

Coping with Anxiety during CoronaVirus.

By Dr. Eric Kuelker R.Psych.

You may be feeling anxiety about corona virus, especially now that it has been declared a pandemic. This anxiety is not surprising, we have had a very long period of peace and prosperity since the end of World War II. Even then, the danger was overseas, not on the soil of Canada. We do not have a clear sense of how to handle a major health crisis, such as what is unfolding now. However, there are several things you can do to decrease your anxiety. They are to focus, filter, and framework.

Focus

The first step in decreasing your anxiety is to take a deep breath. Let the air flow down into your lungs, and then flow out again. Pause. Take another. Notice the air going down into your lungs, and then smoothly leaving again. Pause. Take another breath. Good. Notice that at this moment, you are safe. As you look at your screen, you are completely safe. Your heart is beating regularly, your skin is intact and healthy, your body is safe. At this moment, in this location in time, you are completely safe. You are *alive!*

This is a fact. You could turn on a video camera at this moment, and it would record that you are safe. The camera would keep recording, and it would show that 10 seconds later, in the next chunk of time, you are safe. Completely safe. The camera would keep gathering data, and 10 seconds later, it would show you are safe. This is the truth.

Stay focused on this truth. Anxiety comes when we think about frightening things that have happened to us in the past. Fear also surges up when we think of catastrophic things that **might** happen to us in the future. When people think “What if I.....get into an accident / get cancer / lose my house / get sick?” then their mind floods with anxiety. This is why anxiety is so strong at this time. People are busy thinking “What if this bad event, or that terrible outcome, happens?” People are not thinking about the decent future. They are not thinking “What if I encounter a manageable problem, I take steps to overcome it, and everything turns out fine in the long run?” They are not thinking “What if I have to work 3/4 time for a month to help my company survive, and I have to dip into my vacation account, then the economy picks up, and I am back to full-time hours?” What anxious people do is think of the catastrophic future “What if I lose my job?” “What if I get sick and die?”

There is a huge problem with that pattern of thinking. The future is not a fact. The future is not real. The future is not here, it is the future. It does not exist *now*. What is a fact, what is real, is the present moment. And in this present moment, you are safe. You are just fine. Your heart is beating, your mind is working, your limbs are moving, you are completely safe at this moment. Even if you have a headache or a cough, you are still alive. Right here, right now, you are living. Focus on this truth, rather than letting your mind race into the future (which does not exist anyway) and dream up all sorts of scenarios of doom and misery. Focus on the reality that you are safe at this moment in time. There is a relaxation exercise called “Safe Right Now” that can help you achieve a deeper level of calmness and certainty than simply reading these words on the page. The audio recording is on the webpage.

The second major thing to focus on is what you can actually do. Thinking about things that you have no control or influence over, is a prescription for anxiety. But if you focus on what you can directly influence, then you will stay more calm. You can wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds.

That is well within your control. You can sneeze into tissue paper, if you have to. You can keep 6 to 9 feet from people. You can **do** these things to keep you safer. Worrying does not keep you more safe. Action does. If you take these actions consistently, you will be far more likely to be healthy. The virus does not spread through X-rays or radio waves, or other paths that we cannot stop. It spreads mostly through close contact with an infected person. If you do the recommended actions of hand-washing, social distancing and more, it cannot jump the gap. Focus on what you can do right here, right now, and that these actions will keep you healthy.

Filter

The next major action is to filter what is going into your mind. Thanks to technology, we can put a breathtaking amount of information into our mind, from every part of the world, 24/7. We can go to videos, websites, FaceBook, radio, TV, But this is not necessarily a good thing. The firehose of information can flood us with fear, if we are not careful in filtering it. When you go to the news or smartphone, ask yourself these two simple questions. First “Do I need to know this?” Second, “Will this increase or decrease my anxiety?”

“Do I need to know this?”

We are so used to seeking out information that we rarely step back and ask if we need to know it. Surprisingly, the answer often is 'no'. We live here, in our houses, and move around our city. We come in contact with the people in our workplace, neighbourhood, and stores. We do not live in Paris. Or Baltimore. We actually do not **need** to know what is going on in Paris. It might be *interesting*, but we do not need to know it. We only need to know what is happening right next to us. That is where we live. We do not live in Paris. It is on another continent.

The problem with finding out what is happening in Paris, or another city thousands of miles away, is that it can flood us with fear. Hearing that another dozen people died somewhere across the planet increases our anxiety. And that is the problem with taking in information that we do not **need** to know. It either clutters our brain, or increases our fear. This is not helpful.

Filter your consumption of news to what you need to know. You need to know what is happening in your city. You need to know what Health Canada or the Centers of Disease Control are saying. You need to know what the Public Health officer is saying in your region. You need to know what precautions are in force at your workplace. You do not need to know what is happening in another country, or what some other government in a different country is doing or not doing.

Will this increase or decrease my anxiety?

In your recreation time, pose this question. When you are scrolling through Netflix, or YouTube, or FaceBook, ask if this video or post will increase your anxiety, or decrease it. Watching documentaries on the Black Death is going to escalate your fear. Reading a FaceBook post about what is happening in Iran will increase your fear. This is not helpful. Watching videos about baseball or sailing or Mozart will keep your anxiety lower. They are a distraction, and remind you that life goes on.

