

# Managing Stress and the Threat of COVID-19

Updated 2/2/2021

This document has minor updates since Feb. 26, 2020 and an added link in the [Connect](#) section to the #StayConnectedMN Toolkit.

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## Stress and the threat of COVID-19

Living with the threat of a public health emergency like COVID-19 can cause a lot of stress. Dealing with the threat of COVID-19 is upsetting because it is outside the range of normal day-to-day experience. You may feel uneasy or be afraid that you and your loved ones may come into contact with the virus. At the same time, you may feel that you cannot handle the constant news about COVID-19, which changes fast and is often conflicting. While it is critical during this time to take care of your physical health, you also need to pay attention to your emotional health.

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## Recognize your stress reactions

It is important to recognize and watch your stress level.

### Physical reactions

- When you are under stress, your body reacts. You may feel very tired all the time and have low energy, sleep problems, headaches, muscle aches, a change in hunger, an increased heart rate, or an upset stomach. Be sure to check with your doctor about any big changes, as stress can have many of the same signs as major physical disorders and diseases.

### Emotional reactions

- You may feel anxious, uneasy, worried, afraid, or sad. You may cry easily or lose interest in things you once liked to do. You may also be in a bad mood or feel frustrated, irritable, angry, or helpless. Strong feelings that will not go away, that last longer than a few weeks, or that get in the way of normal day-to-day living may be signs of depression or anxiety and that you should get help from a mental health professional.

### Behavioral reactions

- Some behaviors that start because of stressful events must be stopped, because not only are they bad for your physical and mental health, they can make matters worse for others. Harmful

behaviors include, but are not limited to, increased need for nicotine or alcohol; substance abuse; gambling; bullying; blaming others; spreading rumors or unproven ideas; and ignoring public health and safety recommendations.

## Cognitive reactions

- The stress of COVID-19 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 signs for you to take action to care for yourself.

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## Psychological first aid

While physical first aid reduces body pain from an injury, psychological first aid is a way to ease the painful range of emotions and responses of people to high stress situations. Ways to help you lower stress in yourself and others follow below.

### Safety

- Doing what you can to keep yourself safe from getting COVID-19 can put your mind more at ease. This means wearing a mask in public places; washing your hands a lot; covering your cough; staying 6 feet away from others when not at home; staying home when you are sick; and getting vaccinated when able. Following COVID-19 health and safety recommendations from trusted local and state health professionals helps to reduce fear, stress, and misinformation, and improves community safety.
- Check for up-to-date COVID-19 health and safety guidance at [Protect Yourself & Others: COVID-19 \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html).

### Calm

- Stick to your normal day-to-day activities and routines as much as possible. Eat healthy; exercise; avoid nicotine, alcohol, and illegal drugs; do things that give you joy and make you laugh; and try to get enough sleep. Learn and practice ways to cope, such as deep breathing; forming positive mental images (visualizations); and muscle relaxation. Talk to a mental health professional if your stress level seems like more than you can handle.
- Connect with a free, trained crisis counselor 24/7, every day of the year at the Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990, or text TalkWithUs to 66746. Calls are private. Counselors are multilingual.

### Connect

- Stress is reduced during a crisis when we can connect with your friends and loved ones. Staying connected with supportive family members and friends can bring a sense of comfort and stability. Talking through concerns, thoughts, and feelings with others can also help us find useful ways of thinking about or dealing with a stressful situation. Reach out to family and friends by phone, text, or other virtual methods.
- Use the [#StayConnectedMN Toolkit \(PDF\) \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/suicide/documents/stayconnectedmntoolkit.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/suicide/documents/stayconnectedmntoolkit.pdf) in your organization or community to encourage healthy connections.

## Empowerment and self-efficacy

- You can reduce your stress by taking positive steps to protect yourself and your loved ones. Control time spent paying attention to news and social media about COVID-19. While it is important to stay aware of the situation, too much information will keep you in a heightened state of stress. Instead, focus on the positive things in your life and take action to control the things that you can. Develop a COVID-19 disaster kit so that you will have the supplies you need if you or loved ones become ill.
- Public health emergency disaster kit guidance can be found at [Ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov) (<https://www.ready.gov/pandemic>).

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## Resources

- [Disaster Mental/Behavioral Health and Emergency Preparedness](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/ep/behavioral/index.html) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/ep/behavioral/index.html>)
- Contact [nancy.j.carlson@state.mn.us](mailto:nancy.j.carlson@state.mn.us).



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