accepting help
- An inability to feel pleasure or have fun

Your Body

Your body shows stress by

- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Having headaches and other pains
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled

Your Emotions

You might be

- Anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling heroic, euphoric, or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

Your Thinking

You might be

- Having trouble remembering things
- Feeling confused
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Having 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 one of the resources at the end of this article.

Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) right away if you or someone you know threatens to hurt or kill him or herself; threatens someone else; or talks or writes about death, dying, or suicide.

Know how 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 resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself 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 good sources of information about infectious disease outbreaks.)

Keep yourself healthy:

- Eat healthy foods, and drink water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol.
- Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs.
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.

Use practical ways to relax:

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities, and do a fun thing after a hard task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family.
- Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.
- Take care of your physical health to help lower your stress. Take a break to focus on positive parts of your life, like connections with loved ones.

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 does not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who may be experiencing stress about the outbreak. Talk about your feelings about 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, prayer, or helping others in need.

Sources for Credible Outbreak-Related Health Information

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

World Health Organization (WHO)
Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization
202-974-3000
<https://www.who.int>

Helpful Resources

In addition to your employee assistance program (EAP), the below resources may be of further assistance.

Hotlines

Disaster Distress Helpline, by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Toll-Free: 800-985-5990 (English and español)

SMS: Text “TalkWithUs” to 66746

SMS (español): “Hablanos” al 66746

TTY: 800-846-8517

Website in English:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

Website in español:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/espanol>

SAMHSA’s National Helpline

Toll-Free: 800-662-HELP (24/7/365 Treatment Referral Information Service in English and español)

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-Free: 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255)

Toll-Free (español): 888-628-9454

TTY: 800-799-4TTY (800-799-4889)

Website in English: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Website in español:

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/en-espanol>

Treatment Locator

Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

Website: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center

Toll-Free: 800-308-3515

Email: DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (Revised 2014, October 21). Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks (Pub. No. SMA14-4885). Retrieved February 11, 2020, from <https://store.samhsa.gov>

Tips for Parents and Caregivers on Media Coverage of Traumatic Events

The media (television, radio, print, and the Internet) play an important part in people's lives. The media can inform and educate you and your children. Unfortunately, the media coverage of a traumatic event also has the potential to upset and confuse. There are many ways that parents can help children understand media coverage of traumatic events and manage their exposure.

Understanding Media Exposure

- Media coverage surrounding a traumatic event, such as a terrorist attack, natural disaster, or pandemic, can produce increased fears and anxiety in children. At anniversaries of an event, children may experience some of the same feelings and thoughts they had immediately after the event. They may have trouble sleeping or concentrating at school, or have other behavior difficulties. The more time children spend watching coverage of a traumatic event, the more likely they are to have these negative reactions.
- Graphic images and stories of loss may be particularly upsetting to children.
- Very young children may not understand that the coverage and repetition of images from a past event is just that—a replay. They may worry and fear that the event is happening again.
- Excessive exposure to the media coverage of a traumatic event may interfere with children's recovery after an event.
- Children who were directly impacted by an event (e.g. lost someone in the event, were injured in the event, were witness to the event) are most vulnerable to negative effects from excessive media exposure.

What Parents Can Do to Help

- **Make a family plan.** Parents or caregivers should take the lead, with input from older children, in determining the extent your children will be exposed to the media. Consider putting some limits on children's exposure to media coverage of a traumatic event. The younger the child, the less exposure she or he should have. Consider if media exposure is necessary at all for a very young child. Be ready to put your plan into action, and set clear limits when necessary.
- **Watch and discuss with children.** To gain a better understanding of how coverage may impact children, watch what they watch. Discuss the stories with them, asking about their thoughts and feelings about what they saw, read, or heard. Particularly with older children and adolescents, it is not always possible to review media together. However, taking the time to discuss media coverage can be an excellent way of opening dialogue with your children; getting a better sense of their thoughts, fears and concerns; and understanding their point of view.
- **Seize opportunities for communication.** Sometimes, you will be presented with unexpected opportunities to discuss coverage of a traumatic event. For example, a newsbreak with images or a trauma-related story may interrupt family programming. The images in magazines or newspapers are likely to be viewed by children. Use these opportunities to open conversations related to the event. Assure them that you are available to talk about their feelings and thoughts.
- **Plan time away from coverage.** Be sure your family has time away from media coverage. This is especially important when media coverage of a breaking story is constant. Consider family activities away from the television, radio, or Internet. Be sure your children also have enjoyable social activities planned in the time surrounding a traumatic event. Being with friends and family can have a very positive influence on children's abilities to cope and bounce back after traumatic events.

