

Addressing Anxiety across the Lifespan During the COVID-19 Crisis

Prepared by the AHP BHI Team

Normal Worry or Anxiety Disorder



Anxiety Disorders are the most common mental health problem – 33% lifetime incidence in US.



Anxiety is the body's natural threat response and is expected during times of crisis.

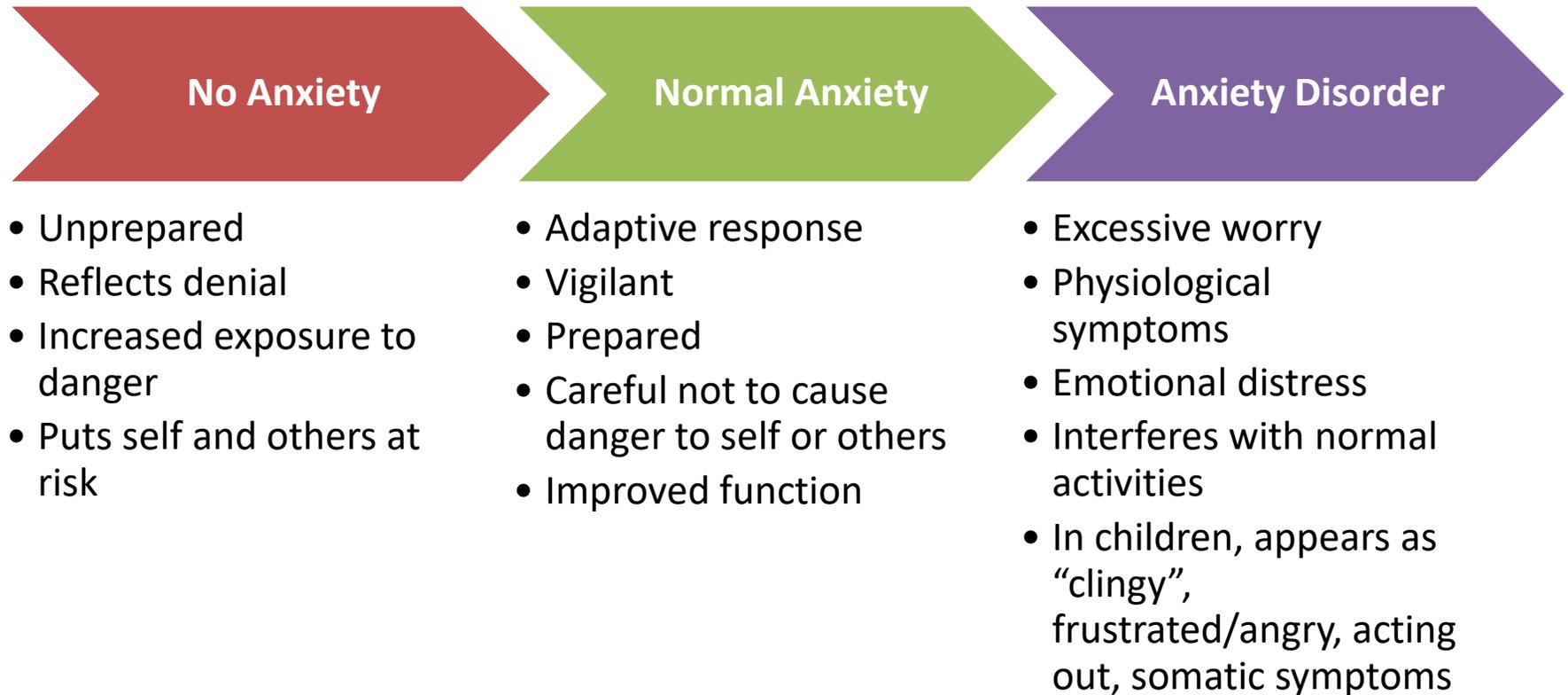


Managing levels of anxiety is important in order to keep it within adaptive levels.



It is important to differentiate between normal stress management and the treatment of an Anxiety Disorder.

