

Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks

What You Should Know

When you hear, read, or watch news about an outbreak of an infectious disease, you may feel anxious and show signs of stress. These signs of stress are normal and may be more likely or pronounced for people who live in or have loved ones living in parts of the world affected by the outbreak. In the wake of an infectious disease outbreak, monitor your own physical and mental health. Know the signs of stress in yourself and your loved ones. Know how to relieve stress and know when to get help.

Know the signs of stress

What follows are behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive responses that are all common signs of anxiety and stress. You may notice some of them after you learn about an infectious disease outbreak.

Your Behavior

- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- An increase in your use of alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Frequent crying
- Excessive worrying
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Difficulty communicating or listening
- Difficulty giving or accepting help
- An inability to feel pleasure or have fun

Your Body

- Having stomachaches or headaches
- Changes in appetite
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled

Your Emotions

- Anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

Your Thinking

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

Know when to get help

You may experience serious distress when you hear about an infectious disease outbreak, even if you are at little or no risk of getting sick. If you or someone you know shows signs of stress (see above) for several days or weeks, get help by accessing one of the resources at the end of this article.

Know how to relieve stress

You can manage and alleviate your stress by taking time to take care of yourself. The following strategies can help.

Keep things in perspective

Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak. You will want to stay up to date on news of the outbreak, particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have gotten sick, but make sure to take time away from the news to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.

Get the facts

Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself against illness, if you are at risk. You may turn to your family doctor, a state or local health department, U.S. government agencies, or an international organization. (Check out the section below for good sources of information about infectious disease outbreaks.)

Keep yourself healthy:

- Eat healthy foods and drink plenty of water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol or other drugs
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.

Use practical ways to relax:

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities and do something fun after a hard task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, watch a movie or take a bath.
- Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.
- Take care of your physical health to help lower your stress. Take a break to focus on positive parts of your life, like connections with loved ones.

Pay attention to your body, feelings, and spirit:

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- 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 around 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 about the outbreak. Talk about your feelings regarding the outbreak, share reliable health information, and enjoy conversation unrelated to the outbreak, to remind yourself of the many important and positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation or helping others in need.

Sources for Credible Outbreak-Related Health Information

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329-4027
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
<https://www.cdc.gov>

World Health Organization (WHO)
Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization
525 23rd Street, Northwest
Washington, DC 20037
1-202-974-3000
<https://www.who.int>

Helpful Resources

If you feel the need for additional support, reach out to Workplace Solutions, your EAP, for confidential, professional guidance at **800-327-5071**. For more information on this topic and other related resources, visit our website at www.wseap.com, click log-in and enter access code *Publicis*

Disaster Distress Helpline, by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 (English and español)

SMS: Text "TalkWithUs" to 66746

SMS (español): "Hablanos" al 66746

TTY: 1-800-846-8517

Website in English: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

Website in español: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/espanol>

SAMHSA's National Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (24/7/365 Treatment Referral Information Service in English and español)

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

References

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (Revised 2014, October 21). Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks (Pub. No. SMA14-4885). Retrieved August 22, 2019, from <https://store.samhsa.gov>