

COVID-19: Boosting your Mental Health, Immunity, and Managing Anxiety

Over the last few weeks (and months for some), our worlds have been turned upside down and all around as our communities are faced with the impact of COVID-19. I have appreciated having access to guidance from medical experts on how to possibly slow the spread of the virus, as well as some tips on how to potentially boost our immune systems in the event that exposure occurs. As a mental health professional, I am naturally interested in how to increase our mental health resilience as well, especially in attempting to best help clients who are faced with many complex emotions and circumstances. Personally, I have experienced a range of emotions as the weeks have unfolded, including stress related to figuring out how to manage home-schooling/childcare/work to sadness as empathy kicks in and I can feel the weight of the world's struggles and pain. This article will primarily provide resources in managing COVID-19 related anxiety; however I do want to stress what I believe to be very important-**all of your emotions at this time are a natural response to being in crisis mode and all of your emotions are valid.** Also, there can be something very powerful, and even healing, in remembering that you are not hurting and struggling alone. When the feelings intensify, give yourself space and grace to feel what you feel. In other words, self-compassion is your new best friend!

Onto anxiety....if we were to imagine Anxiety as some type of bad guy, as my 6-year old son likes to say, that wants to take over the world, the bad guy would be feeling pretty powerful right now! Partly this is because Anxiety grows in size and multiplies when Anxiety is armed with **UNCERTAINTY**. For those that suffer from an anxiety disorder and for everyone who experiences anxiety once in a while, we know that Anxiety seems to really cling to us when there are a lot of unknowns. The what-ifs can really get us, when we just aren't sure: What if I choose the wrong major? What if this relationship doesn't work out? What if I get laid off? What if myself or a loved one contracts COVID-19? Anxiety thrives when these thoughts start to enter our minds and this is partly because when we start to worry, our bodies fight or flight response kicks in and prepares us to be able to fight really hard or run really fast in the event that we are in danger (i.e. We are being chased by a bear). Unfortunately, our high functioning brains can't really tell the difference between real danger and anticipating something bad happening. As a result, worry turns us into The Hulk when it might be better suited for us to be a little more like Yoda. In fight or flight mode, our thoughts start to race (likely because when faced with actual danger, it is really helpful to be able to think quickly on our feet) and Anxiety really starts to take hold when those racing thoughts become catastrophic. Catastrophic thoughts, such as I will lose my job or my loved one will get severely ill, can take over and then we essentially live in the worst-case scenario instead of our current reality. Please note, thinking in this fashion is expected and natural, especially when faced with uncertainty; however, when left unchecked, irrational, catastrophic thoughts can steal our joy and impair our functioning. So, a large part of keeping the anxiety monster in check involves keeping our thoughts in check. Below are some tools that can be implemented to help keep the thoughts, and anxiety, manageable:

1. **Expect and accept anxiety.** Anxiety is uncomfortable and therefore we don't like it! Anxiety is typically thought of as a negative emotion, though it can be very helpful as it tends to push us to problem solve and take action, such as studying for a test after worrying about failing a class. Anxiety is primarily uncomfortable because it gives us those fight or flight physical sensations that are unpleasant, such as sweating due to our

heart rate speeding up and chest pains due to muscle tightness from breathing more rapidly. What happens when many of us feel uncomfortable is that we start judging and even fearing emotions. Thoughts such as AOh no, I feel scared so something really bad must be happening! Or Oh great, I'm anxious again, what if I have a panic attack at work? actually intensify anxiety and feed the Anxiety monster. On the other hand, expecting that anxiety will come AND deciding that you can tolerate it, diminishes the fears and quiets the monster. Helpful thoughts might include, I'm noticing that I'm anxious right now, which I was anticipating happening when one of my kids starts to cough. Which brings me to the next point....

