

# Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

CAMH Logo

<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19#coping>

- Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic
- By Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Back to top

CAMH logo

- FAQs
- Coping with stress & anxiety
- Quarantine & isolation
- Stigma & prejudice

Back to top

*The effort to address COVID-19 is both extremely important for us all and poses a range of challenges on individuals and families as they respond to the demands of the situation. The situation is stressful for everyone and it is normal to be anxious and worried. This site is designed to provide information and suggestions about how best to cope in this difficult time. It is not intended to be a resource for people who require screening for COVID-19 or are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact 911 immediately or present to your nearest emergency department. For up-to-date information about Ontario's COVID-19 response, please visit the [provincial government's COVID-19 information page](#) .*

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is an infection caused by a coronavirus related to the common cold virus. Those affected by COVID-19 can exhibit symptoms ranging from mild to severe, similar to the cold and flu, such as fever, cough and difficulty breathing. They can also experience nausea and diarrhea. In some cases, those who have COVID-19 may show no symptoms. For more information on COVID-19, please visit the [Government of Canada's coronavirus information page](#) .

Where can I get reliable and accurate information on COVID-19?

- The World Health Organization
- Health Canada
- Ontario Ministry of Health

- [Your local public health unit](#)

How do I talk to my children about COVID-19 and its impact?

This time may be very challenging for children and adolescents, some of whom might not understand the reasons for school closures and the cancellation of extracurricular activities. In addition, they are likely to be bombarded with information through social media and from their friends that can cause anxiety and alarm.

Young people may also sense the anxiety of their parents, and worry about their own health and that of other family members. For example, young children may not understand why they can no longer hug a grandparent.

Children need to be reassured in a way that is age appropriate. [Click here for some tips on how to talk to your children and family.](#)

How can I support a loved one who is very anxious about the COVID-19 pandemic?

Everyone responds differently to the effects of a pandemic. If you have a family member or friend who is worried or scared, try to listen to and empathize with them. Some people may want to vent their fears or anger at the situation, while others may want to problem solve.

With the person's permission, share the facts in a simple and straightforward way and ask how you can help. Stick to the facts and offer them resources if they are open to it (see ["Coping with stress and anxiety"](#)). Check in with the person from time to time to make sure their stress levels and mental state are not getting worse. Always keep the lines of communication open.

At the same time, ensure you take care of yourself, and limit the amount of time you devote to supporting others. It is okay to say that you also need a break from fear and anxiety. Sometimes the support may be mutual, in which case it is important to respect each other's ability to help.

I have a friend who can't stop talking about COVID-19 and wants to process worst case scenarios. How do I deal with this?

Sometimes sharing stresses with colleagues, friends or family members can be helpful. However, be mindful that others may be feeling very stressed or anxious themselves, and may not be coping well. Hearing about your anxieties may make them more anxious.

When others share information with you, their facts may not always be accurate — keep this in mind when you hear something about the virus that is not endorsed by Health Canada or the World Health Organization. You may want, as much as possible, to limit contact with people who seem to have difficulty talking about anything but COVID-19 and worst-case scenarios.

How can I deal with feeling lonely while in self-isolation?

Being isolated can be very lonely. Check out our section on coping while in isolation. Remember though to continue to isolate from your friends and family, to ensure the virus does not spread to others. See [Public Health Ontario's guide to self-isolation](#) .

How do I manage my stress and anxiety while I await my test results?

If you have been tested due to contact with someone or because of your symptoms, waiting for the results can be very anxiety provoking. This may be especially true if you are in self-isolation or quarantine. The results usually are available within a day or two, but this can vary depending on your area. Ask the provider who took the swabs when you should expect the results.

While waiting for the results, focus on what you can do to manage and monitor your symptoms. Most people with COVID-19 have only mild symptoms. In this case, all you need to do is self-isolate for the amount of time you are told. Follow the advice of your health care provider on how to monitor and manage symptoms. Most importantly, follow their instructions on when to go (and when not to go) to the hospital.

For more support in coping with stress and anxiety, check out [our coping guide here](#).

I feel anxious because I have tested positive for COVID-19. What can I do?

