

WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I'M AFRAID?

Even though we've been dealing with COVID-19 for a few months now, most of us still aren't used to it. You may not fully understand what it even is, or maybe it feels impossible to make sure you and your loved ones will stay safe. It's totally normal to be a bit scared right now, but just because it's normal doesn't mean it feels good.

WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear is one of the basic emotions that everyone feels at one point or another. We often feel fear when we sense a threat—real or imaginary. It can be a really uncomfortable feeling and may even make it hard for you to think about anything else.

It may not seem like it, but fear can actually be a good thing! Being scared is usually what makes us act in ways that protect us.¹ Think about it—if you weren't afraid of catching COVID-19, you probably wouldn't follow the rules of washing your hands for 20 seconds or wearing a mask. You might not enjoy feeling fear, but it serves an important purpose right now, so don't ignore it.

Fear becomes a bad thing when you can't stop thinking about what scares you or if it's interrupting your daily activities. If you're in full-on panic mode, it's important to take some steps to help reduce your level of fear to better fit the situation we're facing.

HOW TO DEAL WITH FEAR

You can't change the fact that we're living in a pandemic or the effects of COVID-19, but you can control how much the fear that comes with it impacts you. Sometimes the hardest thing about feeling afraid is that you don't know what to do to change it. If that sounds familiar, here are some things you can do to help yourself:

TALK TO A TRUSTED ADULT.

If you're a bit lost on how to handle this whole situation, check in with an adult about how you're feeling. This could be a parent, teacher, coach, or someone else you trust. Whether you don't quite know what COVID-19 is and how to stay safe, or you're worried about starting a new school year virtually or in-person, an adult can help calm your fears and give you tips to stay healthy and comfortable.

LIMIT YOUR SCREEN TIME.

While it's important to understand what's happening in the world, there's such thing as too much information. Constant news coverage might make you feel more scared of COVID-19, and social media can be full of false information and worst-case scenarios. Unfollow or mute social media accounts if they're constantly upsetting you. If you see a story or statistic that worries you, bring it up to someone who can help you talk it out.

REMINDE YOURSELF OF WAYS TO STAY SAFE.

Even though things seem scary right now, there are a lot of ways to keep yourself safe—and you're probably already doing most of them! Washing your hands regularly, wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, and avoiding large groups are all ways to reduce your risk of infection. Remind yourself of these things and challenge yourself to think of more reasons to not worry.

TAKE SOME DEEP BREATHS.

Focusing on your breathing is a great way to relax and reduce some of the anxiety you may be feeling. When you feel big emotions, you might notice you start to breathe faster. If you work to slow your breathing, it signals to your brain that it's time to calm down. Try 4-7-8 breathing: breath in for four seconds, hold for seven seconds, and breathe out for eight seconds.

KEEP HAVING FUN.

It's important to still participate in activities you enjoy, even if they're a bit different right now. Maybe you can play a game with your family or have a virtual movie night with some friends. You could also do a craft or a puzzle or start a new book. You should do these things regularly, but they can be especially helpful to distract yourself if you're having a moment of serious fear.

MAINTAIN HEALTHY BEHAVIORS.

Keeping up healthy habits is really important. Handwashing is important to curb the spread of COVID-19, but things like eating healthy food, getting some exercise, spending time outside, and getting a good night's sleep (9-12 hours if you are 6-12 years old, or 8-10 hours if you are 13-18 years old) impact your health too. And if you do happen to get sick, these habits will help your immune system be ready to fight off those germs.

STICK TO A ROUTINE.

It's normal to be scared of uncertainty, and COVID-19 has added some uncertainty to almost all parts of life. You can help reduce the impacts of this by adding some structure to your days. Make a schedule for yourself—try to eat your meals, do your schoolwork, move your body, and go to bed and wake up at the same times each day. This can help you feel more in control and prepared to take on the challenges you're facing.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and as though your fear is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at MHAScreening.org to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES

¹Sanderson, C. (2020, April 13). *Coping with fear and sadness during a pandemic*. Hofstra University PhD Program in Clinical Psychology. <http://psychrescue-covid19.com/>

