**Self-care crucial during times of anxiety, stress**

It is normal for adults and children to experience anxiety during stressful events like the current worldwide pandemic surrounding the novel coronavirus. Whether it’s the fear of contracting COVID-19, disruptions to work and school schedules, or the myriad of related concerns, stress is an expected and normal response.

[The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service](https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/) realizes the coronavirus has changed the way many people must go about their day-to-day lives. The agency, in response, offers free resources like the AgriLife Extension [Disaster Education Network](https://texashelp.tamu.edu/coronavirus-information-resources/) to help Texans get through trying times.

**The psychology of social distancing**

One of the hardest challenges for adults and children is social distancing. The current federal recommendation is that gatherings consist of no more than 10 people.

“Social distancing means avoiding close physical proximity to larger groups of people or avoiding places where large groups have recently met or passed through,” explained Jeff Fant, AgriLife Extension’s disaster assessment and recovery agent for District 7, San Angelo.

Social distancing is important in slowing the transmission of the coronavirus in order to limit the number of people affected by COVID-19 at one time. It is crucial that hospitals, their staff and resources aren’t overwhelmed.

However, social isolation can add to feelings of loneliness and anxiety, said Nancy Treviño, Ph.D., AgriLife Extension urban youth development agent, Lubbock.

“This can be especially true for the youth out of school, the elderly or people who live alone,” said Treviño. “It is important that people of all ages still interact with their friends, be it over the telephone, via text or even playing games together online.”

“Don’t quarantine yourself from social contact, just physical contact. Keeping in touch with friends and families benefits everyone and is a crucial part of self-care.”

*Jeff Fant, AgriLife Extension’s disaster assessment and recovery agent for District 7, San Angelo*

**Stress in adults**

Fant said when it comes to personal stress levels, what people are now experiencing is no different than the [stress](https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/library/disasters-safety/stress-in-adults-after-a-disaster-warning-signs-and-management/) one would feel during a natural disaster.

“After 25 years of dealing with high-stress situations myself, I would tell people the single most important thing they can practice is self-care,” said Fant, who previously worked as a senior disaster program manager for the American Red Cross in San Angelo.

“Self-care is not just physical things like handwashing and social distancing but caring for one’s self mentally. Right now, people have a fear of the unknown and anxiety about what could happen to family, friends and themselves.”

Fant stressed now is the time when everyone needs to be good stewards of public health and be socially aware and responsible, to minimize and mitigate exposure.

**Be prepared**

Fant said being prepared for a disaster can help ease anxiety before it starts.

“Make sure you have the basics taken care of like food, water and prescription medications. That doesn’t mean [hoarding](https://agrilifetoday.tamu.edu/2020/03/18/excessive-stockpiling-during-covid-19-outbreak-puts-others-at-risk/) and causing shortages for other people, it means having about two weeks’ worth of what you and your family would need. This is a good guideline for any type of situation, including natural disasters.”

**Dealing with stress and emotions amid COVID-19**

Fant said anger, anxiety, depression and fear are all normal responses to stressful situations. He shared these suggestions on managing those feelings:

* **Practice self-care.** Find ways to relax and unwind. If there is a hobby you can do at home, make sure you have the supplies and tools you’ll need in advance.
* **Use the buddy system**. Whether it is a spouse or best friend, have someone you can honestly express your emotions to.
* **Be a friend**. Call and check on others emotional and physical well-being. If you have the capability, video chat with friends and loved ones who live outside your household.
* **Keep your mind occupied**. Do not let it stagnate on fear, anger or worry.
* **Maintain your health**. Try to eat right, get fresh air, stay hydrated and get some physical activity, even if that is just walking around your block, yard or living room.
* **Stay informed but don’t leave the TV on.** Receiving nonstop news on your TV or smart phone about COVID-19 will just add to your stress. Do not share information you can’t prove to be true on social media, you do not want to instill unnecessary fear or worry in others.
* **Don’t worry.** There is no point in worrying about things that aren’t true and unlikely to happen, so make sure the information you are getting is from a legitimate site. Visit the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/), [Texas Department of State Health Services](https://agrilifetoday.tamu.edu/Users/Gabe.Saldana.AGNET/Downloads/DSHS.texas.gov) or [AgriLife Extension](https://texashelp.tamu.edu/coronavirus-information-resources/) for facts and information.

**Stress in children and teens**

Not only are adults affected by COVID-19 worries, so are children and teens. With schools closed and extracurricular activities canceled, many youth are also dealing with feelings of disappointment, fear and uncertainty.

“We already know depression and anxiety disproportionally affect teens,” said Treviño. “Teens may already be struggling with anxiety and depression and feel like they are unable to control many things in their life, and COVID-19 adds to that list.”

Treviño said uncertainty can increase anxiety and there is so much misinformation about COVID-19, or information about it that is framed in a frightful way, that many youths will experience heightened levels of anxiety.

She also said now is the time to help children understand their roles in their larger community.

“This is a learning opportunity about being good stewards in their community and understanding their roles and duties as good citizens.”

**Helping children cope**

Treviño said children often pick up on their parent’s stress and worry intuitively, so it is crucial to be honest with them but not compound their anxiety by sharing specific fears or worries with them.

“Parents and caregivers may be extremely worried about how they are going to pay bills or get childcare but be careful what you say around children. Even when we think they aren’t listening, they often are. Kids need to feel safe and protected, especially during uncertain and scary times.”

*Nancy Treviño, Ph.D., AgriLife Extension urban youth development agent, Lubbock*

 Treviño offered the following tips to [help kids](https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/library/disasters-safety/helping-children-cope-with-disaster) and teens get through this stressful period:

* Self-care is crucial for kids as well as adults. Make sure kids have time to participate in stress-relieving hobbies and games. Try to schedule periods of time where they can do whatever hobbies or activities they enjoy.
* Share information with children, but make sure it is age-appropriate and keep it to the basics. Let children know they are safest when they reduce their risk of getting sick by washing their hands regularly, resting and limiting contact with people outside of their home.
* Reassure them many people who contract COVID-19 will be sick but most will recover and everyone needs to follow precautionary measures to protect people who are at risk, such as older family members or those with health conditions.
* Acknowledge this is a scary time for many people and whatever emotions they are feeling are valid.
* Make sure youth have a regimented schedule to follow if their school is closed and they are at home. It is important for their days to still have structure and normality.
* Let kids talk or video chat with distant family members, especially elderly ones they may be worried about.
* Be aware of signs of stress in your children. For younger children this could be regressive behaviors such as bed wetting. Stress may also manifest itself in physical changes in appetite or digestive issues, such as constipation or diarrhea. For older children and teens, stress may also cause them to stop eating, as food intake is one of the few things within their control.
* Plan family [activities](https://agrilifetoday.tamu.edu/2020/03/20/social-distancing-with-kids/). This facilitates communication and is a chance to connect with children who may be feeling vulnerable. Read a book aloud together, play a board game, create an indoor scavenger hunt or even play a video game with your child.
* Physical activity can promote health and decrease anxiety. If possible, throw a ball around in your backyard, go for a [walk](https://walkacrosstexas.org/) in your neighborhood or just turn on music and have a dance party with your kids.

**News Release prepared by Susan Himes**

**Susan.Himes@ag.tamu.edu**