Spectrum of Stress/Anxiety During a Crisis



Anxiety in the Context of COVID-19

Facts

- Anxiety is heightened for all, no matter your age
 - This is a normal response, one that does not require treatment (unless it does)
- Individuals with pre-existing anxiety diagnoses or trauma, symptoms may be exacerbated.
 - This is likely transient
 - With support, these symptoms can remit



- Do normalize
- Do validate
- Do offer behavioral recommendations
- Do assess level of impairment and need for additional interventions
- Don't rush to offering medications
- Don't make significant changes in existing medication regimens if possible

Common Anxiety Presentations in the Context of COVID-19

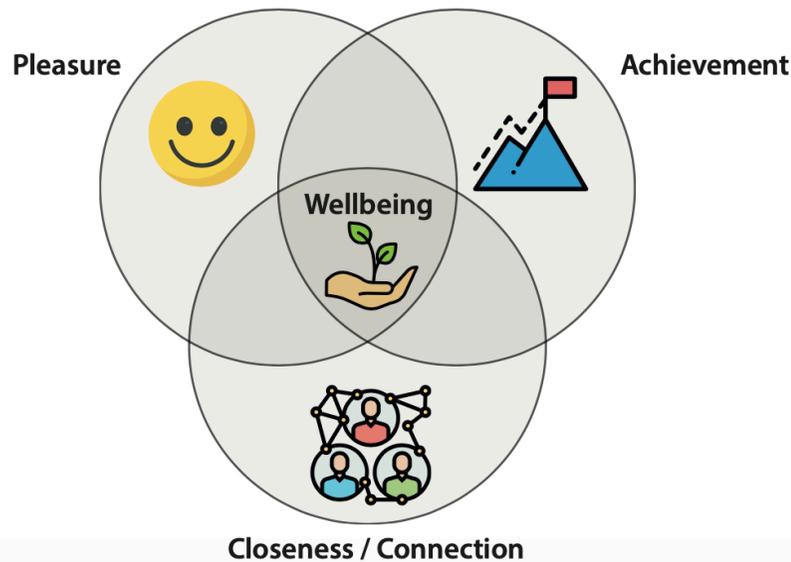
Youth

- Clingy or withdrawn
- Worried or angry
- Easily frustrated or irritable
- Increase in somatic complaints
- Can appear as attention seeking, regression or worsening of underlying behavior challenges

Adults and Older Adults

- Insomnia
- Excessive worry
- Muscle tension
 - Smooth muscles → GI problems
 - Skeletal muscles → aches and pains/headaches
- Irritability
- Excessive alcohol/tobacco use

Find The Balance



- When we are struggling with anxiety and worry, we can lose touch with things that used to give us pleasure.
- We feel good when we have achieved or accomplished something so it's helpful to include activities each day that give you a sense of achievement.
- As social beings, we all need and naturally crave closeness and connection with others.
- As we practice physical distancing, it is important that we don't become socially isolated and lonely.

Non-Pharmacological Tips for Managing Anxiety in Adults During COVID

Set a routine. If you are spending more time at home, it is important to continue with a regular routine. Maintain a regular time for waking up and going to bed, eating at regular times, and getting ready and dressed each morning. You could use a timetable to give structure to your day.

Stay mentally and physically active. When you plan your daily timetable have a go at including activities that keep both your mind and body active. For example, you could try learning something new with an online course. It's also important to keep physically active. For example doing rigorous housework or exercise for 30 min.

Practice gratitude. At times of uncertainty, developing a gratitude practice can help you to connect with moments of joy, aliveness, and pleasure. At the end of each day, take time to reflect on what you are thankful for today. Try and be specific and notice new things each day, for example "I am grateful that it was sunny at lunchtime so I could sit in the garden". Encourage other people in your home to get involved too.

Notice and limit worry triggers. As the health situation develops it can feel like we need to constantly follow the news or check social media for updates. However, you might notice this also triggers your worry and anxiety. Try to notice what triggers your worry. For example, is it watching the news for more than 30 minutes? Checking social media every hour? Try to limit the time that you are exposed to worry triggers each day.

Rely on reputable news sources. It can also help to be mindful of where you are obtaining news and information. Be careful to choose reputable sources. The World Health Organization provides excellent information at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>.

