

An illustration of an older woman with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a grey top. She is surrounded by large, stylized leaves in shades of red, orange, and teal. A dark teal rectangular box is overlaid on the image, containing the title and subtitle.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) anxiety and staying mentally healthy

FOR OLDER ADULTS

The level of anxiety within the community has been high as the number of COVID-19 cases increased across Australia. Although the incidence of new cases is reducing, it is still important to take reasonable precautions. Given the evidence that older adults are at greater risk of having worse outcomes from the virus, we need to learn to monitor our stress levels to ensure that we manage them as best we can, so that we minimise our experience of severe anxiety and panic. The following tips may help older Australians to keep stress and anxiety at bay during this challenging period.

Learn the facts (but limit media exposure)

Stay up-to-date with factual information from reliable sources such as the Australian Government Department of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the World Health Organization, and follow their recommendations.

Limit media exposure

Constant exposure to information and media coverage about COVID-19 will make us feel more anxious and concerned. Try to limit how often you are exposed to news updates on COVID-19. Take breaks from both media coverage and COVID-19 conversations throughout the day so you can focus on other things.

Take reasonable precautions and keep things in perspective

As the pandemic continues to develop, we have all worried about how it is going to affect our own and our family's health, work and finances. Try to keep your concerns in perspective. Rather than imagining the worst-case scenario and worrying about it, ask yourself:

- **What are the actual levels of risk and are there other facts that are important to remember in this situation?**
Current evidence suggests that older adults are no more likely to contract COVID-19 than younger adults. Among those who do contract COVID-19, those over the age of 60 are at greater risk of serious or life-threatening health complications that may require medical intervention. However, even with this increased risk, the majority of older adults who contract this illness will recover.

- Remind yourself of all the people who are working to manage this virus. There are qualified professionals working to keep people well; policymakers are working on strategies to manage the spread of COVID-19 and create economic support packages to assist people; health professionals are working hard to help people recover; and the scientific community is working as fast as it can to understand the illness, develop treatments, and a vaccine.
- Be familiar with the difference between symptoms of COVID-19 and cold/flu symptoms, but also try limiting how often you monitor changes in your physical sensations. For example, don't excessively check your temperature if you are otherwise feeling well.
- **Am I overestimating how bad the consequences will be and underestimating my ability to cope?**
Consider how you (or your family) have gotten through difficulties in the past, and whether these coping skills might help you to get through this situation. Also remind yourself that even though things might be difficult now, many of the consequences are time limited (ill health, financial burden, supply shortages etc.), and will eventually improve.
- Change some of your routine if needed. For example, discuss whether you should postpone non-essential doctor appointments, including wellness visits. If available, telehealth consultations can be a reasonable substitute. Call your pharmacist to enquire about access to prescription medications and alternative methods of collection if necessary.
- Have respectful and open conversations with your family and caregivers about your health concerns. Ask about what precautions they are taking to reduce your health risks, and what to do if you are concerned about your health.

Practise physical distancing but ensure social connection

Current recommendations advise practising social distancing as a way to prevent or slow the spread of COVID-19. This means keep your physical distance from others where possible. Unfortunately this can also result in reduced social contact, which can be especially problematic for people who are already socially isolated or feeling lonely.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 39 per cent of people aged 65 and over live alone. Research has shown that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of physical and mental health problems.

Engaging in social activities is still possible while maintaining physical distance, but it does take creative and flexible thinking. Switch to virtual catch-ups via videoconferencing technology (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime, Skype) instead of face-to-face. Send a text or email. Call your friends and family on the telephone if you do not have access to video-based technology. If you are part of a community group or volunteering agency, enquire what

alternative activities you can complete from home. Explore more ideas online about how to maintain social connections during this crisis (bit.ly/2UsdXcm).

Social distancing doesn't mean locking yourself indoors. If you practise good hygiene and keep your physical distance from others, you can still enjoy your backyard, do gardening, sit on the porch, get your mail and talk to neighbours (from a distance).

Tips for supporting older adults distressed by the COVID-19 outbreak

- Check in with older relatives/friends and ask how they are feeling
- Talk to them about how they are managing changes to their routine
- Offer practical and/or emotional support if needed (e.g., offer to set up videoconferencing technologies on their computer/tablet via FaceTime, offer to deliver groceries)
- Encourage them to do things they enjoy
- If you think they are not coping, or are overly isolated, suggest they seek help from their GPs, or encourage them to speak with a mental health professional (see below for contact information)
- Keep up contact with elderly relatives by writing emails, calling them on the telephone, talking via videoconference, send them videos to watch via email, send photos or drawings from children via email, or to the facility where they are.

Remember...

There are steps you can take to help protect yourself and those around you. Practising good hygiene, enacting physical distancing, and following government recommendations will help you make a difference. You can do things to help those around you, whether that is preventing the spread of illness or by supporting others socially or emotionally. As a community, we can work together to get through this challenging time, and we all have a role to play.

More information

Australian Government Department of Health

The Department of Health has developed a collection of resources for the general public, health professionals and industry about COVID-19, including translated resources. bit.ly/38OOwHe

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization provides information and guidance regarding the current outbreak of COVID-19. bit.ly/3cQUwCw

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides reliable information about COVID-19 such as its symptoms, steps you can take to protect yourself, and what to do if you are affected. bit.ly/39MEml8

Older Persons COVID-19 Support Line

The Older Persons COVID-19 Support Line provides information and support to senior Australians, their families and carers. Call 1800 171 866 Monday to Friday (except public holidays) from 8.30am to 6pm. bit.ly/30xxCvZ

Seeking additional support

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience because of COVID-19 is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide [Find a Psychologist™](https://findapsychologist.org.au) service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

Acknowledgments

This resource was prepared by the APS Psychology and Ageing Interest Group Committee.



The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak. Visit psychology.org.au for more.

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