Managing Fears and Concerns About COVID-19

Introduction

Daily exposure to news about COVID-19 may result in a range of responses, particularly for students with loved ones in China and other affected areas of the world. Reactions can be emotional, somatic, and/or behavioral, and can impact mental and physical health.

This document is intended to support community members with loved ones whose daily lives and well-being have been affected by COVID-19. Please know that we have been following the news as it evolves and we are here to support you.

This document contains information about common stress reactions, responses specific to the COVID-19 outbreak, ideas for coping, and the potential for bias and discrimination.

Common acute stress reactions:

- shock, things feeling surreal
- fear or anxiety about the future or death
- hopelessness or feeling lost about the future; feeling a lack of purpose in study or work
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- feeling emotionally detached, numb, or crying for what seems like no reason
- rumination, preoccupation with information about the outbreak
- difficulty getting to sleep, poor sleep quality, bad dreams, or problems staying awake during the day
- headache, stomachache, or pain without medical causes
- significantly decreased or increased appetite
- relying on alcohol or substances to cope with stress
- increased irritability, feeling angry
- shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, experiencing panic attack(s)

When facing stress, everyone’s reaction is different. You may have other experiences or symptoms aside from those noted above.

You might also have reactions specific to this COVID-19 outbreak:

- Worry about contamination, preoccupation with any signs/symptoms of illness, excessively taking your own temperature, and frequent urges to have yourself examined at health centers. The worries may impact your daily living, social relationships, or study.
● Experiencing symptoms such as itchy throat or nasal congestion and being concerned about having contracted coronavirus, even though no fever is present and there is little possibility of having contracted the virus in reality.
● Feeling alone or misunderstood.
● Feeling angry at or lacking trust in systems or others.
● Excessive attention to or obsession with related news, information, articles, or statements. The focus can result in compulsively reading about information about the outbreak, difficulty sleeping, and/or problems with concentrating on other topics.
● Quickly jumping to conclusions based on new information, resulting in panic in self or others.
● Grieving over loss, or feeling sad and/or a sense of unfairness around someone’s death.

You might experience the following while living in the US, far away from the loved ones:
● “Survivor guilt” due to having physical distance between you and the current virus outbreak. For example, you might feel ashamed, guilty, or that you have abandoned your loved ones because you are not directly involved, because you are currently healthy, or because there are limited ways you can help.
● Excessive worry about loved ones who are currently in China. The worries significantly impact your daily life, social life, or study.
● Feeling angry, disappointed, or a lack of control because your loved ones do not follow suggested precautions or believe in false information.

If your loved ones have come into close contact with a diagnosed patient or have been diagnosed with coronavirus themselves, are in quarantine, or if they are medical providers in China, you might have different reactions in addition to those identified above. If you want to read more about different situations, please click here for more information.

Please know that it is normal and valid (even protective, in some cases) to have the above mentioned thoughts and feelings. It is important to first acknowledge and accept the emergence of the emotions. But if the excessive worry or stress responses interfere with study and daily living, you may want to develop some new coping skills.

Coping

Though you might feel somewhat powerless or limited in what you can do from such a distance, there are ways you can offer support and take control of emotions. Below is a list of suggested activities that might help you during this difficult time.

● **Seek support**: Visit the Counseling Service, call the 24/7 Care and Support Line (413-538-2037), or check in at College Health Services regarding physical and mental health.
● **Maintain a healthy routine**: Stress can disrupt our daily routine, in turn causing more stress. It is important to maintain your regular schedule for sleep, eating, having fun, socializing, studying, and working etc. If this is difficult to achieve by yourself, work with a friend - you can encourage each other in self-care. Click here or here for some relaxation exercises for sleep.
● **Exercise:** Physical activity can boost your immune system, help you feel good about yourself, increase your energy levels, alleviate stress, and help with sleep.

● **Meditate:** Find some time every day to do a bit of meditation. It helps you feel grounded and present.

● **Be informed:** Uncertainty or misinformation can increase worry and cause panic. You can stay informed through official, fact-checked channels (e.g. Mount Holyoke Health Center website or World Health Organization website).

● **Pay attention to some positive news:** Despite this difficult time, there is often some positive information in daily news. Decide whether the degree of your worry is consistent with reliable information (e.g.: incidence rate, death rate, current advancement of medicine etc.)

