

Managing Stress in a Public Health Emergency

Stress and the Threat of a Pandemic Influenza

Living through the threat of a pandemic influenza – or even thinking about it - can be stressful. It is important to pay attention to your feelings and to take care of not only your physical, but your emotional health. Understanding common stress reactions will increase your ability to cope. You can also better help friends and family members handle their concerns.

Physical

When we are under stress, our bodies react. Be alert to whether these symptoms have changed noticeably from the way you felt before. Be sure to see a doctor about any significant changes as many stress reactions mimic major physical disorders and diseases.

Emotional

Often our emotional reactions are the most confusing. We may laugh unexpectedly or yell in anger. We may feel irritable and grumpy. We also may feel intense fear or have unexplained sadness and crying. Strong feelings that won't go away, last longer than a few weeks, or are interfering with normal functioning may be a symptom of depression, or anxiety and are a sign that you should seek professional help.

Mental

The stress of pandemic flu may affect your ability to think clearly, and make it harder to

pay attention, solve problems or remember. It does not mean that you are “crazy” or “losing your mind.” These are common reactions in times of high stress. They are signals to you to take action and care for yourself.

Behavioral

Some people burn “anxious energy” by pacing, fidgeting and other nervous habits. But some behaviors triggered by stressful events need to be stopped as they tend to make the situation worse. These things include increased smoking and drinking, blaming others, yelling, swearing, and taking their frustration out on others.

Promote Psychological First Aid to Reduce Your Stress

The psychological first aid tips listed below can help to reduce stress in yourself, your family, friends, and co-workers.

Children

- Involve children in family preparedness planning
- Provide predictable bedtime and family routines
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Monitor media exposure
- Provide extra comfort and attention

Teens

- Encourage discussion of pandemic influenza, good hygiene habits, and social distancing
- Avoid insistence on sharing feelings
- Rehearse family safety measures



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- Encourage communication with friends via phone, email, and text messaging

Adults

- Limit your exposure to graphic news stories
- Get information from timely reliable sources
- Exercise, eat well, and rest
- Talk to friends, or relatives and offer each other support
- Consider speaking with a mental health professional if your stress becomes too much for you to handle on your own

Practice Flexibility to Increase Your Resilience

During a pandemic flu situation, you may be asked to adjust your daily routine to accommodate the response by city, county, or state officials. Do your best to adjust and move on. Your cooperation of the restrictions will reduce your stress level while helping others get their work completed.

Contact your local public health agency for more information. If you need the phone number, please call MDH at 651-201-5000.

Adapted from Kane County Mental Health Council, Community Planning Guide “Making a Difference...Together.”