

# How to Ease Stress During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Like many, your anxiety level may be high right now. These expert tips can help you feel calmer.

By Jessica Branch – Consumer Reports  
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We are a nation physically separated from each other but united by stress and worry when it comes to our health and that of loved ones. Every day, we head into battle, working to keep our homes stocked with food and other needed items, strategizing about money, and trying hard not to focus on the uncertain future.

Not surprisingly, many of us are also scared, frustrated, grieving, and quite likely, anxious.

In a nationally representative CR survey of 2,164 U.S. adults conducted between April 2 and 14, 76 percent of Americans said they were extremely or very concerned about the widespread transmission of COVID-19—the disease caused by the coronavirus—and an additional 17 percent were moderately concerned.

It may help to know that this anxiety so many of us are feeling is a response to stress, a situation we perceive as dangerous, challenging, or unfamiliar.

“Some stress response is normal,” says Dana Rose Garfin, Ph.D., assistant adjunct professor at the Sue & Bill Gross School of Nursing at the University of California at Irvine, who studies how negative health events and community disasters affect health. “It reminds you to be on guard leaving the house, to remember not to touch your face. You want that to kick in.”

But when stress is constant, as it is for many people right now, it can lead to feelings of anxiety, or in some people, hike the risk of an anxiety disorder.

Both may cause shortness of breath, chest pain, heart palpitations, nagging worry about the future, agitation, restlessness, trouble sleeping, weight gain, and ruminating—rolling the same thoughts over in your mind repeatedly.

Though stress and anxiety may seem inescapable at the moment, all the experts we spoke with said you can take steps to reign them both in. "You can learn resilience," says Shevaun D. Neupert, Ph.D., a psychology professor at North Carolina State University. But in the current situation, experts say, you may need to think slightly outside the box. Here are traditional strategies along with some newer actions that may soothe your mood.

### **The Basics: Eating, Sleeping, Exercise**

Getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and eating a healthy diet can help you manage stress, reduce anxiety, and maintain a strong immune system. These goals may seem unreachable when you're stressed out, but they don't have to be.

It's easy right now to eat for emotional reasons, particularly if you're prone to that, which most of us are, according to Joyce A. Corsica, Ph.D., director of outpatient psychotherapy and director of bariatric psychology at Rush University in Chicago. Before you give in to a food craving, ask yourself whether you're really hungry or whether you're actually frustrated, sad, or lonely. Once you identify the feeling, it's easier to consider better choices, Corsica says. Here, other strategies for reinforcing healthy eating.

Whether you go to the gym regularly or like to walk, jog, or ride a bike outside, your exercise regimen has probably been disrupted, too. That means you're probably not getting your usual stress-relieving dose of the feel-good neurotransmitters endorphins that exercise provides. But most areas still allow solitary outdoor walks and runs, and today, there are more ways to exercise indoors than ever. And you may not need a whole lot of physical activity to improve your mood; even a 15-minute walk can make a difference.

And though it's not surprising that stress can keep you from sleeping well, a lack of sleep and an abundance of stress can create a vicious cycle: lying in bed awake can lead you to ruminate even more, and those swirling thoughts can further keep you from dozing off.

Basic bedroom sleep hygiene—keeping the room cool and dark, staying off electronics before bed—is a good place to start. Some sleep apps may be helpful as well, by blocking out outside noise, for instance.

## **Breathe ... Deeply**

Stressed-out people tend to take quick, shallow breaths, which further exacerbates the fight-or-flight response.

Interrupting that cycle through a conscious effort to breathe slowly and deeply—aiming for five to six deep breaths per minute—just for a quarter-hour or so a day is a surprisingly effective way to relieve feelings of anxiety and stress.

“Deep breathing slows down your physiological stress response,” Garfin says.

Corsica recommends diaphragmatic breathing, a form of slow, deep breathing that involves a purposeful expansion and contraction of the diaphragm and belly. A small study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2017 found that people who engaged in 15 minutes of diaphragmatic breathing 20 times over 8 weeks showed improved attention and mood, and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, compared with a group who didn't do the breathing sessions.

Want to try? The Cleveland Clinic is one source for online instruction in the technique. The University of Michigan's Michigan Medicine provides video instruction.

## **Focus on the Short-Term**

It's hard right now not to wonder how the pandemic will resolve, but thinking shorter-term has been found to be a more useful way to handle the stress, according to a study led by Neupert and published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

“My lab's study found the best recipe for trying to deal with everyday stressors is to try to simultaneously plan ahead about what you can control and stay in the moment mindfully,” she says. “That means recognizing what's going on in the present without trying to change it. That's what we found was the best combination for resilience to stress.”