2. **The goal is to manage anxiety, not eliminate it all together.** Anxiety is a natural human emotion and we will all experience it now and then. When anxiety becomes a problem (AKA a mental health disorder), it causes significant distress or impairs functioning, such as missing work, having difficulty sleeping, etc. Especially in times of significant stress or change, know that we are likely doing pretty well if the anxiety isn't extremely high or constant. It is difficult to evaluate for sure how well we are managing anxiety as we all have different thresholds, though it is fairly easy to know when anxiety is winning. With realistic expectations for anxiety, we can manage it by....
3. **Become a rational and reasonable thinker.** The opposite of rational and reasonable is emotional and uninformed. At this time, when there are a lot of uncertainties about COVID-19, look to sources that you trust and become informed about what we do know to be true. In addition, try to avoid making decisions based on emotions and try to instead look to reason. Anxiety is going to be one of the most prevalent emotions at this time and it can be helpful to recognize and identify fear when it surfaces in order to keep it in check. In the words of wise Yoda, named must be your fear before banish it you can. When I came back to the office this week and encountered the screening station, I felt some pretty intense emotion. While I wiped down the thermometer, noticed the drinking fountains covered and answered questions related to symptoms, it was difficult to not feel alarmed. At that moment, FEAR could have told me that all of these procedures mean that something really bad is about to happen and we are all in danger. When my thoughts started to go in that direction, I had to identify that I was feeling some anxiety and then go back to what I know to be true-the procedures are in place out of caution and to help slow the spread of the virus and protect employees and the community. Shifting my thoughts some did not completely eliminate anxiety, but it certainly helped to keep the anxiety from escalating.
4. **Slow the fight or flight response.** If we can slow our physiological anxiety response down, the emotions tend to lighten. Thankfully, we have many different ways of reversing our fight or flight response and almost all of them involve reducing cortisol and adrenaline, our stress hormones, and increasing calming brain chemicals, such as oxytocin or dopamine. Physical activities, such as long and slow deep breathing, muscle relaxation or aerobic exercise have been shown to reduce stress hormones and produce feelings of calm. Any activity that gives you pleasure will produce calming brain chemicals and therefore reduce cortisol, which could include watching a funny movie, painting or gardening. Finally, connection produces oxytocin and we don't need scientific

proof of this, as we can feel it! Whether it is getting a nice letter from grandma, cuddling a puppy or crying with your best friend over Facetime, when we give or receive love and care, we feel better! Now more than ever, take the time to connect. Taking it a step further might involve being vulnerable and connecting in ways you haven't before, such as volunteering to deliver food to community members in need or possibly joining an online neighborhood chat group.

5. **Ride it Out and take it with you.** Since we know to expect that anxiety will surface now and then, it is important to remind ourselves that anxiety is an emotion that is not permanent and that anxiety always ebbs and flows. The Anxiety monster grows when it paralyzes us and prevents us from doing the things we value and give us purpose. Anxiety says, Oh great, I can really get to Sally now, she's stuck in her bed doing absolutely nothing except worrying about what might happen! A resilient mindset involves recognizing that you can handle it when you feel anxious (I've got this!) and that you will continue to do what is important to you even though it might be harder when you are scared. In part, this process works because it lets our brain know that maybe whatever it is you are worrying about, isn't so scary after all! A wonderful tool that can be practiced when taking this approach is mindfulness, as this practice allows us to be in the moment, even if that involves noticing some things that aren't necessarily comfortable. A wonderful resource for mindfulness beginners is <https://www.mindfulnesscds.com>. This site includes research and tools from Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the experts on mindfulness-based stress reduction.
6. **Self-Care.** Thankfully, many of the self-care practices that boost our physical immunity also boost our mental health immunity. Exercise, eating nutritious food, getting adequate sleep, and stress management all play a role in promoting positive emotions and managing negative emotions. A healthy dose of doing something pleasurable and something productive, along with regular self-care, is foundational for mental and physical health. A resource that I really enjoy for tips on overall health and longevity is www.bluezones.com.
7. **Talk to a Professional.** This is an incredibly stressful and emotional time for many people in our community. Gaining additional support and resources can be very helpful. CHI St. Alexius Employee Assistance Program offers virtual counseling through ZOOM, which is HIPPA compliant video conferencing. We are also able to do phone consultations as needed. Please contact us by calling 701-530-7195 to schedule or learn more about our program.

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