

Tips to reduce Stress and Anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak

Take Control, but also Leave it to the Universe

With our college students, we have been recognizing and validating that this all likely seems very scary and uncomfortable. People generally feel anxiety when they don't have control over a situation and when there are many unknown variables; situations just like this. We work to help students learn to recognize the things over which they have little to no control, and to say to themselves, "if it's something I can't control, it's a waste of energy to spend too much time worrying about it. I need to focus on what I can control, instead." The simple act of letting go of the things over which we have no control can be quite anxiety reducing. Additionally, we work to help students find additional ways in which they can feel in control over their lives when things have been turned upside down. Even if it's as simple as making a schedule, setting definitive times to study and times to relax, following a workout routine, and establishing specific times for practicing self-care.

Limit Exposure to Media

We are all bombarded by the media about this virus. It's incessant and also can greatly contribute to feelings of discomfort and fear during an already difficult time, especially for people who generally feel anxious. We are recommending that our students limit their media consumption to only specific, reputable news sources. If there's ever a time for mindless television, it's now!

Ensure Social Connection

While this is a difficult time, it should be one of physical separation and not social isolation. Social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, and loneliness can lead to feelings of sadness and even depression. We are encouraging our students to take the opportunity to utilize technology to help them stay connected. Facetiming and skyping friends, having virtual hang outs, talking on the phone, all of these things can help bring people together. We are reminding our students that in a time like this we can take some comfort knowing that we all really are in this together; we are all navigating this unprecedented situation as best we can.

Look at the Bright Side

Life doesn't always go how we want it to, there are ups and downs, times of misery and times of joy. Though we are currently in a down time, things are ever changing. We help students learn to engage in metacognition; to recognize which thoughts are helpful versus harmful, and then work to mindfully decrease the harmful ways of thinking. It doesn't help to allow anxiety and depression to convince us of the worst, or that things are not going to get better. In fact, it's much more helpful to have confidence that the people who are guiding us, the healthcare workers who are working around the clock to take care of those who are sick, and the scientists who are working around the clock to find a vaccine. Using the mantra, "this too, shall pass" can help provide students with a sense of hope.

Feelings aren't Facts

We are telling our students that it is okay to feel whatever they might be feeling. Pushing their feelings away is not helpful, and usually it's nearly impossible. Feelings are involuntary and are what make us human. However, it is also important to remember that feelings are not facts, just because you "feel like it's never going to get better," doesn't mean it won't. Anxiety and Depression can be very persuasive, and when we are feeling something intense and uncomfortable, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the facts rather than allowing fear or sadness to take us to the worst case scenario.

Try Something New

We are also working to help our students reframe things and take a different perspective. Unlike the usual busy times, we have the luxury of feeling bored. Try to reframe that as being an opportunity rather than a threat. For example, this is a good time to learn a new skill, to be more mindful, to take time to yourself to reflect, to exercise outside, to read, write, meditate, cook, garden, do something you might not ever have done before. An opportunity to move outside of one's comfort zone is an opportunity for growth.

Self-Awareness

We work to encourage our students, but not just our students, everyone, to be self-reflective and to recognize when they're not doing okay. There's no shame in having a hard time, we are not robots, we are humans. It's important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety, and to take action to identify these signs and symptoms early, as early identification leads to positive prognosis. Most importantly, we want our students to know that when they're not feeling okay, they can reach out. We are here to help, and no one needs to go through a hard time alone.