

## ***Managing Our Anxiety During Challenging Times***

We are all personally affected by the COVID-19 crisis in many different ways, but anxiety is likely an emotion we have shared as individuals and as a collective community. Many of us also have responsibility for our family, friends and/or workplace to lead them through the first pandemic of our lives. We need to know how to prepare and soothe ourselves and bring stewardship through peace of mind and a sense of calm. Anxiety and fear are running rampant with the uncertainty of this health crisis and is quickly unfolding to become a social and financial global shift. It's important that we have a solid foundation of skills and strategies to remain resilient during this time.

### **1. Accept and Allow your Feelings**

- All your feelings are normal and expectable - particularly anxiety, fear, and sadness. Do not be alarmed by your feelings at this time. Talk about your feelings and encourage expression of thoughts and feelings with those around you.

### **2. Stay Informed with Containment**

- Know the facts - stick to information that is research-based from a reliable source such as the WHO website and local health authorities' platforms (See links at end)
- A near constant stream of "breaking news" will cause anyone distress
- Be wary of statistics as these can be used to manipulate or distort information. Statistical information often requires complex understanding of what is being measured to interpret accurately
- Place limits on your exposure to media by updating yourself at specific times 1-2x/day
- If news is causing anxiety or distress - stop watching. Try to discern fact from rumour
- Seek information in order to take specific and practical steps to protect yourself and your loved ones
- Follow the protocols: Practise social distancing, wash your hands with soap frequently, stay close to home, and monitor any symptoms

### **Link for self-assessment:**

<https://covid19.thrive.health>

### **3. Attend to Self-Care**

- Eat healthfully (fresh food if possible), drink lots of water, and use supplements to boost your immune system if desired

- Get Extra Sleep if possible
- Move your body in ways that are fun and bring pleasure
- Connect with and spend time in nature. Get fresh air and sunlight on your skin
- Allow yourself to indulge in inspiring and soothing aspects of life such as music and art - have fun and enjoy yourself and relax as much as possible
- Don't be alone - spend time with those of you in your home who are social distancing together.
- Have frequent remote/virtual connections with friends and family. Maintain your social networks with technology
- Use coping strategies during and in-between work shifts
- Avoid unhelpful coping strategies such as tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs
- Use strategies that have helped you in the past - make a list!

#### **4. Use Positive Self/Other Talk**

- Focus on what you know is 100% true
- Stick to the facts and avoid thought distortions including Catastrophizing, Futurizing (otherwise known as “the what ifs”), Magnifying or Minimizing (threat or safety), Polarization (also known as “black and white thinking), Filtering, Over-Generalizing, and Jumping to Conclusions (among about 7 others!)
- Practise “convergent” vs. “divergent” thinking ex. “What am I going to do today to take care of myself and my loved ones” vs. “What’s going to happen with this world”
- Remind yourself to stay patient and that “This too Shall Pass”
- Seek out and find opportunities to amplify positive stories and images of local people who have recovered or who are supporting others
- Be aware of the phenomenon of stigma during this time. Stigmatizing others during stressful times is an unfortunate aspect of humans trying to distance themselves from the fear or problem (getting the virus). It is an “us vs. them” dynamic that artificially creates security by generating “not me” thoughts and feelings
- Avoid stigmatizing individuals or groups of individuals based on the spread of the virus.

#### **5. Stay Focused on What You can Control**

- Make a list of all the things you can control in your immediate life
- We can control what we do (behaviour) and what we think, which then determines how we feel. Aim to feel good each day!

## **6. Practise Relaxation Strategies**

- Deep Abdominal Breathing, Body Scan, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Visualization, Mindfulness, Meditation
- Use Grounding and Orienting techniques when feeling overwhelmed (long slow scan of environment noticing engaging aspects while creating rhythm with your body (tapping hands/feet) and maintaining focused contact with the earth/ground/supportive structures
- Use apps for guidance Ex. Calm, Insight Timer, HeadSpace...

## **7. Offer Assistance**

- Find out how you can help your family, friends, and community. Helping others during difficult times can help calm our own nervous system and provide a sense of relief and self-efficacy (like we can make a real difference and we have some power in our lives)
- Practising all of the above strategies will help you stay calm which will then serve as a tuning fork for others. Remember, we are all connected and we have the ability to affect others positively by feeling good inside ourselves
- Honour and acknowledge caretakers and healthcare workers supporting the community
- ALL SOLUTIONS NEED TO BE APPROACHED THROUGH A MENTAL HEALTH LENS: We need to protect everyone from poor mental health and chronic stress so that everyone has the capacity to fulfill their roles