It is normal to feel anxious about being diagnosed with the virus. For your physical and mental health and well-being, you should come up with a coping plan to strengthen your resilience and reduce the impact of this stressful situation. Helpful strategies may involve [tackling the problems you are facing](#) in a structured way; [changing how you are thinking](#) about what you are going through; or working on skills such as relaxation and mindfulness. [Here is a resource](#) that can help you to build your wellness plan.

I have tested positive for COVID-19 and my friends and family are avoiding me. What can I do?

Your family and friends are probably both concerned about your health and trying avoid spreading the virus. There are various ways to stay connected while in isolation. Your loved ones might benefit from information to help them support you while in [isolation](#), and to be ready to reconnect in person after you have been medically cleared.

In some cases, stigma about COVID-19 may unfortunately mean that some people do avoid or judge you, out of fear and uncertainty about the virus. This can make your loneliness and anxiety worse, and lead to feelings of guilt. Remember that you are not to blame – anyone can get the virus. Reach out to someone you trust, and talk about how you are feeling. Our section on [stigma and prejudice](#) includes some other tips on what you can do in this situation.

# Coping with stress and anxiety

## Coping with stress and anxiety

The COVID-19 pandemic can cause stress and anxiety because it is disrupting normal life for many people all at once. While it is important to be informed and to take action to limit the spread of infection, the amount of information and attention on this topic can increase stress and anxiety.

### Strategies to maintain your mental wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic

What has worked for you before that helps manage your stress and anxiety? Many of those strategies you can still rely on. One challenge is that the response to pandemics can disrupt routines; people may stop the activities they use to keep well (e.g., exercise) and engage in activities that can make things worse (e.g., drink more alcohol).

Here are some ideas that might be helpful. Some might apply to you and some might not – or they may need to be adapted to suit you personally, your personality, where and with whom you live, or your culture. Please be creative and experiment with these ideas and strategies.

Accept that some anxiety and fear is normal

COVID-19 is a new virus and we are still learning about it. The uncertainty about the virus and the changes that are unfolding can make most people feel a bit anxious. This is normal, and it actually can help motivate us to take action to protect ourselves and others, and to learn more about the pandemic.

Seek credible information

Stay informed by checking information provided by experts and credible sources. A lot of information is disseminated about COVID-19 every day, but not all of it is accurate. Some reliable sources include:

- [The World Health Organization](#)
- [Health Canada](#)
- [Ontario Ministry of Health](#)

Avoid unfamiliar websites, or online discussion groups where people post information from non-credible sources or share stories which may or may not be true. Be wary of what is posted on social media, and always consider the reliability of information you see on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

## Assess your personal risk

It is helpful to get a clear and accurate sense of your personal risk. We recommend using the following credible sources of information.

- [The World Health Organization](#)
- [Health Canada](#)
- [Ontario Ministry of Health](#)
- [Your local public health unit](#)

## Find a balance: Stay tuned in, but know when to take a breather

While staying informed is helpful, too much information may not provide extra benefit.

Limit checking sources to once per day or less if you can. This includes reading or listening to news stories about COVID-19. Even though things are shifting rapidly, daily changes are not likely to affect how you should manage your risk.

## Bring an intentional mindset to unplugging

- Set aside some time to unplug from all electronics, including phone, tablets and computers. Disconnect for a while from social media outlets. You may need to schedule this to make sure it happens.
- Do something fun and healthy for yourself instead (e.g., read, work, exercise).

## Deal with problems in a structured way

All the issues you might need to address during this pandemic situation may feel overwhelming. It can be useful to identify which things are actually problems that need to be solved or addressed, and which are just worries that are not necessarily grounded in reality. [Click here](#) for some steps you can take to resolve issues that come up for you.

## Remember that you are resilient and be careful with the "What ifs"

Our stress and anxiety generally cause us to focus on negatives and trigger "What if" questions, such as "How will I cope if I get sick?" or "How will I manage if I have to self-isolate?" They can also drive us to think about worst case scenarios.

In stressful situations, people often overestimate how bad the situation can get, but underestimate how well they will be able to cope. People are resilient and have coping skills they use every day.

