# 7 science-based strategies to cope with coronavirus anxiety

By Jelena Kecmanovic

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As the SARS-CoV-2 virus continues its global spread and the number of diagnosed Covid-19 cases continues to increase, anxiety related to the outbreak is on the rise too.



Anxiety is part of life, but should not take over your life.

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As a psychologist, I am seeing this in my practice already. Although feeling anxiety in response to a threat is a normal human reaction, sustained high anxiety can undermine constructive responses to the crisis. People who already suffer from anxiety and related disorders are especially likely to have a hard time during the coronavirus crisis.

The following suggestions, based on psychological science, can help you deal with coronavirus anxiety.

## 1. Practice tolerating uncertainty

Intolerance of uncertainty, which has been increasing in the US, makes people vulnerable to anxiety. A study during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic showed that people who had a harder time accepting the uncertainty of the situation were more likely to experience elevated anxiety.

The solution is to learn to gradually face uncertainty in daily life by easing back on certainty-seeking behaviours.

Start small: Don't text your friend immediately the next time you need an answer to a question. Go on a hike without checking the weather beforehand. As you build your tolerance-of-uncertainty muscle, you can work to reduce the number of times a day you consult the internet for updates on the outbreak.

## 2. Tackle the anxiety paradox

Anxiety rises proportionally to how much one tries to get rid of it. Or as Carl Jung put it, "What you resist persists."

Struggling against anxiety can take many forms. People might try to distract themselves by drinking, eating or watching Netflix more than usual. They might repeatedly seek reassurance from friends, family or health experts. Or they might obsessively check news streams, hoping to calm their fears. Although these behaviors can help momentarily, they can make anxiety worse in the long run. Avoiding the experience of anxiety almost always backfires.

Instead, allow your anxious thoughts, feelings and physical sensations to wash over you, accepting anxiety as an integral part of human experience. When waves of coronavirus anxiety show up, notice and describe the experience to yourself or others without judgment. Resist the urge to escape or calm your fears by obsessively reading virus updates. Paradoxically, facing anxiety in the moment will lead to less anxiety over time.

## 3. Transcend existential anxiety

Health threats trigger the fear that underlies all fears: fear of death. When faced with reminders of one's own mortality, people might become consumed with health anxiety and hyperfocused on any signs of illness.

Try connecting to your life's purpose and sources of meaning, be it spirituality, relationships, or pursuit of a cause. Embark on something important that you've been putting off for years and take responsibility for how you live your life. Focusing on or discovering the "why" of life can go a long way in helping you deal with unavoidable anxiety.

## 4. Don't underestimate human resiliency

Many people fear how they will manage if the virus shows up in town, at work or at school. They worry how they would cope with a quarantine, a daycare closure or a lost paycheck. Human minds are good at predicting the worst.

But research shows that people tend to overestimate how badly they'll be affected by negative events and underestimate how well they'll cope with and adjust to difficult situations.

Be mindful that you are more resilient than you think. It can help attenuate your anxiety.

## 5. Don't get sucked into overestimating the threat

Coronavirus can be dangerous, with an estimated 1.4% to 2.3% death rate. So everyone should be serious about taking all the reasonable precautions against infection.

But people also should realize that humans tend to exaggerate the danger of unfamiliar threats compared to ones they already know, like seasonal flu or car accidents. Constant incendiary media coverage contributes to the sense of danger, which leads to heightened fear and further escalation of perceived danger.

To reduce anxiety, I recommend limiting your exposure to coronavirus news to no more than 30 minutes per day. And remember that we become more anxious when faced with situations that have no clear precedent. Anxiety, in turn, makes everything seem more dire.

## 6. Strengthen self-care

During these anxiety-provoking times, it's important to remember the tried-and-true anxiety prevention and reduction strategies. Get adequate sleep, exercise regularly, practice mindfulness, spend time in nature and employ relaxation techniques when stressed.

Prioritising these behaviors during the coronavirus crisis can go a long way toward increasing your psychological well being and bolstering your immune system.

## 7. Seek professional help if you need it

People who are vulnerable to anxiety and related disorders might find the coronavirus epidemic particularly overwhelming. Consequently, they might experience anxiety symptoms that interfere with work, maintaining close relationships, socializing or taking care of themselves and others.

If this applies to you, please get professional help from your doctor or a mental health professional. Cognitive behavioural therapy and certain medications can successfully treat anxiety problems.

Although you might feel helpless during this stressful time, following these strategies can help keep anxiety from becoming a problem in its own right and enable you to make it through the epidemic more effectively.

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