

# Managing COVID-19 anxiety and stress

***Presenter – Erica Hanlon, Clinical Counselor***

Hello, and thanks for joining this special recording of Managing COVID-19 Anxiety and Stress. My name is Erica Hamlin, I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach, and we know that a lot of people are experiencing anxiety and stress right now that is specific to the COVID-19 outbreak, and we wanted to give you some tools to help you cope.

## Today we'll explore:

So, as part of this presentation we are going to talk about what your natural response is to fear and anxiety and why COVID-19 itself presents a prime opportunity for really our brains to freak out. And cause us a lot of stress and anxiety. We will give you some skills to help you cope with those feelings, and finally, we will give you some resources and information about where you can go for support if you feel like you're really struggling during this time.

## Your brain and COVID-19

So, let's talk a little bit about your brain and COVID-19. So, our brains are wired in such a way that it really helped to keep our ancestors alive. So, you have to keep that in mind. We still have a primitive brain that served our ancestors well when they were hunting and gathering and they had to be on the lookout for things like lion attacks. And yes, we no longer have lion attacks that threaten kind of our safety, but we still have a brain that's wired for those things, and this is what that looks like.

So, first of all, the brain loves predictability. It wants to know what's going to happen in the future. If it knows what's going to happen in the future, it feels safe. It feels like, okay, you're good to go, you're not going to die. And that sounds like a little bit of an exaggeration, but really that's how our brains feel. Any kind of uncertainty triggers a lot of stress and anxiety for our brains. They feel like I don't know what's going to happen, and so, yes, this may be a lion attack for all we know, for all we know, even in modern day society, when lion attacks are very, very rare. In fact, we know that given, you know, the two options of knowing for sure that something bad will happen, versus, you know, the possibility that something bad will happen, but you know, it may happen, it may not happen, you might be okay, you might not be okay, given those two options, the brain is actually less stressed when it knows the bad thing will happen.

So, you can see how uncertainty, an unknown future, lack of predictability arouses a lot of stress and anxiety for our brains. Thank you, ancestors. Yes, it kept you alive, but now with COVID-19 there's a lot of uncertainty. And so, we experience a lot of stress and anxiety as a result. The other thing is that our ancestors, they had to constantly be on the lookout for any potential threat, like a lion attack, for example.

So, today what this looks like is our brain is constantly zero, you know it's scanning for those possible threats. If it sees one, it zeroes in on it. So, in modern day society and with COVID-19 this is what that may look like for you. It looks like watching the news obsessively, what's going on, you know, constantly wanting to watch it, see what's going on, where is COVID-19, where is it in your neighborhood, how many people do you know who have it, what could be happening, also, you know, kind of obsessively scanning social media to see what's going on, and try and get information about COVID-19. So, it's good to be well-informed, but it's also important to recognize when maybe some of those behaviors are not serving you, and instead maybe actually exacerbating your stress and anxiety.

## The body's stress response

So, let's talk a little bit about our body's stress response. So, you've probably heard the term fight or flight, and again, this is a stress response that helped our ancestors respond to danger, and it's their evolutionary gift to us. Again, thank you great-great-great-grandparents, and this is how the fight or flight mechanism works.

So, there's an event. Now, events in and of themselves are, they're neutral. So, COVID-19 at its essence is neutral, and you can see this in that some people, you know, they kind of don't care. They hear all the COVID-19 news and they kind of don't care. Then there are others of us who hear about COVID-19 and we see it and then we have thoughts about it that this event, that COVID-19 is a threat.

So, we perceive it as stressful, we perceive it as being potentially threatening. And as a result, our body responds with a stress response. It releases a bunch of stress hormones. It releases, you know, cortisol, epinephrine, which is also known as adrenaline, and this results in that fight or flight response. So, this is kind of like pushing the gas pedal in your car. You have the release of these stress hormones, and it results in an increased heart rate, an increased blood pressure, increased, you know, respiration and awareness. So, you can think again of, you know, your ancestor out in the savanna is scanning for a potential lion. It sees something move in the grasses, and it has this stress response. It's getting ready to survive. And then what we want to happen, and what typically happens is that the perceived threat passes. Our body's able to release hormones that then help us calm down. It's sort of like pushing the brake pedal in your car. It slows everything down.

