



A Union of Professionals

COVID-19 Resources

Taking Care of **Yourself** in Difficult Times

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We know these are trying times. We also know that there will be a psychological impact on many members as a result. Feeling anxious in response to a threat is a normal human reaction, but sustained high anxiety can undermine a constructive response to the crisis. People who already suffer from anxiety and related disorders are especially vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis.

Here are some guidelines that can help you and your family deal with COVID-19 anxiety:

Determine what you can control and what you can't.

- We will have to tolerate a certain amount of anxiety going forward. People who have a hard time with uncertainty tend to experience elevated anxiety. Get accurate facts and information from reliable sources, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and refer to the **www.aft.org/coronavirus** website.

Reduce the amount of time on social media and television.

- Stay connected to friends and family but avoid, if possible, negative individuals who may exacerbate your fears and anxiety.

PAY ATTENTION to Your Body, Feelings and Spirit:

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress and anxiety.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event, and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions and behavior during past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty or angry is common after an event like an infectious disease outbreak, even when it does not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who may be experiencing stress, anxiety and exhaustion about this pandemic. Talk about your feelings, share reliable health information, and enjoy conversation unrelated to the pandemic to remind yourselves of the many important and positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer or helping others in need.

Find these resources and more at **www.aft.org/coronavirus**

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.7 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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BE PREPARED

Routinely Monitor Any Signs of Stress and Anxiety

BE ALERT TO SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN:

YOUR BEHAVIOR:

- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- An increase in your alcohol, tobacco use, or use of illegal drugs
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Having trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Crying frequently
- Worrying excessively
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty communicating or listening
- Having difficulty giving or accepting help
- Inability to feel pleasure or have fun

YOUR BODY:

- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Having headaches and other pains
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled

YOUR EMOTIONS:

- Being anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling heroic, euphoric or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

YOUR THINKING:

- Having trouble remembering things
- Feeling confused
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Having difficulty making decisions

TOP STRATEGIES THAT ARE KNOWN TO WORK:

- Avoid comfort coping, which are individual actions to distract from distress and numb the emotional response—such as alcohol and drug use, sleeping outside of a typical routine, shopping sprees, comfort food binges and emotional repression. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical well-being.
- Eat healthy foods, and drink lots of water.
- Get enough sleep and rest and respite, especially during work or between shifts.
- Get physical exercise—walk your dog, play tag with your kids, go for a bike ride—whatever gets you moving.

USE PRACTICAL WAYS TO RELAX:

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family members.
- Talk frequently about your feelings to loved ones and friends.

GET SOCIAL SUPPORT:

- Stay in contact with family, friends and loved ones; using digital methods is one way to maintain contact.
- Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted people for social support—your colleagues may be having experiences that are similar to your own.

Strengthen self-care.

- Get adequate sleep, exercise regularly, eat healthy foods, practice mindfulness, spend time in nature and employ relaxation techniques. Try to keep a routine especially if you are self-quarantined. Find distractions and activities that help take your mind off the threat, and focus on pleasure and relaxation.

Don't underestimate your resiliency.

- Although dealing with a pandemic is not an experience many of us have had to face, there have been times when we have lived through a crisis and survived. Remember that you usually have more strength and coping skills than you imagine—particularly when you are stressed.

Make a plan.

- If finances are a source of concern and anxiety, make a plan or budget to manage your expenses for the next month. Having a plan always helps manage anxiety even if you have to change the plan as time goes on. This can include thinking about vacations or travel you may have had to cancel and rescheduling them. Try to make as many decisions as you can and avoid simply leaving them “up in the air.” Remember that uncertainty feeds anxiety, and you can always change your plans if you need to.

Practice gratitude.

- Focus on what is going well. We are all in this together, even if some may be better equipped to handle challenging medical and mental health concerns.

Do not allow yourself to be too isolated.

- This is especially true if you are self-quarantined. Stay connected to family and friends by phone or text. Keep a routine. This may be a time to focus on developing or exploring hobbies and interests. Social isolation can be very difficult; make sure you have a plan for how to manage it so that you don't become too depressed or irritable.

Seek professional help if you need it.

- This is a very difficult time for many of us, but particularly for individuals who have pre-existing anxiety and/or related disorders. Do not hesitate to reach out for help from a doctor or mental health professional. Many employers have an Employee Assistance Program that you can access if you need to talk to a counselor. Alternately, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration's National Helpline at **800-662-HELP (4357)** is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service **(in English and Spanish)** for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.