- Think of difficult or challenging situations you have encountered that you were able to manage. Even if things weren't perfect, what did you do to cope with the situation?
- Remind yourself that you can handle stress and that if you feel you need support, you can reach out to family, friends, colleagues or professionals.

- Remember our collective resources – from excellent health care and public health response systems to strong and resilient communities. Try to replace catastrophic thoughts with something like, "This is definitely a difficult time, but we will get through it together."
- Don't underestimate what you are able to do when faced with challenges.

### Challenge worries and anxious thoughts

High levels of anxiety and stress are usually fuelled by the way we think. For example, you might be having thoughts such as "I am going to die" or "There is nothing I can do" or "I won't be able to cope." These thoughts can be so strong that you believe them to be true.

However, not all our thoughts are facts; many are simply beliefs that we hold. Sometimes we have held these beliefs for so long that they feel like facts. How do we know if our thoughts are true or are just beliefs we've grown used to? [Click here](#) to work through an exercise to challenge your worries and anxious thoughts.

### Decrease other stress

COVID-19 is probably not the only source of stress in your life right now. Consider addressing other sources of stress to reduce your overall level of anxiety. You can use [problem solving steps outlined above](#), challenge your thinking, practicing relaxation and meditation or other strategies you may have used in the past that have helped.

### Practice relaxation and meditation

Relaxation strategies and meditation can help reduce or manage your levels of stress and anxiety. There are many options to consider:

- formal meditation practice such as yoga or mindfulness meditation
- informal or self-help approaches such as books and online videos
- relaxation through any activity that you find enjoyable and relaxing.

Choose an activity that works for you and that you are likely to continue doing. Start slowly and gradually work toward a regular practice.

### Seek support

Social distancing does not mean you should break off all contact from loved ones. Being alone can lead to spending too much time thinking about the current situation, resulting in increased stress and anxiety. It can be helpful to connect with people who are a positive influence when you are feeling stressed.

- Reach out and get support from these people – either in person or through phone or video calls or text messaging.

- Look for formal support, either online or by phone, that can help you during high-stress times. For example, you may turn to distress lines, online support groups, or resources in your community such as religious institutions.

Try to avoid people who are negative when talking about current affairs or events, or who generally increase your stress and anxiety.

### Be kind to yourself

The strategies mentioned here can take some time to work. We need to practise them regularly and in different situations. Don't be hard on yourself if you forget to do something or if you are not feeling better right away.

### Eat healthily

Eating healthily can help us feel better. When we are stressed, many people might choose comfort foods that are not actually good for stress and overall health. As much as is possible, choose more fruits and vegetables, and drink lots of water.

### Avoid substance use – including smoking and vaping, caffeine and alcohol

Some people use substances, including smoking or vaping, to cope with stress, anxiety and depression. This may appear to help reduce stress initially, but in the long run can make things worse. The brain and body develop a tolerance to the numbing effects of these substances, and people have to compensate by using more and more. That leads to additional harms and often delays the recovery from the stress. Moreover, in those at risk, substance use can lead to an addiction or a relapse in those who are in recovery. If you are in recovery and experiencing stress, it is important to reach out for help before a relapse occurs. In general:

- Reduce or stop using any non-prescribed substance if you can do so safely.
- Take prescription medications as prescribed.
- Try to reduce or avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Seek out professional help if you cannot do it alone.

### Get proper rest and sleep

Getting enough sleep can both help reduce the amount of stress we experience and prepare us to better manage stress. Here are some quick strategies to help you get a good night's sleep.

- Keep a consistent sleep schedule. This going to bed and getting up at the same time each day (including weekends).
- Practise relaxation or meditation before bedtime.
- Schedule physical activity for earlier in the day.

- Practice sleep hygiene: keep your bedroom cool, avoid any light in your room, use your bed for sleep (not reading, watching TV, using your phone, etc.), and get out of bed if you don't fall asleep after half an hour).
- Talk to your doctor if these strategies don't work — there may be other issues affecting your sleep.
- If you drink caffeine or alcohol, avoid them late in the day.
- Avoid naps during the day if these interrupt your sleep at night.

### Stay active

Physical activity is a great way to reduce stress and anxiety, and improve our mood and overall health. If you are self-isolated, find ways to exercise in your home. For example, use your stairs or follow an exercise video on YouTube.