- **Clear up any misunderstandings.** Children, particularly younger children, may not always fully understand media coverage of a traumatic event. For example, young children may be unnecessarily concerned about the risk to their own or their family's safety. Younger children also may have greater difficulty separating fantasy from reality. It may be difficult for them to differentiate between scary movies and actual real-life events. Clarifications to correct misunderstanding and confusion can be reassuring. It is important not to make assumptions about what your children are thinking, but to find out what they are worried about and then discuss their worries with them.
- **Monitor adult conversations.** Although you may monitor media coverage, it is also important for you to monitor your adult conversations related to the traumatic event and coverage. Even when adults are not aware, children often listen and may not wholly understand what is being said. Overhearing adult conversations may increase worries and fears related to the traumatic event and lead to further confusion and distress.
- **Educate yourself.** Children may experience a variety of reactions in the face of traumatic events or reminders of such an event. Many children are resilient and cope well, but some children may have enduring difficulties. These reactions may vary with age and exposure to the event. Learn about the possible reactions in children. This will allow you to be aware of problems your children may be experiencing and make good decisions about if or when any help is needed. More information can be found at <https://www.nctsn.org> and <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter>.
- **Plan ahead.** Think about what you will do if stress reactions occur following a traumatic event, or the coverage of its anniversary. Identify resources in your community to gain information about managing reactions as well as when to ask for help. Identify expert resources in your community for help in working with children exposed to traumatic events.
- **Be prepared.** Know your community, school, and family plans in the event of an emergency or crisis event. By being prepared, you maintain some control of very difficult situations, and this increases your children's sense of security and safety. Ideas for preparedness can be found at <https://www.nctsn.org> and <https://www.ready.gov>.

When You and Your Children Are Part of the Story

- **Know your limits.** Decide whether or not it is a good idea for you or your children to talk to the media. It is natural to want to tell your story in the aftermath of a traumatic event, but the media may not be the best place to do so (especially for your children). Be sure to keep your children's needs as the priority when making decisions. If you do decide to talk with the media, think ahead about what you are willing and not willing to discuss. Remember, you have the ability to set limits with reporters.
- **Know the story's point.** Ask what the purpose of the story will be and its expected content or direction.
- **Talk it over.** Before the interview, discuss the process with your children. Assure them that there are no wrong answers. This will help reduce the worry that questions will not be answered appropriately. Give your children permission to say no if any questions make them uncomfortable.
- **Be there and set limits.** If your child is being interviewed, be present and available for your child. Let the reporter know that if your child becomes upset or distressed as a result of the interview, the interview may have to be stopped. Make sure the reporter is sensitive to children's needs and has had experience working with children in the past.
- **Discuss the story.** Following the interview, discuss the experience with your child, reinforcing the positive aspects of the interview.
- **Have a follow-up plan.** In the event that the interview upsets you or your child, be sure to have a plan for how you will support your child and how to seek help if necessary. Be prepared that the final media piece after it is produced may be very short, or may be edited in ways that do not reflect your experience.

For more information about child traumatic stress, please visit <https://www.nctsn.org>.

Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (n.d.). *Tips for parents and caregivers on media coverage of traumatic events*. Retrieved August 22, 2019, from <https://www.nctsn.org>

Mindfulness Exercises

Try these exercises to bring yourself into a more mindful state during this stressful time.

Breathing Exercises

Taking deep breaths can increase a sense of calm and contentment. When people experience anxiety, they take quick, shallow breaths. When they are feeling calm, breathing slows, and blood pressure and heart rate drop.

Belly Breathing

Try belly breathing when experiencing a stressful situation such as waiting at the doctor's office. Sit upright with your shoulders relaxed. Take one regular breath and notice where it goes: into the chest or abdomen. Inhale through the nose and imagine the air filling the abdomen; exhale. On subsequent breaths, increase the rise of the belly while inhaling more deeply. Repeat as many times as desired.

Focused Breathing

Try focused breathing when there is a need to quiet the mind. The back should be flat on the floor or upright in a chair. Begin with a deep belly breath. Inhale while saying a positive word or phrase such as, "I am happy." Exhale and imagine breathing out a negative quality, like stress or anxiety. Visualize breathing in a soothing color, or count while breathing in. In on 1, out on 2 up to 10 times, and then repeat the sequence. Do this for at least 5 minutes.

Alternate-Nostril Breathing

Try alternate-nostril breathing first thing in the morning or after a workout. Sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor. Bring the right hand up to the nose. Using the thumb, gently hold the right nostril closed, and inhale through the left nostril. Release the thumb, hold the left nostril closed with the ring finger, and then exhale through the right nostril. Now inhale through the right nostril, release the ring finger, close the right nostril with the thumb, and breathe out through the left nostril. Keep your head in neutral position. Start with 5 back-and-forth rounds and work up to 10.

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is a method for practicing mindfulness. It is a time to sit quietly, empty the mind, and have a feeling of inner peace. Meditation involves sitting and observing without judgment. This may sound simple but can be challenging in practice.

Meditation practice involves observing thoughts, feelings, and sensation without focusing on them. In meditation, one learns to let the natural inner activity of the mind and body continue on while watching emotions, thoughts, and sensations come and go. Through regular practice, meditators learn distress tolerance through letting go of the struggle with their internal experiences. Use the following guidelines to get started.

- Sit in a comfortable position.
- Close the eyes or focus on a spot.
- Mentally scan the body for tension.
- Breathe slowly, simply watching each breath come in and go out of the body.
- Repeat a mantra if desired.

If distracted, which is normal and inevitable, bring attention back to the breath. Other types of mindfulness practice include yoga, walking meditation, mindfully engaging in daily activities, and prayer.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Health. (2011, July). Mindfulness exercise. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/>