

Mindfulness techniques for managing coronavirus anxiety at home and work

What is coronavirus?

Of all the newsworthy events that have happened so far in the new year, there's one word that has stayed consistently in the media and is now at the centre of a lot of daily coverage – coronavirus, also known as COVID-19. While coronaviruses are actually a large family of viruses that can range from the common cold to more severe diseases, this one in particular has been getting a lot of attention because it's a novel virus, meaning that it's a new strain of the coronavirus family.

The constant alerts and announcements about coronavirus can be anxiety-inducing and leave you with a lot of questions – should I really be scared of the virus? What should I do to prepare? How will this affect my business? Whether you're preparing for yourself and your family or you're an employer wondering how to prepare your teams, there are several approaches you can take to cope.

Mindfulness can help you navigate the overwhelming amount of information about the current coronavirus situation: get familiar with the facts, understand how the brain works in these types of situations, know how you can calmly and rationally prepare, and bring an awareness to how you're processing the information to help guide intentional action.

Should we be afraid of coronavirus?

Ever since the spread of coronavirus was first reported from Wuhan, China, on December 31, 2019, we have watched the virus cross the borders of multiple countries. With the number of infected countries continuing to climb, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently raised its risk assessment of the novel coronavirus strain to "very high", causing many to start feeling amplified anxiety over the virus.

From what we know so far, the most common symptoms of coronavirus are fever, cough and shortness of breath. It's important to note that these can also be symptoms of the flu or the common cold, and if you haven't been around anyone who's travelled to Asia, Iran or Italy or who has already tested positive for coronavirus, then your chances of having the virus are very small. But to help keep your mind at ease if symptoms do begin to emerge in your home or work environments, **knowing when to call the doctor** and go in for clinical testing can be beneficial.

The coronavirus is also occurring alongside **a very busy flu season**; there are ways to prepare yourself and your workplace so that everyone can stay calm and rational during this time of uncertainty.

How your brain views the coronavirus

As helpful as your brain's "fight or flight" response can be to protect you from potentially dangerous situations, it can also stir up anxious thoughts during events such as the global spread of the coronavirus.

So, why is your brain fixating on the dangers of the coronavirus when the regular flu season has affected so many more people? The flu is familiar; we all learn about it early on in life so we know what it is and how to handle it as adults. New viruses like COVID-19 can be a little scarier than an existing virus, and all of that uncertainty can make it easy for your brain to latch onto anxious thoughts and spiral.

While it's good to have awareness of what's going on, taking a moment to be present with your anxious thoughts and feelings can help you discover whether your thoughts are fact-based or whether you are experiencing a stress response to the uncertainty of the situation.

Understanding the difference between the two can help you maintain your inner peace as more information is gathered.

Moderate your media coverage of the virus

Most of us have at least one screen in front of us for most of the day, and it's easy to fall into one of two camps – people who watch and read every media source available about the coronavirus, and people who choose to avoid the topic altogether to focus on “happier” things. Both responses are valid when there is a new virus spreading, but there is also a way to mindfully merge both camps into a calmer middle ground.

Getting information and updates about the coronavirus is important, but tuning into sensationalised media coverage that's meant to induce anxiety and panic can be counterproductive to maintaining your personal or professional environments. Setting personal boundaries and limiting your media updates to fact-based, frequently updated government websites can help you stay informed without triggering anxiety or worry. These resources include:

- **The WHO**
- **The CDC**

Tips for making a plan

An important component of mindfulness is accepting things as they are but choosing how to react to them, and that same principle can be applied to the current situation. While you cannot change that the coronavirus has spread, you can choose how you want to react to it, and making a plan at home and work can help you react with confidence and rationality.

Planning at home

- Stock up on medications and food to limit time spent in public spaces.
- Use the latest government recommendations if family members become symptomatic.
- Having open, safe discussions where your feelings and the feelings of your family are validated and addressed can also help to maintain an environment of peaceful calm.



Planning for the workplace

- Having plans in place for working remotely and encouraging use of available sick days can help companies take care of their teams.
- Employers should also create safe spaces for open, non-judgemental conversation about COVID-19 to help employee wellness.
- If you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose and use a napkin as opposed to your hand.
- Use alcohol wipes to sanitise your workspace, phone and any other technology that you touch.
- Avoid touching your face with your hands.


Remain calm (and aware)

It's difficult to turn a blind eye to the urgent news stories and panicked responses to the coronavirus across the globe, but approaching the situation mindfully can help you, your family and your workplace cope and plan calmly and rationally. Focus your attention inward to your thoughts and feelings about the situation and validate that your mind will want to “go down the rabbit hole” with anxious thoughts since this is a new viral strain.

But rather than fearing the coronavirus, understanding the symptoms, assessing whether anyone you are in contact with is symptomatic, and making a plan at both work and home are all ways to confidently prepare. The CDC, the WHO and other reputable government websites that don't sensationalise the topic are great sources to follow for real, unsensationalised facts about the current status of the coronavirus, and those sites will also have the most up-to-date instructions for the best ways to keep yourself and everyone around you safe during this unique flu and illness season.

Sources:

World Health Organization, www.who.int
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov

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