If you are selective, look for videos or articles on people who got sick, had a dry cough and fever for 5 days, and then recovered nicely. That will decrease your anxiety, because it reminds you that the vast majority of people who get corona virus pull through just fine, and go back to living their lives. We

have wondrously sophisticated immune systems, and they are brilliantly engineered to fight off whatever infection or virus is wandering around at this time. We also have a high-quality healthcare system, which has learned a lot of lessons from previous outbreaks such as SARS.

Framework

This last tip is for the people who have had to self-isolate due to concerns about being infected. This can definitely be a stressful time for you. When I worked for the Correctional Service of Canada, one of the punishments given to the prisoners for smuggling contraband or other infractions was to put them in solitary confinement. Having to self-isolate means that your movements are now restricted. This can bring on negative emotions of loneliness, fear, and sadness. Thankfully, you have a lot more options open to you than the guys under the custody of the CSC. These steps can offset some of the negative emotional impacts of self-isolation.

Schedule your Day

Having a blank slate to the day seems like fun for a few minutes, but it is not the best option for being in self-isolation for 14 days on end. Boredom and despair can set in after a while. It is much better to structure your time, so that you have a sense that your day is in order. When you have a framework to your day, it does not seem empty and meaningless. You have an task to do, and that is to survive self-isolation and stay healthy. Here are some tips to help map out each day of your confinement.

Set an alarm to get up at the same time each day. That is the first element of structuring your day, to start it with regularity. Block off time for breakfast. Then, place in several different activities, according to your preference in terms of order. I strongly encourage that one of these activities be a daily walk outside, *if your physician / self-isolation directives permit it*. A great antidote to feeling cooped up inside is to get outside for an hour or more. Be sure to follow the guidelines around social distance, handshaking, and more when you are on your walk or hike, if you are permitted to be outdoors. I encourage that your walk be fairly brisk, so that your body is getting some exercise.

A second activity to put in the daily schedule is video calls to people you care for. There are a multitude of platforms from Skype to FaceTime that permit video connection. Plan for these calls in advance, so that you have something to look forward to each and every day. This will remind you that even though you are alone physically, you still are part of a web of people who care for you and love you. Keep the calls focused on your lives, and ask them to not tell you stories of disease in far-away places. You can place the filter early, as we discussed above.

A third type of activity to schedule is something that is productive. Have you been meaning to clean out the attic for a while? Plunk it in the schedule. Is there an online course you can take to sharpen up your skills at work? The computer is literally right in front of your eyes. Block off the slot in the schedule, sign up for the course, and use the time to improve your skills. This will help add a sense of purpose to your life, if you set a daily time to do something productive. 2-3 hours a day of this will help the time to move along nicely.

A fourth activity is to pick up one of your hobbies. Remember that guitar at the back of your closet? Or the scrapbook you started when your kids were younger, but you have not touched? Tying flies for fishing, drawing sketches, whatever you find as a hobby. These do not have a sense of obligation attached, but are for your enjoyment. Put those in the schedule as well.

One activity that is NOT recommended is to drink more than one serving of alcohol a day. It is a depressant, and the last thing you need when you are in isolation is to put something in your body that makes you more sad or angry. If you are flooded with negative emotions, grab the phone instead, to talk to friend or trusted family member. There are no negative side effects from doing so. However, grabbing a bottle of rum when you have a lot of negative emotions results in even more problems in the long run. The hang-over, the sense of guilt and shame, being thrown off your schedule, all make your self-isolation more difficult than it needs to be.

A final activity that is recommended is to institute some spiritual practices. Whether it is meditating for half an hour a day, or listening to podcasts, sermons, or worship music from your religious background, there are a variety of things you can do to maintain your spiritual well-being. This can help remind you that there is a different perspective on life than what you see from within the walls of your house. Spirituality can be a source of deep comfort for people (like anything else, it can be misused) and it can sustain you through your self-isolation.

Finally.

No one can predict the future. If I could, I would not have sold my stock in Apple when it was \$22 a share, 20 years ago. But we can take steps to manage our anxiety. Humanity has survived very challenging events in the past, and we will certainly survive this one. We will also rediscover that we are more resilient than we thought. Even now, Italians are singing to each other from their self-isolation, in order to boost each others spirits. If you focus on the reality that you are safe at this moment, your anxiety will drop. If you filter out news from far away places, and monitor only the news in your city, you will have less fear. And if you do have to self-isolate, then creating a daily routine, with diverse and helpful activities each hour, will help you to navigate the isolation, and come out doing fine. There are a couple of additional resources listed below, to help cover topics that are beyond the scope of this brief article.

Warmly,
Dr. Eric Kuelker R.Psych.
www.drkuelker.com

Overview of coping with a great list of resources at end.
<https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/social-distancing>

Talking to your kids about Corona Virus. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10222186556591631&set=a.1362989673545&type=3&theater>

Self-isolation
<https://nationalpost.com/health/coronavirus-covid-19-quarantine-self-isolation>