

# COPING WITH ONGOING PANDEMIC STRESS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extraordinary impact on our daily lives for over a year now. Though life has gradually progressed to a version of the “normal” we remember, the threat of COVID-19 continues to evolve and impact us in surprising ways. The information below may be helpful in managing some of the challenging emotions you may feel.

As the pandemic continues, you may be experiencing a range of reactions:

- › **Continued fears for health and safety.** As news of new variants and “breakthrough” cases are reported, our fears for our own health and for our loved ones may be renewed. Anxiety may spike as we follow news of the pandemic in our communities and around the world.
- › **Uncertainty, anxiety over the future.** You may feel unsure, hesitant about making plans or returning to old activities or hobbies. You may be unable to shake the level of fear that has built up over the last year. You may feel worried about what is around the corner, unable to fully trust a return to “normal.”
- › **Grief and loss.** The pandemic has resulted in impactful losses: ambiguous loss of routines and norms, and the tangible and sometimes overwhelming loss of loved ones or livelihoods. As life begins to look more “normal,” these losses can be felt even more keenly.
- › **Fluctuating emotions.** You may feel excited, relieved, or happy with our communities opening up again. At the same time, you may feel unsettled and disoriented. You may even feel sad, with work flexibilities ending or the loss of time at home with loved ones. Your mood may fluctuate from moment to moment.
- › **Exhaustion, fatigue, or “languishing.”** You may feel a sense of restlessness, a lack of motivation or interest in things that have brought you joy in the past. You may feel more sensitive to small pressures, overwhelmed, or drained of energy by tasks that used to be routine.

## Addressing fears and anxiety

- › **Continue to follow health guidelines shared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and local public health agencies.** This has been, and continues to be, a reliable way to feel empowered in the face of the scary uncertainties of this disease.
- › **Monitor your exposure to the news.** Media news coverage can arouse emotion and increase fear. It’s important to get the facts, but it may not be helpful to hear reports over and over. Be aware of how you and family members respond to news stories. Limit television or online coverage if it becomes distressing.
- › **Try to keep your focus on the short-term.** When the virus continues to impact our communities in spite of your best efforts to follow recommendations, it can feel defeating. How will you get through each week, day, or hour? Take it one day at a time, and try to talk back to persistent thoughts or worries about the future: “I’m doing what I can.”
- › **Notice what triggers anxiety and push back with “baby steps”.** It’s natural to simply avoid anxiety-provoking situations, but doing so reinforces a sense of threat. When you are in a situation that sparks anxiety, work on taking small steps to address it when it is safe to do so. For example, if you enjoy dining out, but feel too stressed by the idea of a restaurant, try a short get-together on a patio.

## Coping with challenging emotions

- › **Be patient with yourself and others.** The pandemic brought seismic shifts to the way we live, acclimating ourselves to isolation and watching out for danger in every environment. Give yourself credit for what you've navigated so far and permission to work through this at your own pace.
- › **Give and get support from others,** even when you feel like withdrawing. It is natural to detach from others when we are feeling down or sad – but others can help us pull through when we feel this way. Send a text to a friend or family member to reconnect, or schedule a visit or phone call with loved ones.
- › **Allow your feelings.** You are going through an extraordinary experience, one that has likely sparked a wide variety of emotions. Expressing them can help give you some release. You might try journaling, or addressing them in some creative way, such as painting or music.
- › **Continue to anchor yourself in routines.** Routines help us feel purposeful, rooted in a version of normalcy. Regular meal times, bedtimes, or rituals during the day can help us feel a sense of security and stability in a rapidly changing world.
- › **Reach out for help when you need it.** Recognize and respond to signs that stress is building into something more. If you consistently struggle to sleep, have aches and pains, changes in appetite, or negative emotions like hopelessness, anger, or worry that's hard to control, these may be cues that help is needed. Your EAP is a good resource for finding support or to talk through concerns.

## Getting energized

- › **Reclaim some balance.** Spend time doing things that can distract you from worries and that help you feel more calm. Take time off when you can to relax, even if you don't have formal plans. Read books you enjoy, take walks in the park, or binge watch that TV show you've been meaning to watch. Taking time away from your worries can help you reset and recharge.

- › **Give yourself uninterrupted time for meaningful projects, tasks, or activities.** Turn off your cell phone, or put the "do not disturb" sign on the door. Even small steps toward achieving a goal gives us a sense of hope and progress. It can be as simple as completing a crossword puzzle or organizing your inbox at work.
- › **Get creative with stale stress relievers.** You may find that your normal "go-to" techniques to manage stress do not have the impact they once had. Think about what works for you to manage stress and look for ways to expand into new territory to keep you engaged and challenged. For example, if exercise works for you, try a new type of workout, like water aerobics, jump rope, or kickboxing.

## Self-care matters.

Self-care is a way to build up and maintain our emotional, physical, and spiritual resources. It's important to take care of our own well-being in order to replenish our energy, recharge our spirit, and deal with stressors effectively.

Core examples of self-care include:

- › **Getting enough rest each night** to wake up feeling well-rested and energized.
- › **Making time to eat well and stay hydrated.** Regular, well-balanced meals give you fuel to stay strong and focused.
- › **Fitting regular exercise into your routine** to lower stress and help with sleep. Even 15 minutes a day helps!
- › **Relaxing your mind and body** to release tension. Try deep breathing or mindfulness exercises.
- › **Investing in meaningful relationships.** Lean on them for support.
- › **Talking through concerns and worries.** Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available 24/7 to offer support to you and your household members.