

Calming Your Coronavirus Anxiety

Think back to a few weeks ago when we were first facing this virus. Every day we struggled with trying to weigh the risk of exposure with the reward of personal freedom – Do I go to work? Do I send my kids to school? Do I go to the gym? Do I visit Mom in the nursing home?



When the Government announced a “lockdown” many of us experienced a sense of relief - a decision had been made. The human mind can experience decision fatigue in the face of so many choices. Sometimes accepting outside control is OK. It provides structure for us. This can be good for an over stressed brain - instructions give us control - we can finally control some part of this pandemic. Humans don't do well with uncertainty. We need to focus on what is reassuring and positive, and what we can control.

Here are some things that might help you find some peace in this crazy time.



1. Structure your time

Reason: Routines are calming for everyone. Whether for children or adults, our minds need to know what to expect next. Anxiety thrives in uncertainty.

Make a bucket list of things you will do during this time – somethings you want to do and somethings that you need to do.

Prioritize those that lead to a measurable result – we all need to experience successes.

Start with a morning routine. Keep it simple. Cook a new recipe. Make a meal plan. Plan a video conference with your family & friends.

If you are working from home, don't forget to make time for breaks and build in a recharge time.

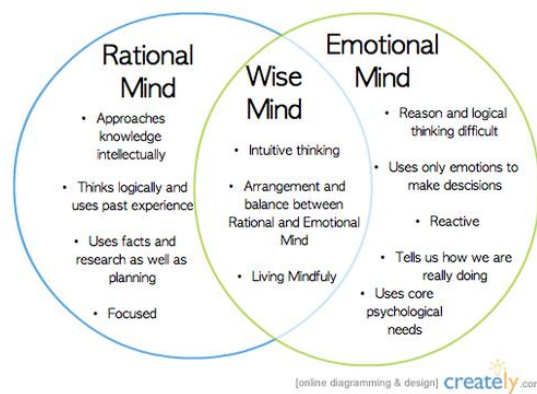
If you are still attending work, then find time to connect with your colleagues and remember to celebrate the successes of your team.

2. Take A news break

Reason: Our brains need to return to baseline functioning without constant stimulation from a fear-inducing topic.

Constantly taking in news headlines about infection, risk, and death feed our fears. Anxiety is fear based – in uncertain times we start to anticipate fear and we tend to focus on the bad things happening in our world. Soon we can't see anything but the bad.

Avoiding the news for a day makes our “wise mind” available when we do tune back into news. “Wise mind” is a term from dialectical behavioral therapy that refers to a way of looking at things with perspective and acceptance, or “peace in the truth.” Try to cultivate your “Peace in the truth”. Has there been an upside to social distancing for your family?



3. Thought charts and Worry time.

Reason: Thought charts help us see a choice in what we focus on and try to shift our perspective to a plan of action instead of the worry.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most evidence-based way to address fear. CBT is used for specific phobias, as well as widespread unease. With practice, it teaches us to reframe our thoughts in a way that generates less reactivity and more measured responses.

One helpful technique from CBT is to create a thought chart: This includes three steps: identifying the thought that creates concern, followed by the actual worried thoughts, and finally a challenge to them. The challenge to these worried thoughts should include self-compassionate phrases (“It’s normal to be worried right now”), as well as plan-of-action phrases.

When I teach CBT to children, I use a book called Taming Your Gremlin. My favorite CBT workbook for adults is called Mind Over Mood. Both are available on Amazon.