Managing worries and stress related to the COVID-19 outbreak

Dos and don’ts

Anyone can experience worries or feel “stressed” when faced with a problem or a situation which seems to be dangerous. These worries are normal, and may even help us to be more alert or active in facing problems. However, sometimes these worries become excessive. When this happens, we may experience unpleasant bodily sensations, have difficulty in sleeping, or not be able to do our normal activities. Excessive worries can also cause us to behave in ways that are harmful, such as not following medical advice or hoarding materials in an attempt to reduce our worries.

This leaflet provides information on worries related to the COVID-19 outbreak, and how we can manage them so that they do not harm us or others.

Worries are a part of life
All of us worry about things which we think are important, such as our jobs and families. In the same way, when we are faced with a problem such as an accident, an illness, or the loss of some money, we worry about how we can solve the problem or make ourselves safer.

At this moment, the entire country is facing a serious problem – an infectious disease known as COVID-19 (short for “coronavirus disease 2019”) which is caused by a virus. This disease is spreading extensively and is leading to a number of deaths even in developed countries of the world. It is therefore natural that it is causing a lot of anxiety. To control the spread of this disease, the Government of India and the various State governments have implemented measures to reduce our risk of catching this infection.

When faced with a serious problem of this kind, it is natural and normal to be worried! Being worried is not a sign of mental illness. It is a sort of “alarm signal” designed by Nature to warn us about danger, and to motivate us to take appropriate measures so that we and those around us, especially our families, remain safe.
Excessive worrying can harm us

In some persons, these worries can become excessive. When this happens, instead of feeling more alert or aware of our problems, we start feeling uncomfortable, upset or unwell. The box below lists some of the symptoms we can experience when we are very worried about something.

**Signs of excessive worry**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Symptom</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling breathless or “short of breath”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling of one’s heart beating faster or more strongly</td>
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<td>Uneasiness or pain in the stomach</td>
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<td>Headache</td>
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<td>Tiredness</td>
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<td>Needing to pass urine or stools more frequently in small quantities</td>
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<td>Difficulty in concentrating</td>
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<td>Difficulty in falling asleep</td>
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<td>Bad dreams (“nightmares”)</td>
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<td>Getting easily irritated</td>
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Worrying to this extent is like an alarm signal that does not stop ringing and keeps generating noise: it disturbs our peace of mind and can even lead us to behave in ways that put us and others at risk. For example, some people may be so afraid of developing COVID-19 that, even if they have symptoms of the disease or are at risk, they may refuse to follow proper precautions or consult a doctor. Others may look for a false sense of safety by hoarding masks or hand sanitizer. And others may quarrel with those around them over trivial matters.

**What can I do if I am worrying excessively?**

The following steps have been found helpful by experts in reducing worrying related to the COVID-19 epidemic. Some of them may apply to you, and others may not, so choose the ones most suitable for your situation in life.
1. Thinking differently about my situation

Sometimes, the way we think about a situation can affect how worried we are. For example, a person may believe that if he contracts COVID-19, he will surely die. However, to date, less than 5% of infected persons have succumbed to the disease. While this is not something to be taken lightly, 5% is certainly less than 90% or 100%! If we find that our beliefs or thoughts about this disease or its consequences are not correct, we should try to correct them.

2. Obtaining accurate information

We live in an “information age”, where we can easily access news and information about anything through the Internet and social media. However, this information is not always accurate. For example, a news report that 8 persons were infected in a town may be exaggerated or distorted by someone else, and reported as 80 or 800 instead! This sort of misinformation can make us worry excessively. To prevent this, we should obtain our information only from trusted and verified sources, such as the Government of India (https://www.mohfw.gov.in/) or the World Health Organization (https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019). We should also stay away from social media reports about COVID-19, as they often contain inaccurate or false information which can cause more worries to us. If this is happening to us, we should practice not just “social distancing”, but “social media distancing” to preserve our mental balance!
3. Following appropriate preventive measures

When we feel that we cannot do anything about a problem, we tend to feel more worried. Therefore, it is important for all of us to take control of the situation by learning about the appropriate preventive and safety measures, such as hand hygiene and social distancing, and following them. Even if we find it difficult, annoying or inconvenient to follow these measures, they are beneficial both to us and to others. You can learn more about these at the website of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India (https://www.mohfw.gov.in/) by clicking on the “For Citizens” tab. Besides following these measures, we should teach these to our friends and family members, and correct any wrong notions that they might have. “Taking control” in this way will help us to reduce our worries, even in the face of a major problem.