### **I still can't cope. Now what?**

Sometimes, even after trying to reduce our stress and anxiety, we may continue to struggle. If you still feel significant distress around COVID-19 and feel you are not coping well, you may need extra support from someone like your family doctor or a psychologist, psychotherapist, social worker or other health professional.

### **Assess your stress levels**

Understanding your stress levels can help you make a plan for how to manage your stress and anxiety. When some people experience too much stress, they may feel a loss of control, excessive worry and other negative emotions. By managing our stress and anxiety, we can maintain positive mental health as the pandemic evolves.

The surveys below, when taken together, tell you how much stress you are experiencing, if it appears to be getting excessive, and your coping capacity. You can then decide how you want to use these answers to help you cope with the anxiety and fear being caused by this pandemic and social distancing.

*Please note that these resources are offered for educational purposes only and are not intended to diagnose any mental illness.* If you have already been diagnosed with a mental illness such as depression and/or anxiety, many of your symptoms might overlap with, or be worsened by, your feelings about the pandemic. If possible, reach out to your provider to make sure you are not experiencing a relapse, and adjust any treatment as required.

### **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)\***



How stressful do you perceive events in your life to be? This scale helps to answer this. For example, people with higher scores on the PSS might be more vulnerable to symptoms of depression from stressful life events.

[TAKE THE TEST HERE](#)

### **Stress Can Drag You Down\***

How well are you coping with the stress in your life? A higher score means you are likely handling stress better than those with a lower score.

[TAKE THE TEST HERE](#)

### **GAD-7\***

The GAD-7 is a tool that screens for symptoms of anxiety affecting several parts of your life, also known as generalized anxiety. It is not used to diagnose, but to assess the severity of your symptoms.

[TAKE THE TEST HERE](#)

*\*The data is used to score your results and will not be stored for any purpose. You may take the test as many times as you like.*

[Return to top of page](#)

## **Quarantine and isolation**

### **Quarantine and isolation**

Quarantine (separating well people who have been exposed to the virus, to see if they become ill) and self-isolation (separating people who have symptoms so that they can't infect others, including close family members) are sometimes needed to prevent the spread of a virus in a community including close family members.

[Public Health Ontario's guide to self-isolation](#) gives advice on how to proceed if you are in this situation.

### **Dealing with isolation**

People placed in quarantine or self-isolation may experience a wide range of feelings, including fear, anger, sadness, irritability, guilt or confusion. They may find it hard to

sleep. Some people might feel relieved. Humans are social creatures and need connection to others to thrive, which can make isolation challenging. The following suggestions may help you through this challenging time:

### Keep busy

- Create and stick to a schedule for work, leisure, chores, meals, physical activity and sleep.
- Many people will not be able to work when they are quarantined. Explore if your employer will allow you to work from home and attend meetings via teleconference or videoconference. Keeping busy with day-to-day activities can be helpful. Loss of income is a major source of fear and not everyone has a supportive work environment.
- Catch up on other tasks or projects at home.
- Do things that you normally love to do (e.g., crosswords, puzzles, reading, TV shows, listening to music).

### Social interaction

- Think of ways to stay connected to other people – by videoconference, phone, chat or text. Talking to others and sharing how you are feeling is important. So is asking for help when you're feeling overwhelmed.

### Self-care

- As much as is possible, prepare healthy meals and drink lots of water.
- Stay physically active: go online to find exercises you can do at home with no equipment.
- Practise relaxation or meditation.

Here is more information on [coping under stress](#).

### Prepare ahead

- Stock up on groceries and supplies ahead of time if possible, including dried pasta, rice, canned foods, hygiene products, medications and toiletries.
- Plan ahead with family or friends to get additional food and supplies if you are quarantined.
- Use delivery services to order groceries. Your local grocery store may offer this service.
- Ask your pharmacy if they can deliver medications you need, or plan ahead to make sure you have enough medication to last through your quarantine. If you take

opioids to treat either chronic pain or addiction, make sure that the pharmacist and prescriber are available to ensure an uninterrupted supply of your medication.

- Keep a list of important numbers, including your doctor, public health, pharmacy and hospital.

