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Is Your COVID-19 Anxiety in the Healthy Range?

Attribute to: *Stewart Shankman, PhD, chief of psychology at Northwestern Memorial Hospital*

Is there a “normal” level of anxiety in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic?

The biggest inducer of anxiety is uncertainty, and right now there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding COVID-19. Anxiety in times like this is a normal response for a lot of people.

How does consumption of COVID-19-related news affect anxiety about the pandemic?

It's one thing to consume some information each day about COVID-19. However, if COVID-19 is all you're thinking or talking about, or if you're having trouble sleeping or eating because your mind is consumed by this, it may be time to talk to a professional.

How much news is too much in situations like this?

You have to ask yourself whether you are learning new information or if the information that you're consuming is actually leading to different actions on your part. That is, if the knowledge you're gaining leads to new action, then it may be worthwhile. If not, and you are listening to the same types of stories over and over and not changing what you're doing, you should turn off the television or exit out of social media apps and do something else.

Other than disconnecting for a while, what else can I do to help my mental health during this pandemic?

It's really important that people continue to take care of themselves. Our first defense against viruses is the body's own immune system and chronic psychological stress inhibits our natural immune system's ability to fight off infections. Deep breathing, exercise, mindfulness exercises and meditation can reduce our stress and help our immune system fight infections. Talking to a friend – about anything but the new coronavirus – can help us maintain healthy social connections and improve our health.

What motivates people to hoard things like toilet paper?

Uncertain situations are by definition uncontrollable, so when people are buying items (even if they don't need them), they feel like they are doing something taking back control. It is a false sense of control, though.



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Is it better to simply ignore the situation?

We shouldn't act like everything is completely normal, but we can take the recommended precautions without making ourselves so stressed and anxious that it then impairs our overall well-being.

If someone is currently receiving treatment for anxiety or has had treatment in the past, what should they do?

People who have a tendency toward clinical anxiety are more vulnerable in times of uncertainty. They should continue talking to their current therapist, or seek a therapist who provides evidence-based care such as cognitive behavioral therapy.

How can I help friends and family members who are especially anxious about COVID-19?

This is a time of unprecedented stress and anxiety, but we know from what has happened in other countries that this will most likely be a time-limited situation. Stay in touch with your loved ones and ask them if they are OK. If you are worried about their mental health, tell them you think they would benefit from the support of a therapist. If you believe they are in crisis, call your local crisis hotline to connect them with emergency support.