Now, for a lot of us with COVID-19 the threat has not passed. If anything, the threat may be growing. And so, you stay in that fight or flight response. You stay in that state of anxiety and stress. Now, anxiety and stress shows up a little bit differently for everybody.

## Symptoms of anxiety

So, let's review some of the common symptoms that people experience. We've categorized these into three different areas, the first of which is a cognitive, our cognitive symptoms and cognitive just simply means within your thoughts and your brain and your thinking. So, this can look like negative thoughts if you're kind of constantly worrying or thinking about bad things that may happen in the future, you have trouble concentrating, you're obsessively thinking about what's going on, you have trouble with memory, or you get easily confused, right? You're constantly forgetting your keys, or losing your spot in where you're doing work if you're still working at this point, those kinds of things.

Now, emotionally, for some people anxiety shows up in kind of a pretty typical trajectory of anxiety, where we've got nervousness on one end, fear and anxiety in the middle, and then panic, where you've got very extreme anxiety. But other people, anxiety doesn't always look like anxiety. Anxiety may fall in a more kind of anger, frustration kind of range. So, you've got people who experience irritability, frustration, anger, rage. So, it looks a little bit different for everyone. Others just experience feelings of being completely overwhelmed, and they feel fragile and vulnerable. Others kind of show symptoms of more depression and sadness. They may experience a loss of interest in daily activities or they may experience no emotions at all. They experience sort of a strange sense of emotional numbness.

And finally, physical symptoms may include muscle tension, headaches, dry mouth, racing heart, rapid breathing. Again, you've got that racing heart, rapid breathing, that fight or flight. You may see an increase in illness, stomach troubles, and sleep problems, and the reason we have so many physical ailments related to emotional experiences is that our bodies and our brains are just very, very closely tied and related.

## Typical anxiety

So, I hope one of your big takeaways here is that experiencing anxiety related to COVID-19 is completely normal and adaptive. We all have brains that are wired for this. And so, typical anxiety looks like worry and concern and fear right now about maybe the spread of the illness, loved ones getting sick, your personal finances, or job security, or the economy, or the stock market. It might look like concerns around events getting canceled, like graduations or weddings or vacations. And it may look like anxiety related to having to work at home if you've never done that before, or having

to work at home and take care of children at the same time. So, for some people, they feel really overwhelmed, like there's too much to do right now. So, those are all really typical anxiety responses that many people are experiencing right now.

## **Anxiety disorder**

But for other people, they may be experiencing symptoms that border more on something that needs professional help that's more of an anxiety diagnosis, and it's important to make a distinction between the two. So, if we're looking at something that's more concerning and maybe needs professional intervention, that may include worries and concerns and fears that interfere with your ability to complete daily tasks. Like maybe you have trouble getting out of bed in the morning or just functioning. It's get, you know, causing problems in your relationships or other important parts of your life, like your work life and your family life.

And many people experience panic attacks at some point in their lives. It's very, very normal. But if you notice that you're starting to have repeated panic attacks, or you have extreme fear about a potential panic attack, and that is getting in the way of your ability to function, you may be looking at something that looks more like an anxiety disorder, and it's important to seek help for that immediately.

## **Coping with anxiety**

So, the next part of this presentation, we are going to talk about coping with anxiety. We've talked a little bit about what anxiety looks like, why you might have it, and now we're going to give you some tools and tips to help you move forward and cope with those feelings when they come up.

## **The truth about anxiety and fear**

So, here's the truth about anxiety and fear. Again, your brain is wired to be anxious. It's wired to focus in on threats and respond with stress. But that doesn't mean that something has gone wrong. It doesn't mean anything's gone wrong. It just means your body is rising to the occasion. It wants to keep you alive. It's a little bit like an overprotective parent, looking out for those potential threats and wanting to protect you. So, which is trying to protect and care for you, and anxiety is just a symptom of that overprotective brain. And fear, whether it's rational or irrational, it's a completely natural part of life. If you're feeling anxious, nothing has gone wrong. It's okay, you are okay.

