

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 behavioural, 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 Behaviour

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 stomach aches or diarrhoea
- 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 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 ill, 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 local health department, government agencies or an international organisation. These two organisations are credible sources of information about infectious disease outbreaks:

- **World Health Organization (WHO)**, <https://www.who.int>
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, <https://www.cdc.gov>

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.

- Recognise and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Recognise 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 behaviour 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 or helping others in need.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014, 21 October). *Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks* (Pub. No. SMA14-4885). Retrieved 23 January 2020 from <https://store.samhsa.gov>

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