

# Managing Stress and the Threat of COVID-19

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Living through the threat of a public health emergency such as COVID-19 can be extremely stressful. Dealing with the threat of COVID-19 is upsetting because it is outside the range of a normal day to day experience. You may feel anxiety, or fear for yourself and your loved ones becoming exposed to the virus. At the same time, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the constant, rapidly changing, and often conflicting information provided by the media regarding the growing danger of COVID-19. While it is critical during this time to take care of your physical health, you also need to pay attention to your emotional health.

## Recognize Your Stress Reactions

It is important to recognize and monitor your stress level during a COVID-19 outbreak.

### Physical Reactions

- When you are under stress, your body reacts. You may experience low energy, exhaustion, sleep problems, headaches, muscle aches, appetite change, increased heart rate, or stomach upset. Be sure to check with your doctor about any significant changes as many stress reactions mimic major physical disorders and diseases.

### Emotional Reactions

- You may experience anxiety, worry, fear, sadness, tearfulness, and/or loss of interest in usual enjoyable activities. You may also feel frustration, irritability,

anger, or helpless. 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 mental health help.

### Behavioral Reactions

- Some behaviors triggered by stressful events need to be stopped because they can not only harm your physical and mental health, but they also make the situation worse for others. Harmful behaviors include, but are not limited to, increased dependence on nicotine or alcohol, substance abuse, gambling, bullying, blaming others, spreading rumors or conspiracy theories and ignoring public health and safety recommendations.

### Cognitive Reactions

- The stress of COVID-19 may affect your ability to think clearly, 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 to care for yourself.

## Psychological First Aid (PFA) Strategies

While physical First Aid is used to reduce physical pain from a body injury, Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a strategy to reduce the painful range of emotions and responses experienced by people exposed to high stress situations. The PFA strategies

provided below will help you to reduce stress in yourself, and others.

### Safety

- Practice basic cold and flu precautions by washing your hands thoroughly with soap and water, covering your cough, and staying home when you are sick. Follow COVID-19 specific health and safety guidance provide by your local and state health department. When following the recommendations of trusted health professionals, fear, stress and misinformation is reduced and community safety enhanced.
- Check for current COVID-19 health and safety guidance with the [MDH: Protecting Yourself from COVID-19](#)

### Calm

- Maintain your day-to-day normal activities and routine where possible. Eat a healthy, exercise, avoid nicotine, alcohol, and illegal drugs, cool your temper, do things that bring you joy and laughter, and try to get enough sleep. Learn and practice coping techniques such as deep breathing, visualizations, and muscle relaxation. Talk to a disaster behavioral health responder, or a mental health professional if your stress level seems overwhelming.
- Connect with a free multi-lingual confidential trained crisis counselor 24/7, 365-days-a-year at the Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746).

### Connect

- Stress is reduced during a crisis situation when we are able to connect with our friends and loved ones. Maintaining connections with supportive family and

friends can bring a sense of comfort and stability. Talking through our concerns, thoughts, and feelings with others can also help us find helpful ways of thinking about or dealing with a stressful situation. Consider creating a disaster communication plan so that you are able to connect with loved ones and support services during a crisis.

- Family/household communication plan templates are available at [Ready.gov](#)

### Empowerment & Self-Efficacy

- You can reduce your stress by taking positive steps to protect yourself and your loved ones. Control your exposure to news and social media reports about COVID-19. While it is important to stay aware of the situation, overexposure will keep you in a heightened state of stress. Instead, focus your attention on things that are positive in your life and take action over the things that you do have control over. Develop a COVID-19 disaster kit so that you will have the supplies you need if you or a loved one gets ill.
- Public health emergency disaster kit guidance can be found at [Ready.gov](#)

## For Additional Resources

Go to the [MDH Behavioral Health](#)

Minnesota Department of Health  
Center for Emergency Preparedness and Response  
625 Robert St. N  
PO Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
651-201-5700  
[nancy.carlson@state.mn.us](mailto:nancy.carlson@state.mn.us)  
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/ep/bhavioral/index.html>

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