

## Coping With Anxiety and Depression During the Coronavirus Pandemic

A crisis can exacerbate existing mental health issues. Here's what you can do to protect your family.

By **Raychelle Cassada Lohmann, Contributor** March 24, 2020

**COVID-19 IS CAUSING** widespread fear and anxiety throughout the U.S. But the impact is more pronounced for people with existing mental health disorders. This is especially true for anyone who struggles with [anxiety](#) or [depression](#).



 (GETTY IMAGES)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in a given year 18% will struggle with an anxiety disorder, and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reports that 7% will have at least one major depressive episode. In short, there are a lot of people who struggle with these conditions.

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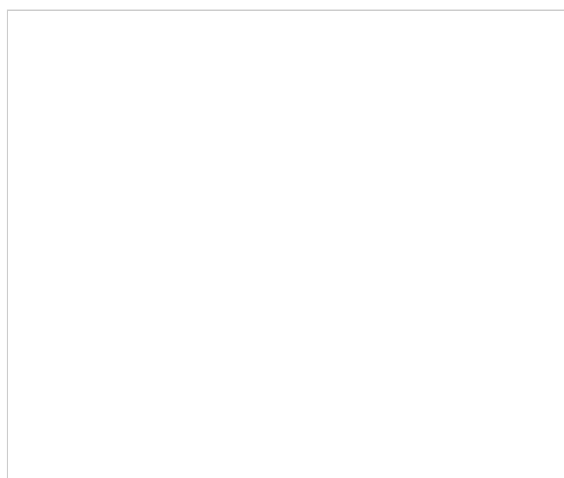
Add to that, there's a broad public health push for [social distancing](#), keeping space between ourselves and others outside our home, to slow the spread of the coronavirus. And that extends to holding off on most appointments with health professionals unless urgent.

Fortunately, there are new ways to connect with therapists and to address anxiety and depression. In these unprecedented times, many therapists are offering to counsel clients through telehealth, or specifically what's referred to as teletherapy. This allows clients to

interact virtually with their therapists from the comfort of their homes using only a smartphone or tablet.

Due to the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, many insurance plans are accepting telehealth as a viable option to conduct therapy. Just check with your plan in advance to see if this is covered. Also, for your own privacy and protection, make sure that your provider is using a secure HIPAA-compliant platform to conduct the telehealth session.

Those who struggle with anxiety disorders frequently have intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. And COVID-19 can add to one's "typical" levels of [stress](#) and worry. Kids and their parents may see an exacerbation of these issues occur during a crisis.



Fear of the unknown and uncertainty over how long we'll have to resort to limiting our daily lives, fear of contracting the coronavirus or even worry about how this will affect one's financial situation are legitimate concerns. But it's important to know that we are all in this together. There are millions of Americans who are worried about the same thing and feeling the effects of COVID-19. So, even though we are physically isolated, we are not alone in how we are feeling.

The 24/7 [media coverage](#) of COVID-19 pandemic has added to the already heightened levels of stress, anxiety and isolation. A study published in the journal *Psychiatric Research* showed that depression is associated with exposure to infectious diseases. We don't yet know what the mental health impact of the coronavirus will be. But based on past research, we could anticipate similar effects related to COVID-19, where increasing numbers are being exposed to the virus and many more are making drastic changes in their lives to try to slow its spread.

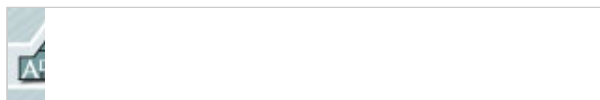
No doubt about it, having a mental condition during these unprecedented times can be cumbersome and burdensome. And for those who don't understand the nature of these

conditions, it can be even more frustrating. But hang in there. There are some evidence-based measures that you can take right now to help you cope and persevere this in turbulent time.

[ **READ:** [Protect Your Family's Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic.](#) ]

## Begin the Day With Gratitude

Before your feet hit the floor in the morning, think of something that you're [grateful](#) for. Making this a focus for yourself, and teaching your kids to do the same, can have a significant impact on your emotional health. The heaviness of our current situation can quickly weigh us down, and if we begin our day with doom and gloom, then we have set the negative feeling pendulum into full swing.



A study published in the journal *Psychotherapy Research* found that writing a gratitude letter can improve a person's outlook and emotional well-being. It even seems to change brain activity in a positive way, based on MRI scans of study participants.