## **8. Maintain Routine**

- Our bodies like routine and familiarity as it is extremely comforting. Stick to your typical schedule as closely as possible while incorporating the new health and wellbeing protocols
- Maintain or introduce novel, fun, or familiar engaging activities to create a positive atmosphere, continue important socialization, keep spirits high, and normalize
- When leading your families and workplaces, provide a lot of communication and reassurance about what will stay the same and exactly what to expect that will be different
- Provide abundant support and guidance during transitions/changes of routine at home and at work. Be particularly mindful of body language, tone, and facial expressions so

that the shifts and changes do not seem threatening or worrisome. Keep things the same as much as possible and be clear about “What we can count on”

***For Caretakers of Children:***

- Help children find positive ways to express disturbing feelings such as fear and sadness
- Engage in a creative activity (playing, drawing, singing, creating rhythm to help them
- Stay close emotionally and physically to foster safety and security. If separation needs to occur, ensure appropriate alternative care is in place and the child feels at ease. Even during separation, maintain frequent remote contact (at least 2x/day)
- It is common and typical that children may exhibit more attachment needs and even regress during stressful times and this can be more demanding for caregivers
- Discuss COVID-19 information using age-appropriate language and only providing necessary or requested information. Children will observe and emulate your behaviour and emotions and look for cues on how to manage themselves.
- Provide fun prompts (pictures/washing stations) to remind kids to wash their hands

***For Caretakers of Older Adults***

- Older adults - especially those in isolation and/or in cognitive decline will likely become more anxious, angry, stressed, agitated and withdrawn. Provide as much direct practical and emotional support using formal and informal networks
- Share simple facts about what is happening and clear information about how to reduce risk. Repeat the facts often with patience. Display the information in writing or pictures. Help them practise to ensure they understand and know how to perform risk reduction
- Encourage and facilitate healthy older adults with special strengths to volunteer in the community to help with peer support, wellness/neighbor checking, and childcare

**9. Be Creative and Collaborative about changes and transitions**

- Understand the facts about COVID-19 spread and limit changes to what is necessary in order to reduce fear and panic
- Have clear guidelines in your family and at work about how to conduct yourselves and what to expect
- Keep it simple. Let go of non-essential activities and focus on what is most important
- Adjust timelines and expectations: Under stress everything takes longer and tends to be less efficient. Be easy on yourself and others

- Use easily understandable ways to share messages with others - forms of communication that do not rely solely on written information as under stress some people need alternative methods of learning and remembering
- Orient your family/workplace on how to provide basic psychological first aid \*\*

## **10. Leadership**

- Ensure good quality and timely information updates
- Rotate workers from high stress to low stress functions frequently
- Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues. The buddy system helps provide support, monitor stress, and reinforce safety procedures
- Work in pairs as much as possible - especially if out in the community
- Initiate, encourage and, where possible, monitor work breaks
- Implement flexible schedules
- If you are a leader in your life: Be Visible and Present, Stay Calm Confident and Reassuring, Communicate the Facts, Role Model Protocols, Be Understanding

## **11. Look for the Opportunities**

- Even in a crisis or dark time, there is always light. Look for the opportunities in this situation
- Whenever possible, take advantage of a slower pace of life, focus on family/loved ones, the important essentials
- Look for opportunities to learn and grow from this experience, to improve upon systems, better ways of being with/treating others, and more effective methods of moving through everyday life
- Enjoy what you CAN DO: Spending time in nature (because many public spaces are closed), being home with loved ones and pets, taking care of yourself and others, and getting back to basics (playing games, reading, rest etc.)
- Use this time to push yourself to be more creative, collaborative, and aware of yourself and others
- Look out for the emerging positive outcomes of this global transition. For example, the global BioHazard Response has just undergone a massive overhaul and we are more informed, prepared and rehearsed than ever. New strategies and protocols are being created all the time as a result of this crisis. Nature is providing us with some important insights with re: to the impact of human behaviour. Since the shutdown of Italy, the

canals in Venice have cleared so that schools of fish can be seen and bird species have returned, including the swans. According to one source, the pollution rate in China decreased so dramatically during their shutdown that the lives saved from this will be greater than those lost from the virus. The earth is giving us signs that if we were to change our habits even slightly or for short periods of time, she can recover from our heavy imprint. Ideally, this experience will teach all of us something about how to come together as a community (local and global) in a way that we can heal the earth and each other.

**Find the latest information from WHO on where COVID-19 is spreading:**

**<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>**

**Advice and guidance from WHO on COVID-1:**

**<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> <https://www.epi-win.com/>**

**\*\* *Basic Psychological First Aid:***

*Provide Practical Care and Support that does not intrude*

*Assess basic needs and concerns*

*Help others address these (ex. food, water, information)*

*Listening, but not pressuring them to talk*

*Comforting and helping them to feel calm*

*Help others to connect to basic needs (info., services, social supports)*

*Protect others from further harm*

*Written by Kathlyn McHugh RCC, RSW*

*The Vitality Clinic*