

## Taking Care of Your Mental Health During an Infectious Disease Outbreak

adapted from SAMHSA: <https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4894.pdf>

### SOCIAL DISTANCING, QUARANTINE AND ISOLATION

Social distancing is a way to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease.

Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.

Isolation prevents the spread of an infectious disease by separating people who are sick from those who are not.

### FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS YOU MAY HAVE DURING AND AFTER SOCIAL DISTANCING, QUARANTINE AND ISOLATION

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations, like an infectious disease outbreak that requires social distancing, quarantine or isolation. You may feel:

- **Anxiety, worry, or fear** related to:
  - Your own health status.
  - The health status of others.
  - The feelings that friends and family may experience if they need to go into quarantine or isolation.
  - The experience of monitoring yourself, or being monitored by others, for signs and symptoms of the disease.
  - Time taken off from work and the potential loss of income and job security.
  - The challenges of securing things you need, such as groceries and personal care items.
- **Concern** about being able to effectively care for children or others in your care.
- **Uncertainty or frustration** about how long you will need to remain in this situation, and uncertainty about the future.
- **Loneliness** associated with feeling cut off from the world and from loved ones.
- **Anger** if you think you were exposed to the disease because of others' actions that are different from yours.
- **Boredom and frustration** because you may not be able to work or engage in regular activities.
- **Uncertainty or ambivalence** about the situation.
- **A desire to use alcohol or drugs** to cope.
- **Symptoms of depression**, such as feelings of hopelessness, changes in appetite or sleeping too little or too much.
- **Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, such as intrusive distressing memories, flashbacks (reliving the event), nightmares, changes in thoughts and mood and being easily startled.

→ If you or a loved one experience any of these reactions for two to four weeks or more, contact your health care provider or one of the resources below.

### WAYS TO SUPPORT YOURSELF DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING, QUARANTINE AND ISOLATION

**Understand the risk:** Consider the real risk of harm to yourself and others around you. The public perception of risk during a situation such as an infectious disease outbreak is often inaccurate. Media coverage may create the impression that people are in immediate danger when really the risk for infection may be very low. Take steps to get the facts:

- Stay up to date on what is happening, while limiting your media exposure.
- Avoid watching or listening to news reports 24/7, because this tends to increase anxiety and worry.
- Remember that children are especially affected by what they hear and see on television.
- Look to credible sources for information on the infectious disease outbreak.

**Be your own advocate:** Speaking out about your needs is particularly important if you are in quarantine, since you may not be in a hospital or other facility where your basic needs are met. Ensure you have what you need to feel safe, secure and comfortable.

- Work with local, state or national health officials to find out how you can arrange for groceries and toiletries to be delivered to your home as needed.
- Inform health care providers or health authorities of any needed medications and work with them to ensure that you continue to receive those medications.

**Educate yourself:** Health care providers and health authorities should provide information on the disease, its diagnosis and treatment.

- Do not be afraid to ask questions. Clear communication with a health care provider may help reduce distress associated with social distancing, quarantine or isolation.
- Ask for written information, when available.
- Ask a family member or friend to obtain information in the event that you are unable to secure this information on your own.

**Connect with others:** Reaching out to people you trust is one of the best ways to reduce anxiety, depression, loneliness and boredom during social distancing, quarantine and isolation. You can:

- Talk “face to face” with friends and loved ones using Skype, FaceTime or WhatsApp on a computer or smart phone.
- Use the telephone, email, text messaging and social media to connect with friends, family and others.
- If approved by health authorities and your health care providers, arrange for your friends and loved ones to bring you newspapers, movies and books.
- Sign up for emergency alerts via text or email to ensure you get updates as soon as they are available.
- Call SAMHSA’s free 24-hour Disaster Distress Helpline at 800-985-5990 (English and Español), if you feel lonely or need support.
- Use the Internet, radio and television to keep up with local, national and world events.
- If you need to connect with someone because of an ongoing alcohol or drug problem, consider calling your local Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous offices.

**Talk to your doctor:** If you are in a medical facility, you may have access to health care providers who can answer your questions. However, if you are quarantined at home, and you’re worried about physical symptoms you or your loved ones may be experiencing, call your doctor or other health care provider:

- Ask your provider whether it would be possible to schedule remote appointments via Skype or FaceTime for mental health, substance use or physical health needs.
- In the event that your doctor is unavailable and you are feeling stressed or are in crisis, call the hotline numbers listed at the end of this tip sheet for support.

**Use practical ways to cope and relax:**

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you — take deep breaths, stretch, meditate or pray, or engage in activities you enjoy.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities, and do something fun after a hard task.
- Talk about your experiences and feelings to loved ones and friends, if you find it helpful.
- Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking; consider keeping a journal where you write down things you are grateful for or that are going well.

## **AFTER SOCIAL DISTANCING, QUARANTINE AND ISOLATION**

You may experience mixed emotions, including a sense of relief. If you were isolated because you had the illness, you may feel sadness or anger because friends and loved ones may have unfounded fears of contracting the disease from contact with you, even though you have been determined not to be contagious.

The best way to end this common fear is to learn about the disease and the actual risk to others. Sharing this information will often calm fears in others and allow you to reconnect with them.

→If you or a loved one experiences symptoms of extreme stress — such as trouble sleeping, problems with eating too much or too little, inability to carry out routine daily activities or using drugs or alcohol to cope—speak to a health care provider or call SAMHSA’s free 24-hour Disaster Distress Helpline at 800-985-5990 (English and Español).

→If you are feeling overwhelmed with emotions such as sadness, depression or anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or someone else, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 (English), 888-628-9454 (Español) or TTY 800-799-4889.