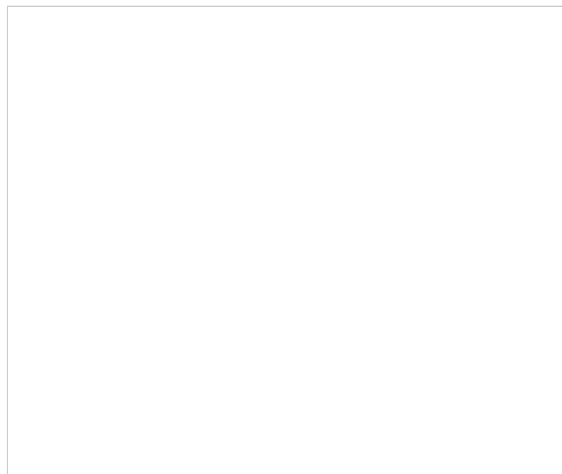
## Get Into a Routine and Make a Daily Schedule

[Depression and anxiety](#) can keep you from feeling in control of your life. One way to counteract that feeling is by making a regular schedule and sticking with it. When you organize and structure your life, you know what to expect. Make sure you have a family routine.

Remember, kids are used to routine and structure in schools. Many thrive on having consistency in their lives, which consequently helps them feel in control, something kids need now more than ever.

Not only will having a plan can help you stay centered, it will keep you focused on the tasks at hand. A [study](#) published in the *Annual Review of Psychology* on psychological habits showed people rely on their routines and habits when they are stressed. That helps them get through difficult times, suggesting that establishing healthy routines could help with physical, emotional and mental health during difficult times like these.

So go ahead and make a schedule. The first item on the list should be to make your bed. According to a survey by OnePoll and Sleepopolis, which provides mattress reviews, people who make their beds regularly tend to report feeling happier and more productive. Plus, if making your bed is on your to-do list, you can accomplish your first goal of the day.



[ **READ:** [How to Cope With Coronavirus Anxiety.](#) ]

## Get a Good Night's Sleep

According to the National Sleep Foundation, adults need between seven and nine hours of sleep each night. And research shows the amount and quality of sleep we get has a significant [impact on mental health](#). The amount of sleep kids need varies considerably by their age. That ranges from newborns snoozing away most of the day (14 to 17 hours recommended), to preschoolers splitting time awake and asleep (11 to 13 hours in la la land recommended), to [teens](#) who are advised to get eight to 10 hours of sleep daily, though they rarely do.

Researchers have discovered that those suffering from mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, are at an increased risk of [insomnia](#). And not getting adequate rest can raise one's risk for mental health problems.

So, during times of high stress, sleep is of utmost importance. In addition to following a routine, another way that you can ensure a healthy night's rest for you and your kids is by [making sure the whole family is active](#) during the day.

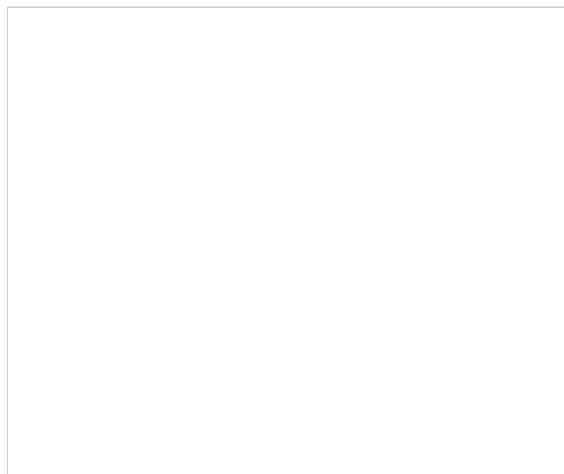
## Go Outside

[Research](#) from Sweden suggests that [being outside](#) is associated with a lower risk of developing psychiatric disorders. In a separate [study](#) published in the International Journal of Environmental Health Research, researchers showed that spending about 20 minutes in the park can improve your overall well-being.

Even if you can't get to a park, just getting some fresh air – while keeping 6 feet from others outside your household – can do you a world of good.

## Eat Healthy

During this stressful time, it's important to watch what you eat. That's because what you put into your body will affect how you think and feel. Research has long documented the [positive impact nutrition has on mood](#) and that eating well is associated with lower levels of anxiety and stress.



Research has demonstrated the benefits of eating unprocessed food and having a diet that's high in vegetables, fruits, unprocessed [grains](#), with fish and only modest amounts of lean meats and dairy. Studies suggest that those who eat this way have depression rates 25% to 35% lower than those who consume a traditional Western diet characterized by processed foods, lots of red meat and high intake of unhealthy fats and carbs. The saying "you are what you eat" applies as much to mental health as it does to your physical health.

[ **READ:** [How Does the Coronavirus Affect Children and Infants?](#) ]

In a time of uncertainty, you need to take care of your mental health. Sure, you may be more confined than you usually are, but you don't have to let anxiety and depression consume you. Make your mental health a priority by following the measures outlined above.

Also, if you need professional help, please reach out, as there are trained professionals who would like to assist you. Don't forget, with COVID-19, you are not alone in how you are feeling. More importantly, remember this, too, shall pass.

## **Pediatrician Advice Parents Ignore**