



# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC & MANAGING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have grown weary and discouraged. Even with the promise of vaccines, the weight of the virus is still a heavy burden.

In addition to the physical toll that COVID continues to inflict, medical professionals are also concerned about a mental health crisis they say has been underway for months and could have long-lasting effects. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in August 2020 that symptoms of depression had increased four-fold. In a group of adults surveyed, their symptoms of anxiety have tripled compared to the previous year.

Mental health resources are stretched thin due to the increased demand, in addition to the reassignment of some behavioral health care workers and facilities to address COVID-related needs.

Many people's lives have been turned upside down due to illness, job loss, work changes, additional childcare responsibilities, and lack of physical contact.

These disruptions can result in increased stress, fear, and worry, affecting every aspect of life. If you are suffering psychologically during this difficult time, be assured you are not alone and know there is help available.

## Symptoms of COVID-Related Stress

An important first step in managing mental health issues is to recognize symptoms. Common symptoms of COVID-related stress and anxiety, according to the CDC, include the following:

- Difficulty sleeping or experiencing nightmares
- Changes in appetite, energy, interests, or desires
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach problems, body pains, or skin rashes
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Worsening of mental health conditions or a mental health condition relapse
- Increased use of tobacco, alcohol, or other substances

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms or know someone who is, there are things you can do to relieve stress and manage everyday tasks and responsibilities better. Talk with your Human Resources department, or benefits administrator, they will be able to provide you with information on mental health benefits through your insurance or your employee assistance program (EAP).

## Healthy Ways to Cope with COVID Stress

While we cannot make the coronavirus disappear, we can continue to do our part in slowing the spread. We can slow the spread by wearing masks, social distancing, limiting close contact to the people we live with, and practicing good hygiene. There are coping methods to help deal with ongoing COVID-related stress and anxiety. The CDC suggests the following ways to help manage your COVID stress.

**Take screen breaks.** Constant monitoring of pandemic news can be upsetting. Avoid the temptation to spend hours monitoring the news, checking in just a couple of times a day instead. Limit time spent on social media, as well.

**Get enough exercise.** Chronic stress can make you feel tired and lethargic, but as hard as it might be to get going, exercising of any kind can renew your energy. When weather permits, try to get outside for at least a few minutes. Take a walk down the street or around the block, enjoying the fresh air as you go. If you're stuck inside, practice stretching, gentle chair yoga, jogging in place, stair climbing, or simply walking in your home. Just be careful not to overdo it and practice safely.

**Pay attention to what you eat.** Certain foods, including fatty fish like salmon, trout, or sardines; eggs; yogurt; and green tea, are thought to help manage stress and anxiety.

**Get enough sleep.** Stress can wreak havoc on our sleeping patterns. Ways to improve your sleep would be to enjoy a relaxing activity before bed, keep your bedroom quiet and at a comfortable temperature, and remove electronics from your space. Going to bed and getting up at the same time each day can also improve sleep habits.

**Stay away from substances.** Resist the temptation to use alcohol, tobacco, or other substances to cope with stress. A cup of herbal tea or a brisk walk may help you resist the urge to drink or smoke. If you are concerned about your substance use, there are resources available to help you. Talk to your primary care provider or contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration hotline at 1-800-662-HELP.

**Continue with your health care.** Don't skip routine preventative measures like cancer screenings or getting a flu shot unless your doctor advises differently.

**Stay connected with others.** While it's difficult to be separated from loved ones, try to connect by phone, mail, or virtually with friends and relatives. If you are part of a faith community, ask what resources may be available. If you feel you need help managing stress or depression, reach out to your primary care physician, who is there to help you.

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## The Long-Term Effect

According to researchers, mental health issues caused by the pandemic could be long-lasting. Ongoing stress and anxiety can lead to severe depression. People who contracted the virus, lost a friend or family member, or were regularly exposed to it are at increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Health care providers are among those who may be more likely to suffer from PTSD. According to the American Psychiatric Association, it can result in long-lasting problems such as flashbacks, nightmares, and feelings of anger, sadness, or fear. There also is the concern that people who turned to alcohol or other substances to self-medicate during the pandemic will struggle with long-term addiction as a result.

It is unknown how the pandemic will affect children and teens who were displaced from their schools and missed important life events. Experts say feelings of sadness, loss, and anger are common and could lead to depression. Those who lost jobs also may be prone to resulting mental health issues.

## Staying Hopeful

It often seems like life will never be the same. Most experts are optimistic that as more people get vaccinated, and warmer weather allows us to be outside again, there will be fewer and fewer COVID cases. While you might feel discouraged, it is important to try to remain optimistic and hopeful.

Think of something you are looking forward to, such as a birthday, visit with a friend, or simply watching flowers coming up as spring approaches. Remember that longer, warmer days are ahead, and the pandemic will not last forever.