

## Managing Anxiety Amid a Pandemic

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Figure 1. Image created by Samuel Rodriguez

We cannot control a pandemic; we all know it is above our paygrade! Yet, we want to control it anyway—which causes all of us anxiety! However, we should feel some anxiety. Healthy anxiety pushes us to read the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports and follow their guidelines.

Our relationship with anxiety matters. When it creates chronic worry, restlessness, insomnia, tense muscles, irritability, and feelings of dread, anxiety becomes our internal monster. When this happens, it is natural that we want to defeat it.

It is anxiety's job to protect us from everything. It is normal to try to vanquish immediate threats. We want to fight the threat, kill it, and move on our merry way. The problem, of course, is that COVID-19 is unseen and it is an uncertain threat that is likely to go on for quite some time.

There is a bright side to this! The pandemic is an opportunity for us to change our relationship with anxiety. After all, the risk of getting the virus won't be zero for quite some time. How can we manage our anxiety? Here are some evidence-based tips that we can do to decrease—not eliminate—our anxiety.

**Practice self-compassion.** Rather than running from the anxiety monster, practice befriending the monster—after all, he is trying to keep you safe! Make room for listening to the monster like you would a good friend that is scared. Or, if you are a visual person, treat the anxiety monster as your own inner child—get a picture of yourself as a young child and listen to the anxiety monster. Choose to be gentle and understanding to that little child within!

**Practice paced breathing.** Navy seals are taught to do this before going into combat to calm their nerves. It is surprisingly simple and *highly* effective. The key is to take much longer out-breaths than in-breaths. Try a four second in-breath

and an eight second out-breath. This will stimulate your vagus nerve and help your body to move into feeling safe. There are many good apps and videos where you can learn more about this!

**Become more embodied.** Find where the anxiety monster lives in your body. Place a hand where you feel it and breathe into that space. The key to this exercise is to focus on the feeling and not the thoughts in your head!

**Think 'Common Humanity!'** When we feel anxious, scared, or sad, we often feel all alone. However, anxiety, fear, and sadness are universal emotions. Everyone suffers—it is not unique. While every human has their own unique situation, of suffering, it is part of being human. When we are feeling alone, we can remind ourselves that everyone suffers!

**Get some exercise.** We all know exercise releases endorphins. If you are just starting a routine, a big key to success is to be compassionate with yourself! Don't beat yourself up if you miss a day. This is another great opportunity to practice self-compassion. As Voltaire so wisely put it, "Don't let perfect be the enemy of the good."

**Phone-a-Friend.** Reach out to others. It is important to have or create connections in this time whether over the phone, computer, or at a social distance. This doesn't mean 'connecting' by watching the news or simply scrolling through social media. Find activities that are purposeful and pleasant.

**Remember: Small changes make the biggest impact.** Your anxiety monster will tell you that these small changes will do nothing. However, when it comes to managing anxiety, it is the small changes that over time and with regular practice make all the difference!

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