

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Managing Acute Stress Response During the COVID-19 Pandemic | April 2020



"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." – Viktor Frankl, M.D., PhD.

Managing Acute Stress Response During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Symptoms of acute stress response are becoming more prevalent as the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic hits close to home.

Stress arouses your nervous system and releases hormones (cortisol and adrenaline) that trigger the fight, flight or freeze response. An acute stress response is often associated with feeling afraid or helpless after experiencing a traumatic event or in connection with an ongoing stressful situation.

Activation of the body's self-preservation and general stress adaptation system affects both physical and mental health. It may even suppress your immune system, making you more susceptible to illness.

Stress-related physical symptoms include rapid heart rate, headache, upset stomach, diarrhea, muscle aches, fatigue and trouble sleeping. Psychological symptoms include depression, anxiety, irritability, concentration or memory problems, accident-proneness, feeling detached or overly emotional, hypervigilance and guilt about pursuing usual life tasks. An extreme response may involve aggression, substance abuse or suicidal thoughts.

Adaptation

Human beings have an amazing ability to adapt to acute stress, according to WorkCare Associate Medical Director Brittany Busse, M.D., who has expertise in managing psychological components of work-related injuries and illnesses.

"Over time our bodies will adapt to just about any condition, such as heavy exercise, excessive worry, diminished food supply or financial stress," she said. "The source of stress has not been removed, nor has the person adopted traits or behaviors to help mitigate the stress – the body and mind are just adjusting to a new baseline. This adaptability serves us well when it has a specific, time-limited purpose. But when it is used continuously to mitigate daily stress, we will eventually run out of the energy we use to adapt."

Exhaustion

Exhaustion is a state of emotional, physical and mental depletion resulting from excessive and prolonged stress. In contrast to acute stress, it develops over months or years. At this stage it becomes difficult for the body to adapt to new stressors. Physical and psychological symptoms return and may get worse, Dr. Busse said. Potentially serious health consequences include cardiac disease, kidney disease, autoimmune disorders and cancer.

What Can You Do?

Dr. Busse offers this advice:

1. **Conduct an honest self-inventory.**

What are your default modes, behavior patterns and emotional responses to stress?

2. **Practice self-compassion.**

Observe your emotions but try not to identify with them. Be vulnerable. Use "I feel" in place of "I am" when expressing yourself.

3. **Ask, don't assume.**

We each have different fears and coping mechanisms. Let people know that you see and hear them. Asking "How can I help?" helps alleviate suffering.

4. **Make space.**

People who are going through a transition need time to adjust and regain a sense of control.

5. **Stay connected.** This is a time for physical distancing, not social isolation. Use all available options to maintain connections with family, friends and neighbors.

6. **Get help.** If stress is affecting your ability to function, make a virtual appointment with an Employee Assistance Program counselor or other behavioral health professional.

7. **Be informed.** Rely on accurate and reliable sources of information. Monitor your news intake and take breaks to do something you enjoy.

8. **Express gratitude.** An attitude of gratitude diminishes stress effects and helps you appreciate positive aspects of your life.

For workplace COVID-19 updates and guidance, visit www.workcare.com/resources

It's easier to manage acute stress response when you recognize signs, symptoms and contributing factors, including external stressors and your own behavior.

Wellness in Difficult Times

- Eat nutritious foods to boost your energy and immune system
- Get exercise to produce a chemical response that lifts your mood
- Keep a consistent, quality sleep schedule – optimally 7-9 hours
- Spend time close to nature and do activities you enjoy
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, yoga or meditation
- Avoid alcohol and drugs as a way to relieve symptoms of stress

COVID-19 as a Source of Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has created conditions in which there are many potential sources of stress. Here is a sampling of them:

- Worries about meeting physiological needs – food, shelter, clothing, water
- Fears about inability to protect health and safety of oneself and others
- Living where drugs or alcohol are abused or there is domestic violence
- Loss of employment income and related financial worries
- Difficulty creating boundaries and balance between home and work life
- Social isolation, loneliness, lacking a sense of community, feeling disconnected
- Loss of freedom to do daily tasks, enjoy life and feel in control of the situation
- Feeling guilty or as if you aren't doing enough in response to the crisis
- Grief over losses, including deaths and cancellation of symbolic events
- Anger or confusion about how others are handling the pandemic