These findings might be especially relevant now, she says. Mindfulness—staying focused on the present—has long been known to help reduce stress, and there are techniques you can use to get better at it, such as yoga (you can search for "yoga for anxiety" or "restorative yoga" online, and if you're new to yoga, here's how you can get started) and meditation (the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center provides free online guided meditations).

Mapping out and following a plan for the week or just the next day can also help, by giving you a better sense of control, experts say. Clinical psychologist Paula A. Madrid, Psy.D., of New York City, recommends creating a daily schedule of simple, reasonable actions to take:

call a friend, try a new recipe, work in the garden. If you're working from home, shower and dress, says UC Irvine's Garfin.

## **Look to a Positive Future**

It may feel like we've all spent an eternity social distancing, but the pandemic will eventually end, Madrid points out. And while there's no way to know what details of your life may change permanently, it's fine to put your imagination to work in a positive way.

"Project your mind to the future, to a year or even a few months from now, to give you a sense of relief from the present," Madrid says.

Planning a future winter vacation or figuring out the details of your next landmark anniversary party can remind you that there are happy activities to look forward to down the road.

Working on projects or skills that you can use after the pandemic—learning a language, taking an online programming class, or picking up that guitar again—is also helpful, says Corsica: "Tasks that distract you in the here and now but also benefit you in the future are wonderful."

## **Keep Up Key Connections**

Whatever communities are most important to you—whether it's your religious congregation, gym buddies, or book group—try to stay in touch.

You may not be going out, but technology today provides us with multiple ways to connect with other people. For instance, your gym or house of worship may be holding livestream or recorded sessions online. And you can "see" friends and family on your smartphone, tablet, or computer by using video conferencing services like Google Hangouts, Skype, or Zoom, many of which offer free versions (be aware, though, of potential privacy concerns).

If you miss catching a favorite show with a friend, gizmos like Google Chrome's free Netflix Party extension let you share that experience long-distance, too. Playing online group games like Words with Friends can also help you feel connected.

"Try to find whatever ways you feel comfortable with to stay socially connected," says Neupert. "Reach out via phone, text, video conference when you find yourself missing a social connection or feeling lonely."

That said, you may feel you're getting too much contact with others, especially if your

family is large and your home is small. “You don’t usually spend this much time with anyone,” Garfin points out. Make sure to carve out private time for yourself, and let each member of your family do the same.

## **Limit Your Intake of News**

Watching and reading endless news stories about the pandemic? Getting accurate information is crucial for well-being during quarantine, according to a review of research published in February’s *The Lancet*. Having the right info about the real risks of contracting COVID-19 and the reasons for self-quarantining and social distancing can also help keep you from catastrophizing, experts says.

At the same time, too much information—even if it's correct—can be overwhelming. How much is too much? Madrid’s rule of thumb is “Do not watch the news more than an hour a day.”

And limit the number of media options to those that you really need. Stick with trusted, science-backed sources like the CDC and news from your state or local government and health department sites, which can advise you on issues such as park closings or transit changes in your area.



## **Find a Way to Nature**

Feeling a connection with nature has real, restorative effects on your sense of well-being and, according to a 2019 study from University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, even 20 minutes can measurably reduce levels of stress hormones.

That’s especially true if you can get a little exercise while you’re outside. “It’s helpful to take walks for mental and physical health within social distancing guidelines,” Garfin says.

But if you're stuck indoors, research suggests that soaking in a view of a natural setting—trees, a lawn, a garden—can reduce stress symptoms, as can exposure to household plants or herb gardens. Even sitting near a window that provides sunlight can help improve your outlook and sleep quality, which in turn can ease feelings of anxiety. And a small 2015 study from the Netherlands found that gazing at photos of nature helped people recover from stressful events. No pictures of forests or fields on hand? Try a virtual tour of a national park or live cams of waterscapes.

## **Do Good to Feel Good**

Hardship can be easier to bear when you feel it's for the good of the larger community, according to the authors of The Lancet review about quarantines.

Research also shows that giving to others in some way—whether it's sewing masks, food shopping for an elderly neighbor, or talking a not-so-tech-savvy friend through setting up FaceTime—can make you feel happier and less stressed, Neupert notes. (Here, a rundown of ways to help.) "And it's a two-way street," she adds. "People you reach out to can benefit you, too."

## **Know When to Get Expert Help**

Some of us may need, or simply want, more support in coping with anxiety or sadness. "If you realize that your thoughts, behaviors, or feelings are preventing you from feeling like you're functioning or able to get through a day, that's a sign to reach out," says Neupert, including "if you're having trouble getting out of bed, or you've lost interest in activities, or you feel really hopeless."

The National Alliance of Mental Illness has a long list of mental health resources, including hotlines and warmlines—for non-emergency situations. The APA has a resource list as well, along with advice for families of those who are struggling emotionally.

Seek help right away if you've thought of harming yourself or others. If you don't have a mental health provider, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255, which offers free, confidential help.