

## WELLNESS TIPS

### COPING WITH ANXIETY

Even though some aspects of “normal” are slowly returning, pockets of uncertainty continue - from daily activities such as safe grocery shopping and visiting friends; to scheduling Step exams, returning to clerkships and research; or wondering how navigating the residency application process will be different – many of us have experienced increased anxiety.

Anxiety is a warning mechanism that helps us avoid harm. It was useful when humans needed to avoid predators but in modern society, stressors can contribute to more extensive anxiety which has the potential to interfere with one’s health and well-being. Mild anxiety can be beneficial as a motivator to act and problem solve. But chronic stress and anxiety can result in exhaustion, poor decisions, and health problems. Some signs of anxiety: worry; difficulty concentrating or sitting still; jitteriness, muscle tightness, GI upset, headaches, increased pain; and difficulty sleeping.

Sometimes we can change or eliminate the source of stress creating anxiety. When that isn’t possible or even desirable, there are strategies for coping with anxiety. Intensity of anxiety comes in waves and these strategies can decrease the nervous energy and help you ride it out until it subsides.

- Recognize the anxiety, label it and notice how it is impacting your behavior. This can give you some emotional distance from the anxiety and not get more caught up in it.
- Keeping a journal can help you recognize patterns and make changes that might be helpful.
- Write down your worries. Reviewing them can help you determine if they are reasonable and how likely they are to happen. List possible solutions and make an action plan.
- If worrying is spiraling:
  - Ground yourself in the present by focusing on your breathing, your body, and your surroundings. What do you notice? Do this for several minutes. When your thoughts stray, return to focusing on the present – your breathing, etc.
- Engage in a physical activity. Work off some of that anxious energy by dancing in your living room, doing jumping jacks, running or walking.
- Go outdoors. Research shows that nature settings can be calming.
- Engage in a distracting activity.
- Create a schedule. This includes leisure activities and down-time, not just academic/work schedule. This will provide structure and sense of direction.
- When you are connecting with others, talk about things other than worries, concerns, assignments, or stressors to provide pleasurable interactions and distraction.
- Be kind to others. Remember they are also stressed and possibly anxious. You will feel better about your interactions.
- Avoid self-medicating.
- Pay attention to your self-talk. Harsh self-criticism isn’t helpful. Neither is catastrophizing.
- Mindfulness and relaxation techniques can be helpful.

City of Hope. "15 Minute Deep Breathing." January 16, 2015. YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F28MGLlpP90>

Anxiety and Depression Association of America. "Top Ten COVID-19 Anxiety Reduction Strategies." Ken Goodman. March 31, 2020.

<https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/top-ten-covid-19-anxiety-reduction-strategies>

HelpGuide. "Coronavirus Anxiety: Coping with Stress, Fear, and Worry." Melinda Smith and Lawrence Robinson. April 2020.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/coronavirus-anxiety.htm>

Mind Over Mood. Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky. Guilford Press. 2016.

If anxiety becomes too intense, is an ongoing problem, and disrupting the quality of your life consider talking with an MSCC counselor for assistance. Or contact your primary care provider or a mental health provider for further evaluation and recommendations.

Stay healthy!

Liz Schacht

[elizabeth-schacht@uiowa.edu](mailto:elizabeth-schacht@uiowa.edu)

MEDICAL STUDENT COUNSELING CENTER

[MSCC@healthcare.uiowa.edu](mailto:MSCC@healthcare.uiowa.edu) 319-335-8056 1240 MERF