

Life in the time of COVID-19: Mental Health Impact and Coping Tips

The Psychosocial Impact of Pandemics

Dr. Linda Carlson

In a recent government poll, 74% of Albertans indicated that the pandemic had negatively affected their mental health, and recently the [government committed \\$53M to increase mental health services](#). Not surprising, as a pandemic is a perfect “anxiety stew”. It has all the ingredients that go into causing worry even in people who are not typically anxiety-prone. These include: 1) uncontrollability; 2) uncertainty; and 3) high consequence. That is, outside of clearly important behaviors like hand washing and physical distancing, there is little any one individual can do to control the spread of the virus or the magnitude of the pandemic, which may leave you feeling helpless and wishing you could do more. How this will unfold locally and around the world is highly uncertain, as we hear over and over, and there is no shortage of speculation going around (much of it not evidence-based). Humans as a species quite dislike uncertainty and tend to “fill-in-the-blanks” in situations like this, which often results in highly improbable worst-case scenarios. Finally, the consequences of not getting it right are high: you or family members contracting the virus, potential illness, and untold deaths globally.

Add to this thousands of lay-offs, cut hours and lost jobs leading to significant financial strain; being isolated alone and feeling trapped or lonely; in close quarters with family members where there may be escalating arguments or even abuse; or worrying about family members living at a distance, in hospital or extended-care facilities. It is no wonder there are reports of escalating mental health problems. These include insomnia, anger, grief, depression, substance abuse, domestic violence and somatic symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension and gastrointestinal problems. On the other hand, most people who contract the virus have mild symptoms

and go on to recover, and public health efforts seem to be working. In the meantime, we need to look out for one another and do what we can to ease the burden of these temporary measures.

Coping Tips

It’s a tough situation, and difficult to think about all the suffering many people are having to endure, but there is a lot you as an individual can do to ease the suffering.

1. **Be kind to yourself (and others).** This is tough. None of us have been in this situation before; we have no rules or experience or role models to turn to. We are making things up as we go along. You may be feeling lost, confused, anxious and worried. So is everyone else. These are all totally normal emotions. Allow yourself these feelings and don’t automatically try to push them away or force yourself to “think positive”, which psychologists know is not a healthy coping mechanism, as it denies the reality of your current experience. All emotions are okay, even the tough ones, and trying to stuff them down and replace them with “positive thinking” is an impossible and unhealthy task. Find a safe and controlled way to acknowledge and express difficult emotions, for example by writing them down in a journal or letter, talking to a friend, getting physical exercise, or practicing yoga or meditation. If your symptoms are severe and interfering with your ability to function, contact a mental health professional. Above all, think about how you would respond to a friend struggling in this situation, and apply that same compassion and advice to yourself; then turn it towards others.

2. **Be Realistic.** It is NOT realistic to think you can do all of a) homeschool your kids; b) work full-time from home; c) maintain a perfect (clean, orderly) household and; d) take care of yourself and others. I suggest you prioritize one or two of these two things, and let the



Linda E. Carlson, PhD, RPsych
Dr. Linda Carlson is the Enbridge Research Chair in Psychosocial Oncology and a Professor in the Division of Psychosocial Oncology, Department of Oncology.

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2. Be realistic.
3. Make the best of the situation.
4. Keep your routines.
5. Stick to reliable sources for the facts (and skip the dross).

others slide a little. Leave the teaching largely to the teachers and focus on parenting. Take time out for self-care. Remind yourself not to worry if you let work projects slide a little bit as you adjust, or the laundry and dishes pile up for a while, or the kids get a little extra screen time so you can get things done. You'll get to it all when you can. Focus on your priorities. Be kind and self-compassionate and don't expect too much of yourself.

3. Make the best of the situation. While at first glance it may not seem like there is much you can do in the face of the situation right now, in fact there is a lot. In particular you are totally in control of your response. Accepting the uncertainties of the future, while at the same time identifying areas in your life you CAN control and focusing on those is a good place to start. Can you go out for a walk in the fresh air and sunshine? Then do that every day. If you enjoy cooking and have the time, can you try out a new recipe for your family? If your kids are around more now without school and other activities, can you try to involve them in household chores and teach them how to cook and do laundry? Maybe you are able to take time and play a board game with them, or go for a family walk. Are you able to catch up on sleep a bit? Our society is so chronically sleep-deprived, this is a great opportunity to get some needed rest.

Can you think of ways to help others in your neighborhood? Volunteer whatever skills you have if time permits.

4. Keep your routines. Catching up on sleep is great, but it would be better not to sleep until noon every day. Keep your schedules and routines much as they were before, with modifications to suit your work-at-home routine. Have set times to work, set times for meals, activities and a relatively regular bedtime. Don't drink much more alcohol than usual, and cut-back if you're having more than a couple of drinks per day.

5. Stick to reliable sources for the facts (and skip the dross). Pick one or two sources of info on the pandemic that you trust, such as Health Canada or Alberta Health Services, the U of C, and the CBC. If social media makes you feel anxious and angry (as it does to me when I scroll through my current news feed), avoid the threat of "social contagion" and take a break. Consider limiting your scrolling time to 20 minutes or so, once or twice a day. Only post and read "good news" news that you find inspiring; maybe stories about how the community is banding together to help one-another, or skip the social media altogether.

Final word: this is temporary and we will get through it. We can learn a lot from slowing down a bit and taking care of one another. Once this passes, consider carefully what you really want to add back into your life.

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