And it's important to recognize that, again, your thinking is what really drives those feelings. If think back to the, you know, that sort of stress response, you know, graphic, some people see the news

about COVID-19 and their thoughts are like so what, it's not going to bother me, you know? So, their thinking is leading to feelings of calm, maybe too much calm one could argue, but your thoughts, you know, are the ones that are really causing you feelings of fear. So, you can tune into what those thoughts are, and you can start to practice thoughts that will help you feel more calm.

## Understand your anxiety

So, how do we really understand our anxiety and show compassion for it? So, one of the biggest things is to not resist the anxiety when it comes up. For a lot of us, we don't know how to cope with uncomfortable feelings. Anxiety and stress fall into that category, and so, we tend to try to resist it, right? We turn to food or alcohol, or you know, watching a lot of television, or shopping online, whatever that is, right? We all sort of have our go-to's to try and avoid our feelings.

But when we resist the feeling, and when we try and push it away, and this can also look like trying to jump to positive thinking really quickly, right? I've got to think positive, think positive, think positive. That is a form of resistance, and what happens is it makes that uncomfortable feeling actually last longer. The best way to move through our anxiety is to simply be present with it, accept it, and allow for it.

You may be scratching your head, like what does that even mean? So, the first thing is to simply notice that you're having a feeling. What feelings are you having, right? What are they, and what are you really afraid of? Let me give you an example. When the news came out that my children would be home for the next three weeks and I would be working at home and home schooling them, I had a lot of anxiety, and I started to really tune into my thoughts, like, what's going on? Why am I so anxious about this? And my thoughts were things like I can't do it, it's going to be too much, I'm not going to be able to do my job, I'm not going to be able to home school, I'm just going to be a mess. Everything's going to be a big, fat failure, right? So, those were my thoughts that I was having. So, I simply noticed them with curiosity, and I noticed that what I was really afraid of was failing, and not being up to the task. And it's important to just notice that. We're noticing the thoughts. We're noticing the feelings, and we're doing it without judgment.

It's also important to kind of notice where those feelings are coming up in our body. So, again, instead of resisting or ignoring the feeling, we're getting really curious about it. Where does the feeling show up for you when you feel anxious? For me, anxiety shows up in my chest. It feels like a real heaviness on my chest, almost like something pushing down, and it gives me sort of a shortness of breath. I feel like I have kind of a harder time breathing.

So, we're just observing. We're observing, we're getting curious about it. So, now that we've noticed the feeling, and we've gotten really curious about it, we're curious about the feeling, we're curious

about our thoughts that are really driving the feeling, we're just simply allowing for it. This, I kind of, when I talk to clients that I work with I talk about, you know, allowing the feeling is like having a passenger in your car. The feeling gets to sit in the back seat. It's along for the ride. We're just, you know, we're letting it come along, but it doesn't get to give us directions, it doesn't get to drive the car. We are still driving the car. We're just letting it be there. You know, we're not really listening to it, but it can be there. We just let it happen.

So, we're allowing the fear to exist. It's along for the ride, and meanwhile, we're going to continue to make wise choices in our lives around self-care. We're going to engage in healthy activities to build resilience. So, if you can, maybe get some physical activity. You know, if you have exercise, you know, machines in your house that you can do, if you can do exercise videos in your home without leaving, that is really important and helpful. If you can practice mindfulness, that's great. It's also important to watch your diet at this point. There are some diets that are shown and some nutrients that are shown to actually help reduce anxiety, things like magnesium and zinc, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamin B, and probiotics. So, make sure that you're eating lots of really healthy foods right now.

And we want to practice mindfulness, and mindfulness, again, is just being in the moment, allowing our thoughts, allowing our feelings to come and go, without judging them or trying to control them. And we want to learn relaxation techniques as much as possible. So, relaxing our bodies, you know, practicing deep breathing, anything like that can be really helpful at this time. Again, we've got that mind body connection. If we can learn to help relax our bodies, it will help relax our minds.

