



## **Coping with Pandemic Related Stress**

During an infectious disease outbreak, we may be required to spend more time at home and have less physical contact with others. Living in isolation can be stressful and it is normal to experience a number of changes in our feelings. This fact sheet provides information on some of the common feelings people experience and how we can manage our emotions during isolation.

### **Infectious disease outbreaks and emotions**

An infectious disease outbreak is unlike anything we are likely to have experienced before and can lead to many significant changes in our lives. When we are faced with difficult situations, it is normal to experience feelings of stress. Stress is our normal protective response to challenging or dangerous situations.

Stress can lead to changes such as:

- **Physical changes** (e.g. difficulty sleeping, fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, decreased sex drive and high blood pressure)
- **Behavioural changes** (e.g. angry outbursts, avoiding people, excessive use of alcohol and drugs, and relationship issues)
- **Psychological symptoms** (e.g. worry, crying, sense of loss of control, feeling overwhelmed, difficulty concentrating and loss of confidence)

People respond to stressful events differently and feelings vary from person to person. Not all of these feelings are necessarily negative. For example, during infectious disease outbreaks, some people have reported increased feelings of happiness, relief and solidarity. However, it is common to experience a number of other emotions when we are isolated. We may feel:

- Irritable or restless
- Bored
- Lonely
- Frustrated or angry
- Confused
- Sadness, guilt or grief
- Nervous or fearful

## Stressors during an infectious disease outbreak

An infectious disease outbreak can present many challenges.

- **Our health and the health of loved ones** (e.g. we might worry about infection or spreading disease to others)
- **Restrictions on usual activities** (e.g. limits on travel and physical contact with others)
- **Access to essentials** (e.g. it might be difficult to access the things we need, such as medical care, prescriptions and basic supplies)
- **Finances** (e.g. changes to work hours or losing employment)

Being forced to quarantine can increase our risk of developing mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, if we are faced with a period of isolation, it is very important that we look after our loved ones and ourselves.

## Managing our feelings during an infectious disease outbreak

There are a number of practical things we can do to look after our physical and mental health if we are in a period of isolation.

- **Obtaining the facts.** We may be fearful about the health and safety of ourselves and others. Sourcing information from reputable sources like the World Health Organization (WHO) may help manage these fears.
- **Taking basic precautions to prevent infection.** The WHO recommends basic measures that people can take to protect themselves from COVID-19 infection, such as: hygiene practices (e.g. regular hand washing and avoiding touching your face), and physical distancing from others. Taking basic precautions can help reduce anxiety.
- **Taking a break from too much media coverage.** Our anxiety may be heightened if we are exposed to excessive negative media coverage.
- **Practicing self-care.** We can protect our physical and mental health by healthy eating, avoiding drugs and alcohol, getting a good amount of sleep, and doing regular exercise. Spending time outdoors can help lift our mood and improve our concentration.
- **Learning stress management.** For example, relaxation exercises involving deep breathing, muscle relaxation, yoga, meditation, mindfulness and music.
- **Acknowledging our feelings and sharing them with others.** This can be very beneficial for our mental health. We may also wish to 'check in' on our loved ones to provide them with support. There are many things we can still do to stay connected with family and friends (e.g. phone calls, letters, text messages, emails, video chat, or social media).

- **Developing a daily routine to cope with feelings of boredom.** A good routine is balanced and incorporates a mix of work, rest and play. During isolation we may wish to do more of the things we enjoy, or learn a new hobby or skill.
- **Seeking professional assistance.** Professionals such as General Practitioners, psychologists and counsellors provide support to people who are finding it difficult to cope with the stress resulting from COVID-19.

**For more information go to:**

[www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)

[www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

[www.phoenixaustralia.org](http://www.phoenixaustralia.org)

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