4. Don’t trust “miracle cures” or take medications without prescription

At times of crisis, it is normal for people to look for “miracles” that will solve all our problems. This leads to the spread of information about methods that will “surely” prevent or cure COVID-19 infection. Some of these could include quackery or faith-based healing. These can give you a false sense of security and you may ignore important measures like handwashing and keeping a safe distance from other people. Others involve the use of medications that you hear about on television or forwarded messages. These medications are meant to be used only under expert supervision, and their use can cause side-effects than any possible benefits. Trusting in these “false cures” can harm us in two ways. First, they may cause us to feel a false sense of safety, leading us to take risks and contract the infection. Second, when we find out or learn that they are useless or harmful, we may feel disappointed or cheated, leading to more worries. It is wiser in these times to follow recognized methods of prevention, as advised by experts or official authorities.
5. Seek support and provide support

When facing a serious problem like COVID-19, being alone or isolated can increase our worries. Except for special cases, such as an infected person being quarantined or admitted in the hospital, most of us will continue to live with our families and be in contact with neighbours and friends. They can provide an excellent source of support, but we must remember that this is a two-way process. If others around us need our support and guidance, or if they are more worried than us, we should also take the time to listen to their concerns and advise them appropriately. If it is within our capacity to support those less fortunate than us, either materially or financially, we should do so without hesitating. Helping others reduces our preoccupation with ourselves and our own troubles, and can help us to reduce excessive worrying.

6. Take care of your physical health

Mind and body are closely connected to each other. If we neglect our physical health, this can cause undue worries and other negative thoughts and feelings. It is important for us to follow as healthy a diet as possible, even if there is a shortage of certain supplies. Taking fruits and vegetables as far as possible can help to maintain good health. Taking a lighter meal with fibre content and sugar-free fluids like buttermilk or fruit juice will help prevent excessive weight gain during this period. We should set aside about 10-15 minutes a day for some sort of physical activity or exercise, which can be done indoors if necessary. We should also refrain from unhealthy habits such as smoking or consuming alcohol, as these can actually make us more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. We should reduce noise levels in our home, such as keeping the television periodically off, as silence is good for relaxing the body and mind. Finally, we should avoid excessive use of social media and
mobile devices, as these can disturb our sleep and activity patterns. Taking care of our own health helps us to feel less worried and more confident about facing challenges.

7. Relax!

Many of us think that “relaxation” means sleeping, going on a holiday, ignoring our problems, or “taking things easy”. This is not really true! “Relaxation” is a natural response provided by nature to protect our body from excessive stress. We can achieve relaxation through various methods, but four things are essential: (1) a quiet and calm environment, (2) keeping your body in a relaxed posture (sitting or lying down), (3) paying less attention to everyday thoughts, and (4) focusing on something repeatedly – this can be a particular word or phrase, our breathing, or movement of a particular part of the body. You can find out more about some of these methods here: https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045368. For those familiar with the Indian tradition of yoga, certain yoga techniques can also help us in activating the relaxation response. Pranayama techniques such as Nadi-Shudhi Pranayama (Alternate Nostril Breathing) (https://dahlc.mayoclinic.org/2016/10/06/alternate-nostril-breathing-reset-video/) can be useful in reducing anxiety. Guided meditation techniques are also useful in calming our mind down. (https://www.mayo clinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858) We do not need to practice these for a long time: even 10-20 minutes two to three times a day are sufficient!
8. Taking care of young children

Young children may be worried when hearing discussions at home or watching news reports on the Coronavirus. It may be good to allow them to clarify their concerns and validate their worries rather than silencing them. Parents can also discuss the efforts that the child and family can follow to prevent infection. It is important that parents follow these meticulously, as children learn more by observation.

Engaging children in age appropriate activities and limiting excessive exposure to media is essential. Parents can take this opportunity to spend quality time with their children and strengthen their emotional connectedness with them. This time will also serve as an opportunity for them to learn problem solving and coping in the face of an adverse event. (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html) (https://www.mohfw.gov.in/Corona_comic_PGI.pdf)

We hope that following these suggestions can help you to reduce your worries and stress as we deal with this difficult situation.

Issued in the public interest by the Department of Psychiatry, JIPMER, Pondicherry, India.