## Supporting a loved one

The U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has an excellent resource on keeping your home safe if you or any family member is in self-isolation or quarantine. Most spread of COVID-19 is between those who have close contact, so it is critical to create distance between the person at risk and others in the household. Unfortunately, this can worsen feelings of loneliness or abandonment, especially for someone who has a pre-existing mental illness or developmental problem.

Here is how you can support a loved one:

- Try to use a phone or computer to communicate instead of talking face-to-face.
- Be a good listener.
- With permission, provide factual information without getting into an argument.
- Ask what they make of the information you shared.
- Ask about their general health, food they might need, tasks that need to be done and other ways you might help them.
- Help them stay distracted with work, hobbies, music, movies and other activities.
- Help them structure the day and encourage them to limit the amount of news they consume.
- If they have a pre-existing mental illness, make sure they have access to their medications and that their condition is not getting worse.
- Connect them to their health care provider or any reliable and validated online support service (e.g. [Big White Wall](#) in Ontario).

If you or your loved one are concerned about new symptoms, please follow your [local health authority's guidance for accessing care](#) .

## Stigma and prejudice

### Stigma and prejudice

[Stigma](#) is a negative stereotype or negative association about people with an illness. Prejudice is a negative stereotype about a group, such as racism. The current COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a rise in stigma and discrimination against people who have the

virus; people from countries where the virus originated or are considered hot zones; people who have travelled recently; or even those who it is believed have come in contact with someone who has the virus. People who work in health care may also feel stigmatized, because people assume they must have the virus.

Stigma often arises because of fear or uncertainty about something we don't fully understand. Because COVID-19 is new and there are still many unknowns, people are anxious. The mass of information flowing through social media and other channels can create misconceptions about the disease that may further cause anxiety.

The discrimination and racism that results from stigma can appear in various ways, such as:

- referring to COVID-19 as the “foreign virus,” or Asian or Chinese flu
- blaming a person or group of people who may have the virus for “being careless and spreading the illness”
- avoiding places associated with myths about the virus, such as Asian restaurants and grocers
- verbal or physical attacks on certain ethnic groups
- different treatment of stigmatized people in health care, schools and workplaces.

### **The impact of stigma**

Stigma obviously affects the people who are targeted, but it can also have a wider impact. For example:

- Stigma can make people feel guilty or bad about themselves if they have the virus.
- It can lead people to become isolated to avoid discrimination.
- People may be less likely to get tested or seek treatment for the virus if they fear they will face discrimination.
- People who have COVID-19, or think they may have come into contact with someone who is infected, might avoid a quarantine to hide the fact they are sick.
- Stigma and discrimination can also increase anxiety, as the person has to worry about how to manage the discrimination.

### **How you can reduce stigma**

You might be feeling anxious or scared, and it may be comforting to look for someone to blame. However, this is a time to focus on facts and evidence.

- Be careful of the language you use to describe the virus or someone who has the virus. Avoid using “Asian/Chinese/Wuhan flu,” and negative terms like “victims” or “people suspected of having the virus.”

- Stay informed with facts from credible sources. There are many posts on social media about the virus, how it originated and how it is spread. Many of these are just stories, not facts. Look to sources such as the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) , the [WHO](#) , or the [CDC](#) for information and facts about the virus.
- Respect people’s privacy. There is no need to tell others if someone you know is infected. Instead remind others always to use preventative measures.
- Focus on positives, such as the steps being taken to contain the virus and the preventative steps that people can take to keep safe.
- Support someone who is experiencing stigma or discrimination because of COVID-19. Speak out against stigmatizing behaviours.
- Raise awareness about COVID-19 by sharing messages based on facts. Correct any misconceptions that people believe or have spread.

If you have been affected by stigma associated with COVID-19:

- Reach out to someone you trust, and talk about how you are feeling.
- Remember that you did not do anything wrong. Anyone who comes in contact with the virus can get sick.
- Avoid reading social media discussions or blogs where people are posting stigmatizing language.
- Don’t blame yourself because you have the virus.

The following sites offer more resources on stigma and discrimination:

[CDC - Reducing Stigma](#)

[CMHA - Stigma and Discrimination](#)