● **But limit the information:** Sometimes, too much information leads to overload and more stress. So please try to limit your exposure (such as <1 hour/day), and make sure your information sources are reliable. **Avoid reading information on the topic before going to bed - this can make it more difficult to fall asleep.**

● **Think positively:** Recall how you and your loved ones survived past hardships and crisis. Remind yourself that things are temporary and the current situation will pass. Please remember that no matter what happens in the future, you and your loved ones are striving to live day-by-day in the present. Change your perspective - consider the current time as an opportunity to show more care to yourself and your loved ones.

● **Share your thoughts/feelings with others (in moderation):** Talking about your thoughts and feelings can help alleviate stress. Others might share similar feelings and help you feel less alone.

● **Check in with your loved ones (in moderation):** If you are worried about your loved ones, please reach out to them when you feel comfortable and lend a listening ear. Loved ones are often concerned about us and we may think they are trying to protect us by not being fully truthful; try not to jump to conclusions about their health and well-being, and please understand that we cannot always control others’ behaviors or change their beliefs.

● **Learn to say “no”:** Although sharing can be helpful, sometimes it is also important to say “no” when you are not comfortable with sharing or engaging in conversations on the topic. Just make sure you set your boundaries respectfully or leave conversations in an appropriate way.

● **Engage in conversations and activities unrelated to the outbreak and allow yourself to have some fun:** There is still life outside of the current crisis. Reading news and engaging in activities unrelated to the current outbreak is okay - it doesn’t mean that you don’t care or aren’t concerned.

● **Do some relaxation:** Make sure to plan some relaxation or activities you enjoy into your daily schedule, such as deep breathing, spending time with friends, coloring, listening to music, taking a shower, taking a walk, etc.

● **Let it out:** Sometimes expressing your emotions can be helpful - try journaling or keeping a voice diary, or let yourself be upset for a while.

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**Potential for Bias and Discrimination**

During this time you may experience bias, discrimination, or misunderstandings because of your identity or your relationship to people who live in China. If any of the following happens, please consider the options available:
If you read false information or insulting/condescending articles from the media and you are feeling angry, helpless, or wronged due to your hometown or culture being slandered:
Please know that these reactions are valid and potentially helpful. If your current state allows, you can provide feedback and advocate through appropriate channels, such as writing emails to the media, reporting the article etc. You can also share your thoughts with people you trust in order to advocate together or to seek support.

If you experience discrimination against your racial, national, or provincial identity:
Make a record of the incident by writing or keeping a voice memo of the details. Consider reporting the incident or seeking support from professionals. If the incident happened on campus, you can contact the Dean of Students Office and fill out a Bias Incident Report; you can also contact the Ombudsperson or the Counseling Service to seek support. You can share your experience with people you trust or on appropriate platforms; it might validate your feelings and thoughts.

If a friend, adviser, or someone you know says something insensitive or discriminatory:
It is valid to feel angry, confused, sad, and disappointed, especially when someone you know is the source of bias. After you take care of your own emotional health, you could consider reporting the incident and/or having a conversation with the person about the experience. If you would like to do that, writing down what you want to say might be helpful.

It is also okay to not respond.
If you do not have the time, energy, or mental resources to take further action, it is okay – you have endured a lot already. It is common to not want to think about the incident or to take action. If you have made a record of the incident, you can keep it out of sight and continue with your daily activities. If and when you want to return to the subject and have the energy to do so, you can retrieve the record and seek appropriate actions. You can also choose to keep some distance from the media, making a record of troubling articles or reports, then blocking them so that you do not have to see them again. If and when you have enough energy to return to the subject, you can confront it then.

Resources

Counseling Service (also a 24/7 hotline)  
413-538-2037

College Health Services  
413-538-2242

Ombudsperson  
413-538-2413

Office of Academic Deans  
413-538-3610

Counseling Service (also a 24/7 hotline)  
413-538-2037

Drop-in Talkin’  
Click here for hours

College Health Services  
413-538-2242

Dean of Student/Division of Student Life Office  
413-538-2550

Ombudsperson  
413-538-2413

Residential Life  
413-538-2088

Office of Academic Deans  
413-538-3610

Alcohol and Drug Awareness Program  
413-538-2616

Center for Disease Control  

World Health Organization  
https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus

*If you have any questions or suggestions regarding this document, please contact Counseling Service at 413-538-2037 or via the Counseling Service website.