ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Managing Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak

Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Individuals and Communities

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak has the potential to increase stress and anxiety, both because of the fear of catching the virus and also because of uncertainty about how the outbreak will affect us socially and economically. There are practical steps you can take to improve your wellbeing.

Coping with the Stress of COVID-19

Dealing with stress reactions caused by the COVID-19 virus outbreak can improve your health, quality of life, and wellbeing. The following evidence-informed principles have been shown to be related to better outcomes in many adverse situations (Hobfoll et al., 2007). There are key actions within each element that might be especially helpful for those affected by the COVID-19 outbreak (Reissman et al, 2006; Gonzales, 2003). It's not necessary to have all elements in place but implementing some of the following suggestions may help you deal with the stress caused by the COVID-19 virus.

Increase Sense of Safety

Reduce anxiety with healthy actions that make you feel safer. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other experts suggest the following good hygiene habits to limit the risk of infection:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Properly dispose of used tissues.
- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, arm, or elbow if you don't have a tissue.
- Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing.
- Stay at home if you are sick.
- Avoid contact with those who are sick.
- Clean and disinfect objects or surfaces that may have come into contact with germs.
- Make plans for what will happen if someone in the home becomes ill or if quarantine or shelter-in-place measures are ordered.

Read more about prevention.

Stay Connected

- Seek support from family, friends, mentors, clergy, and those who are in similar circumstances.
- Be flexible and creative in accessing support via phone, email, text messaging, and video calls.
- Talk to your supervisor about the possibility of working from home temporarily.

Cultivate Ways to be More Calm

- Realize that it is understandable to feel anxious and worried about what may happen, especially when many aspects of life are being affected.
- If you find that you are getting more stressed by watching the news, reduce your exposure, particularly prior to sleep.
- While circumstances may be stressful and beyond your control, you can try to offset them with positive calming activities. Practice slow, steady breathing and muscle relaxation, as well as any other actions that are calming for you (yoga, exercise, music, keeping the mind occupied).
- Preparing for a range of possible scenarios and having adequate supplies should sheltering at home be necessary can help you feel more calm. For instance, you can put together a kit with supplies to last you and your family 3 – 5 days. Include supplies such as:
    - Water and food, vitamins, fluids with electrolytes, and food preparation items such as a manual can opener.
    - Prescribed medical supplies or equipment, such as glucose or blood pressure monitoring equipment; thermometer; medicines for fever, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen; anti-diarrheal medication.
    - Hygiene supplies such as soap and water, alcohol-based hand wash, soap, tissues, toilet paper, and disposable diapers if necessary.
    - General supplies such as a flashlight and batteries, portable radio, and garbage bags.

Read more about pandemic preparedness.

Improve Your Sense of Control and Ability to Endure

- Accept circumstances that cannot be changed and focus on what you can alter.
- Modify your definition of a “good day” to meet the current reality of the situation.
- Problem-solve and set achievable goals within the new circumstances in your life.
- Evaluate the absolute risk of contracting the virus and recognize the benefits of accepting a certain level of risk in order to maintain as much of your normal routine as possible.
- Those who have been faced with life-threatening situations recommended the following strategies:
    - Quickly recognize, acknowledge, and accept the reality of the situation.
    - Make a plan for dealing with feelings of being overwhelmed or overly distressed. Preparation can make you feel more in control if these feelings arise and help you move through them quickly.
    - Combat unhelpful emotions by using distraction or staying busy---both mentally and physically.

- Avoid impulsive behavior.
- Get organized.
- Increase positive coping behaviors that have worked in the past.
- Shift negative self-statements to statements that allow you to function with less distress. Try changing "this is a terrible time" to "this is a terrible time, but I can get through this."
- Rather than getting discouraged, focus on what you can accomplish or control.
- Seek out mentoring or information to improve your ability to make decisions and take actions when necessary.
- Try to engage in the situation as a challenge to be met, which can increase your ability to act both creatively and decisively (Gonzales, 2003).

Remain Hopeful

- Consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective.
- Look for opportunities to practice being more patient or kind with yourself, or to see the situation as an opportunity to learn or build strengths.
- Celebrate successes, find things to be grateful about, and take satisfaction in completing tasks, even small ones.
- Give yourself small breaks from the stress of the situation by doing something you enjoy.
- Draw upon your spirituality, those who inspire you, or your personal beliefs and values.

Resources

- Tools to help with symptoms are available—see Resources for Survivors and the Public Following Disaster and Mass Violence on our website: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/resources_disaster_violence.asp
- If you need help right away call 1-800-273-8255
  Press "1" if you are a Veteran.

References

Gonzales, G. (2003). Deep survival. Who lives, who dies, and why. True stories of miraculous endurance and sudden death. W.W. Norton & Company. New York.

Hobfoll, S. E., Watson, P. J., Bell, C. C., Bryant, R. A., Brymer, M. J., Friedman, M. J., et al. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. Psychiatry, 70(4), 283-315.

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