

Dealing with Coronavirus Anxiety: Practical Tips During Social Distancing & Confinement

The threat of a serious respiratory illness which may result in death justifiably generates fear in most people. Yet influenza, which annually causes tens of thousands of deaths in America, barely registers in our awareness compared to the current coronavirus crisis. Why is this the case?

We are social creatures who tend to seek out others. As Americans we appreciate the "freedom of assembly" by gathering in restaurants, meeting halls, houses of worship, theaters, etc. However, this behavior is being curtailed for our own good.

The COVID-19 virus has a long incubation period which can yield many carriers unknowingly spreading this disease to others. While a carrier may not have serious symptoms, others, particularly the medically compromised and older individuals, face a much greater mortality risk if infected. Experts in public health ask all of us to change the established rules of our social conduct thus creating anxiety around identifying how we should behave. Large groupings of people should be avoided resulting in the many closures and cancellations of which you are surely aware. This disruption to regular life has created a sense of fear and discomfort for many.

This fear is actually helpful! This ancient emotion warns us of dangers, keeps us vigilant, healthy and alive. Take fear and use it to remind yourself to be safe. Think of your fear as a stimulus for healthy action. By engaging in healthy behaviors, we can feel safer and a sense of control during this tough time. Here are some practical tips to consider:

- 1) Confinement is about keeping you, family members and friends safe. It is highly advisable to remain in and about one's home as much as possible. This is simply to increase your distance from others who may have the virus. It is important to establish a daily routine of grooming, dressing and eating. This can help maintain a sense of stability and normalcy during this challenging time. Try to utilize your time at home to take on activities and tasks you have wanted to get to. Read a book, organize papers, prepare that work proposal, scan old photos into your computer, prep for an online meeting, call an old friend, paint a room, etc. Being contained does not mean you need to be asocial. Use your media to call, video-chat, text or email the people with whom you want to stay connected with. Use your time to be productive as well as stay entertained.
- 2) Social Distancing implies that when you have to go out, you should modify your behavior to do so safely. Many people need to travel to work and we all need to shop for food and other necessities. In public situations, avoid crowds, groups and close contact whenever possible. Immediately distance if someone is coughing near you. I have found that wearing disposable gloves is a useful cue to remind myself not to touch my face or eat from unwashed/unsanitized hands. Many supermarkets and restaurants are offering home delivery services. Take-out food is a great way to support local businesses which are suffering without their usual customer base.
- 3) Children need special attention when they are unable to go to school and participate in the activities of their normal routines. Explanations for children should be simple such as, "a really bad cold is going around and we want everybody to feel good by not spreading it around."

Normalize the experience of being home with statements of reassurance like, “sometimes these things happen and it will be alright.” Children, like adults, need to be occupied. Educational lessons may be provided in paper or online. Try other activities out of the videogame/social media/ tv norm. Consider planning a real, future trip with your children to a nearby city. Such planning would involve geography (maps), math (miles, hours away), history (sites to see), art/science (museums), etc. Try reading a book out loud with your children, or build a project together like a cardboard “castle” or ship. Board games, card games and crafts are always fun, as are artistic expressions through music, drawing and painting.

Coronavirus has caused many of us to feel anxious as the social rules of our world have temporarily changed. Taking control of your world will help you feel safer and more in control during this turbulent time.

Mitchell L. Schare, Ph.D., ABPP
Professor of Clinical Psychology
Director of the Hofstra Phobia & Trauma Clinic
Hofstra University