

When Anxiety Is Useful, and When it's Not

Source: [Mind Beacon](#)

Anxiety is useful. Really, it is.

It might not feel that way all the time, but anxiety is like an alarm that tells us something is wrong. And, if we're in real danger, then anxiety is the normal and healthy reaction.

Anxiety only really becomes an issue when that "alarm starts going off when there's no real, immediate danger – when it gets stuck in the on position.

For a lot of us, that's happening more and more, and there's probably not a lot of confusion over why. We're constantly being bombarded by media messages that tell us, "Something is wrong!" or we need to panic!"

And, sure, COVID-19 is a global issue. But, for the vast majority of us, it's not a threat right now. Not in this minute. Same goes for many of the things we are stressing about right now.

So, if you're feeling anxious about it, or about other things out of your control, you can take a few steps.

1. Drop out for a while

Limit the news that you consume, both in terms of the amount of time spent and from certain sources. You're unlikely to miss anything important, so there's no need to spend an excess amount of time reading articles that all say the same thing.

2. Watch out for news that's telling you to panic!!!

Make sure that the sources you're reading from are scientifically based and reliable – that kind of news is likely to not change very quickly. Unless you're a frontline worker or first responder, it's unlikely you're under any immediate physical threat. Don't let anyone tell you that you need to be freaking out!

3. Guard against attention bias

A lot of our worries has to do with something called attention bias – the fact that we're paying so much attention to it makes it seem like a big deal. Flu and pneumonia get spread often, but we consider them to be commonplace. Sure, this isn't a risk we're used to living with, and we want to pay more attention, but don't equate the amount of risk with the amount of news coverage.

4. Don't join the echo chamber

Be aware of the social contagion phenomenon – people get ideas from each other; if one person says something is important, we tend to calibrate to each other. The reactions of people around us are very powerful, and a lot of groupthink can happen.

5. Pay attention to your thoughts

Be aware of the thoughts that you're having and the extent to which they correspond to reality – especially to the reality of your family and your immediate circle. If you have thoughts about people getting sick or about the news being more than you can handle, counter that by remembering that there's a good chance that no one you know is in any immediate danger.

And, if you know someone who does have it, remind yourself that you can't control the outcome. You can control your response – taking them to the hospital or making sure their needs are met – but you have no ultimate control beyond that. Also, have realistic thoughts and limit them to people you know personally, rather than about people far outside your circle.

6. Get out of the circle

Find activities and things to do that are enjoyable and that won't be a direct route to thinking about COVID-19 or anything else that's making you particularly anxious. If you're catching up with friends, don't dwell on the news if you're feeling overwhelmed. Take the chance to talk about friends and family and hobbies and all the other things that you would have talked about before. Try to not always tie your conversations back to those heavy topics. Give yourself a break.

7. Do stuff

Feelings of pleasure and enjoyment are a good antidote to feelings of anxiety – when you're feeling good you don't feel anxious.

Sure, worrying can make us feel like we're doing something, so it can feel good. But, remember that freaking out or panicking actually doesn't do anything. It doesn't help the situation. Calm thinking will actually help with better decision-making. Getting swept up into a state of panic isn't helpful. We're better equipped to make good decisions if you remain calm.

8. Be honest and look for helpers

This is a great time to reach out to people you haven't talked to in a while. Or, maybe it's time to start up that Zoom Book Club? Reach out online for support or online therapy. Seek out the kinds of comforts that you've always looked for – it's a great opportunity to watch a feel-good movie, for example.

And, if you feel comfortable expressing your fear to someone, it's OK to say, "This is really scary. This is making me feel anxious." Acknowledge that what's going on is scary and uncertain, and that it's normal for that fear to go up and down.