

Coping with Stress during an Infectious Outbreak



What you should know.

Feeling anxious, depressed, angry or guilty are common during an infectious disease outbreak. These signs of stress are normal and may be more likely or pronounced for people who live in or have family members impacted or are on the frontlines working within the outbreak.

In the wake of an infectious 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 when to get help. Behavioral, physical, emotional and cognitive responses are all common signs of stress and anxiety.

Your Behavior- you may experience:

- 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 Emotions – you may experience feeling:

- Anxious or fearful
- Depressed
- Guilty
- Angry
- Heroic, euphoric or invulnerable
- Overwhelmed by sadness
- Not caring about anything

Your Body- you may experience:

- Having headaches and other pains
- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled

Your Thinking – you may experience:

- Trouble remembering things
- Feeling confused
- Trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions

Know how to relieve stress.

Keep things in perspective. Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching the news about an outbreak. Set limits to how much to allow yourself to discuss it and worry about it. Take time away from the event to focus on things in your life that are going well that you can control.

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Get the facts. Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn what you can do and take action to protect yourself. I.e. World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Take care of your physical health to help lower stress. Eat healthy foods and drink water. Avoid excessive amount of caffeine, sugar or alcohol. Get quality sleep and rest. Get regular physical exercise. Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs.

Use practical ways to relax.

- Relax your body often throughout the day by doing things that work for you- stretching, deep breathing, meditations, washing face or engage in a pleasurable hobby.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities and do a fun/relaxing thing after a hard task.
- Use time to relax – read, listen to music, take a walk, a bath, eat a good meal *slowly*.
- Talk about your feelings to loved one and friends.
- 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 past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event and think about how you handled your thoughts, emotions and behaviors 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 about the outbreak, share reliable information and enjoy conversation unrelated to the outbreak to remind yourself of the many important and positive things in your life.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation or helping others in need.

Resource: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014, 21 October). Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks (Pub. No. SMA14-4885). Retrieved 23 January 2020 from <https://store.samhsa.gov>

Good reasons to seek talk therapy.

Therapy is a time-tested tool that helps people with a variety of issues including stress, anxiety, relationship problems, grief, trauma, substance abuse and self-exploration. There are many misconceptions about what it means to talk to a counselor and the stigma associated with it is often the reason people don't seek help in the first place. However, therapy can help people manage issues, develop coping skills and learn how to improve themselves.

When life presents you with problems that you are having difficulty resolving on your own, take advantage of the counseling sessions offered by Baystate's WorkLife and EAP Support program.

Therapy is not just for mental health issues, it can help you with support, education, guidance, learning about yourself and provide you with the resources to learn and practice new ways of coping.

WorkLife and EAP Support services are:

- Completely confidential and provided by Magellan Health
- Available 24/7/365 telephonic support from master's level clinicians
- Counseling available in-person, telephonic, web chat/video, and via text.
- No-cost to all Baystate team members, dependents and household members

1-800-888-6332