Non-Pharmacological Tips for Parents During COVID

Establish routines that include time for work and play. Uncertainty breeds worry; Predictability with routines is the anecdote. Find new activities; chores, puzzles, game night, baking, walks, playing catch, or a bike ride.

Discuss Coronavirus in a developmentally appropriate manner. Keep an open communication with your child; talking is always okay. Answer the child's questions: keep it simple and factual. Be available when the child asks. Take cues from the child: invite the child to tell you what they understand. Dispel frightening fantasies.

Encourage parents to notice their own anxiety. Talk with your kids about what you are feeling. Model stress tolerance; breathe, practice the pause. Make use of many online resources designed for children, as an example <https://www.mindful.org/helping-children-embrace-big-emotions/>

Reassure. Children may worry about their susceptibility. Talk about the important ways parents are keeping them safe (hand washing for 20 seconds, hands away from face, stay home, physical distancing). Remind parents, when kids know what to do, they feel empowered. Celebrate health behaviors: Catch kids in the act of practicing that keep them and their family safe.

Rely on reputable news sources. Stay informed but take a break each day from news and/or social media that might feed parent and child anxiety. A reliable source of information includes: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html>

Guidance for Kids

Relax, You Got This!

Use your
breath:



- [Butterfly Breath](#)

Stay
grounded:



- [Soothing with our senses](#)
- [5-4-3-2-1 Activity](#)

Technology May Help

– Free Mindfulness Apps:

- [Insight Timer](#)
- [Smiling Mind](#)

– Meditation:

- www.self-compassion.org
- [UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness](#)

Guidance For Families

Stick

Stick to routines when possible; they help all of us and create a sense of normalcy.

Anticipate

Anticipate that members of the family may cope, and handle stress, differently. And those differences are ok.

Consider

With so much 'forced' togetherness, we still have separateness; consider ways to balance your individual and family needs for both.

Keep

Keep channels of communication open; consider start of day or mealtime "huddles" to talk about important issues (for adults and kids both!).

Leave

Leave room for levity; keep it light when you can!

Pharmacological Considerations for Managing Anxiety During COVID

Target Symptoms (Adults)

- Insomnia:
 - Trazodone 25 -100mg nightly
 - Doxepin 10 – 25mg nightly
- Anxiety/Irritability:
 - Hydroxyzine 25 -50mg tid prn
 - Ativan 0.5mg tid prn

Target Symptoms (Children)

- Initial Insomnia:
 - Hydroxyzine
 - Benadryl
 - Melatonin
- Anxiety/Irritability:
 - Hydroxyzine

Explain to patients:

1. Importance of restoring routine and balance
2. Avoid excessive caffeine and/or alcohol use
3. If using benzodiazepines, explain that this is for 2 to 4 weeks. This will help manage expectations and avoid conflict when time comes to stop medications

Treatment Optimization

- Consider only if there is exacerbation of underlying disorder, not just increased symptoms
- Avoid significant changes or switching of medications during a crisis when possible.
- Consult with Care Manager or BHI team when needed AHPBHIT@urmc.Rochester.edu

Practice The Pause: Assess the Problem

- Prior history of Anxiety Disorder. Expected vs. excessive levels of distress
- Severity of of interference with daily activities, emotional distress & interpersonal relationships
- Does the person regain normal functioning when the stress level is lower (adjustment disorder) or has the anxiety taken a life of its own (Anxiety Disorder)

Non- Pharmacological Interventions

- Always consider NPI as first line intervention for mild or moderate symptoms. Many symptoms are transient. Providing guidance may be all that is needed.
- Behavioral Interventions are better at restoring balance and adaptive functioning during a crisis
- Consider NPI first even when patient has a history of mental health diagnosis and taking medications

Pharmacological Interventions

- Consider when NPI not effective, symptoms are severe, panic attacks are frequent and/or interference with daily activities is significant
- Target symptoms management refers to using medications usually short term to manage specific symptoms such as insomnia, panic attacks, irritability...
- Optimizing treatment refers to adjusting the dose of current medications when stress is causing worsening of an existing condition