

# Is there a right way to worry about coronavirus? And other mental health tips

The coronavirus is taking a toll on our mental and our physical health. So how do we make sense of it? We asked some experts

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‘Feelings come and go and they will pass, and that’s what we have to remind ourselves when we are feeling anxious.’ Photograph: Josep Curto/Alamy Stock Photo

In the face of indefinite isolation, contagion, financial uncertainty, and with no return to normality in sight, coronavirus is taking its toll on our collective mental health.

[Crisis Text Line](#), which operates in the US, UK and Canada, has seen a huge rise in volume since late February, and 80% of the texts it receives about coronavirus deal with anxiety.

In these unprecedented times, what can people do to bring themselves a bit of mental relief?

## **Acknowledge your anxiety**

People deal with anxiety in ways that range from harmless to harmful – from binge-watching TV to comfort eating and alcohol. But the commonality is that these are ways of avoiding dealing with it, says psychiatrist Dr Richa Bhatia.

First, she recommends acknowledging that anxiety, which is a normal evolutionary reaction to a perceived danger or threat.

And Bhatia suggests trying to reframe anxiety as “a set of feelings, thoughts and emotions” rather than something defining to you or your life. “Feelings come and go and they will pass, and that’s what we have to remind ourselves when we are feeling anxious.”

## Schedule worrying

If the worry gets overwhelming, Bhatia recommends putting aside a set time for it, say 30 minutes a day. “This might seem counterintuitive, but it can actually help reduce worrying.” The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) [says](#) setting a daily half-hour “worry period” at the same time and place helps to stay in the present moment the rest of the day. During the allotted slot it recommends “distinguishing between worries over which you have little or no control, and worries about problems you can influence.”

Limiting daily news consumption may be wise. “If you’re losing sleep over what’s happening or you’re unable to concentrate on anything other than the risk that someone in your life has, you should probably consider [lowering] your dose of media to once a day,” says Dr Ken Duckworth, medical director of National Alliance on Mental Illness (Nami). Apps like [Freedom](#), which enable you to block certain websites for specific time periods, can help with this.

## Reframe the situation

You are not “stuck inside”. No, you are indulging in a long-awaited opportunity to slow down, focus on yourself and your home, [writes](#) psychologist Dr Aarti Gupta at the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

“Doing one productive thing per day can lead to a more positive attitude,” she writes. “Set your sights on long-avoided tasks, reorganize, or create something you’ve always wanted to.”

## Set quarantine rituals

With all the additional time spent not commuting or getting to places, Gupta suggests using it to do something special with new rituals. This could entail a walk first thing in the morning, starting a journal, or speaking to a family member every morning on FaceTime.

“Having something special during this time will help you look forward to each new day,” she [writes](#).

## Get moving

Exercise is a “classic anxiety reduction strategy”, says Duckworth. A [review](#) in the Journal of Happiness Studies found that those who exercise just one day a week may experience a happiness boost. It could be YouTube classes, a [fitness app](#), cycling, jogging – and a New York club called [Nowadays](#) has created an online “virtual club” with live DJ sets every night.

## Small acts of altruism

Helping others can give you a sense of purpose and control. Do you have an elderly or sick neighbor you can offer your services to? “The idea is to get out of the helpless zone if you can. If you can get out of that then be an agent,” says Duckworth.

## Physical distancing, not social distancing

It goes without saying, but “loneliness is bad for humans,” says Duckworth. Have a coffee over FaceTime. Call your parents or kids every day.

While in some ways coronavirus is isolating, Bhatia says it is worth remembering that it’s a shared global experience. “Everybody’s affected to different degrees, but the bottom line is that everybody’s in it together, and scientists all over the world are trying to work on it together to find a solution quickly.”

## More resources

- Mindful walking, breathing and eating for just a couple of minutes several times a day can help with anxiety, says Bhatia. The aim of mindfulness is to bring the mind to the present moment – or the process of trying to. Try mindfulness apps such as [Calm](#) and [Headspace](#).
- If you want to talk to a professional, many therapists are now doing appointments by phone or conference call. Bhatia recommends checking [Psychology Today](#), which lists therapists in the US, UK and many other countries around the world, and the [American Psychiatric Association](#). The [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#) and [Australian Psychological Society](#) are also good places to start.
- Yale professor Laurie Santos’s happiness course, in which she explains the science of wellbeing, is available free on [Coursera](#). She also has a [podcast](#).
- The Anxiety and Depression Association of America has a dedicated coronavirus [page](#). In the UK, the Mental Health Foundation’s [section on coronavirus](#) is a helpful resource.
- If you need urgent help in the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) or [jo@samaritans](mailto:jo@samaritans). Other international helplines can be found at [www.befrienders.org](http://www.befrienders.org).
- **( From the Guardian newspaper)**