And as much as possible, seek support from trusted family and friends, and I know for most of us right now we're engaging in social distancing, where we're kind of staying away from other people. That alone may create some anxiety for you. But there are still ways that you can connect with people in ways that are really helpful. You know, maybe that looks like a lot of video calls, talking to people on the phone, you know, if you can get outside, you know, we, I took my family for a walk the other day. We've got these really great trails where you can keep a nice six to eight-foot distance away from other people, and we ran into some of our neighbors and we had a conversation with them from, you know, from afar.

So, there are still things that you can do to help manage that anxiety related to COVID-19 and related to social distancing. And make sure that you're making self-care a priority. For a lot of us, if you're like me, you're working, you've got kids, you're home schooling, you've got a lot going on. But self-care has to be a priority. It's not selfish, it's self-preservation. If you need to, put it on your calendar to make sure that it happens.

## Tips to reduce anxiety

So, here are some final tips to help you reduce anxiety and stress right now. One of the very best things you can do to kind of, again, you know, if stress and anxiety is the gas pedal on your car, we want to be pumping the brakes on the car, and one of the best ways you can do that is by simply taking deep abdominal breaths. When we get anxious, we tend to take those really short, you know, shallow breaths. So, we want to take those deep abdominal breaths, and we want to take them on a regular basis as much as possible, you know, just throughout the day, whenever you notice that you're anxious, or even before then. I know I have a watch that prompts me to do deep breathing for a minute several times throughout the day. I'll be honest, I usually ignore that. I usually ignore those prompts, but this is a great time to not ignore those prompts, and to really practice the deep breathing, because it tells your brain that you're calm and it tells your body that you're calm. It's one of the best ways to pump the brakes on that stress response.

You can also focus on a soothing word, like peace, or calm. You can visualize a tranquil scene. You know, what's interesting about our brains is that they can't really distinguish between doing something and thinking about doing something. It's sort of, it's the same thing to our brains. So, visualize somewhere you really want to be, somewhere that makes you feel really relaxed and safe, visualize yourself in that space, and really try to use all of your senses. What does the place sound like and feel like and smell like, feel like, all those things, and show compassion for yourself.

So often, again, you know, we feel anxious and then we feel anxious about feeling anxious. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but it's what most people do. So, we just want to, again, show compassion for ourselves. Allow the feeling to just be.

And remember, you are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are going to happen. You can just get curious about them, allow them to happen. It's okay, you know. We're showing compassion for ourselves right now. It's really key. There aren't really any instructions. Everybody's sort of figuring this out as we go. So, you know, if you feel like you didn't do something perfectly, that's all right. Nobody is right now. We're all figuring this out.

## Get support

And finally, it's really important to get support. So, a lot of the tips we gave you today would fall under the category of self-care, and that's great if you're feeling just sort of that typical anxiety right now. But if you feel like you are bordering into more of that anxiety disorder area, where it's really making it challenging for you to do your day to day tasks, it's important to seek professional help. Self-care is great, but it does not replace clinical intervention. So, it's important to seek professional

help from an expert right now and talk about what's going on. If you're struggling in any kind of way, it's important to talk about what's going on. It's really the first step to start feeling better.

So, let somebody know that you need help. Talk to a trusted loved one or friend, and most all, especially if you're feeling like you may have more of an anxiety disorder, and you're really struggling, reach out. Find a therapist by tele-video or phone. You can contact, you know, your benefits provider to see what kind of resources are available to you through work, or you know, you can just look online, and see what else there is there.

So, that concludes our webinar for today, Managing Anxiety with COVID-19. I hope it was helpful. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to us. We are here for you 24/7, thank you.

## Resources For Living

The EAP is administered by Resources For Living, LLC. This material is for informational purposes only. Information is not a substitute for professional health care and is not meant to replace the advice of health care professionals. Contact a health care professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.

©2020 Resources For Living | 44.36.900.1-05-2019-RFL (3/20)