

Accepting that our reactions are understandable

With the disruption to our daily lives, irritability and anger is normal. Anxiety and fear is normal. Sadness and grief is normal. When these feelings arise in you or others, say to yourself, “This is understandable.” Ask yourself “What might feel helpful at this moment?” Say to yourself, “May I hold this feeling in kindness and remember it will pass.”

We respond to threats in three primary ways: fight, flight, or freeze. We see this all around us — we may be quicker to argue with a loved one; we may flee into denial or avoidance; we may feel disoriented and confused about what to do from one minute to the next. All this is understandable.

If we can accept these reactions as normal, it'll make it easier for us to adjust to our changing circumstances.

Slowing down when there is no hurry

Take some time every day to appreciate all the ways we're taking care of each other — we are stocking grocery shelves, caring for patients, teaching children remotely and at home, reaching out to friends, checking on our elderly and immunocompromised people, buying gift cards for local businesses that might be losing income. The list of things we can do and are doing is endless; we get to choose which ones feel most possible for us.

We can also pause to appreciate the unexpected gifts — extra time to snuggle with pets, a walk in the woods mid-day with a teenage child, a leisurely breakfast with a spouse, a break from the daily commute. It's okay to enjoy these gifts even though the larger situation is not one we would have wished for. It's okay to enjoy these gifts even in the midst of suffering. Sometimes it is necessary.

Maybe it feels like there are only losses right now and no unexpected gifts. You have no duty to feel grateful for or cheerful about any part of this. That's okay too, to just feel whatever you're feeling. And to know that your reaction, whatever it is, is understandable. We have never been here before.

If you notice yourself rushing around when there's no need to hurry or you notice yourself feeling overwhelmed (this may happen many times during a day), sit down somewhere comfortable for three minutes and take ten breaths. Count four counts on the inhale and seven counts on the exhale. Invite your body to relax and release tension while you do this. And then get up and move into the next thing more slowly. Allow yourself to stop and breathe like this every hour if it helps.

Getting along with our loved ones

Children of all ages need their parents to remain calm and reassuring. Children will react to a parent's level of stress. If you need to step away, even just to the bathroom, to take ten long, slow breaths, do that rather than let an interaction escalate.

Don't be afraid to talk to your kids about Coronavirus. Talk about facts and set a calm tone. Respond to your child's questions and needs rather than overloading them with information. Focus on the practical things you are all doing to stay safe — washing hands, staying home, keeping distance from others when you're outside, not going to play dates or gatherings.

When a child or any loved one voices a feeling, however irrational it may seem to you, treat the feeling with respect. Don't minimize it, and don't jump to trying to fix it. Our loved ones need to know they can express thoughts and feelings to us without being judged or dismissed.

Let your loved one know you're listening by saying back what you hear: "You're worried about how grandma is" or "You miss your friend Lucy" or "you're frustrated about being stuck at home." And then just let them talk. It's fine to say, "That makes sense to me" or "I can understand why you'd be feeling that." Once they sense their feelings have been heard, they will be able to move on to something else.

There's no need to talk anyone out of a particular feeling, even if it's hard to sit with them while they express themselves. Feelings come in waves and they will roll on through if we don't put up a lot of resistance to them and if we don't feel like we have to "fix" them. (See "More Help" section below if you think someone is in danger of harming themselves or needs more support than you can provide).

With children, anxiety, fear, and sadness can manifest as irritability, anger, or behavior that annoys us. Trust that there is a legitimate feeling underneath the difficult behavior you're seeing. You can say, "I see you're having a tough moment." And you can always say, "I love you" and "I am here anytime you want to talk."

Finding balance in the day

Maintain steady routines in your days. Children need consistency, but so do grown-ups. Regular rhythms signal safety to our nervous systems.

Stay informed, but limit how much time you spend reading news or on social media. Ask yourself, "How is this content helping me right now?"

We are fortunate to live in an area where we can go outside without jeopardizing our health or the health of others. Go outside for some part of each day. Learn to identify the birds or teach someone else. Plan a garden, plant seedlings.

Exercise is one of the most powerful treatments we have for mild to moderate anxiety and depression. There are short, free workout apps; as little as five minutes can make a difference. You can also just do some jumping jacks or heavy cleaning around the house. (Don't start a big new exercise regime without talking to your doctor).

Notice the small joys. Take time to appreciate a meal or a cup of tea, watch the plants coming in to bloom, listen or dance to favorite music.

This may be a good moment to start a new creative endeavor like learning a new language or picking up an instrument. But it's not the time to add a lot of extra expectations. Ask yourself, "what do I have energy for?" and "what feels soothing right now?"

If you find yourself imagining worst case scenarios, say to yourself in a friendly tone: "Oh, I'm doing the 'what-ifs' again" and then re-direct your thoughts to something positive — a happy memory, a comforting image, or a well-wishing prayer ("May I be well. May I be safe. May I be calm.").

Find ways to connect socially every day. Some people are scheduling regular phone or video chat times with friends and family. That brother who you only talk to once a month, think about sending him a short text or email every day. Get creative with connecting with your people by video if you are able to — have a cup of coffee, play a game of chess, make art together over Skype. Write and mail an old-fashioned letter. Share your skills and knowledge with others: if you have a bread recipe, share it with your friends. If you made up a new game with your kids, post it online.

Keep up with your hygiene. While many of us don't have to dress for the office, make sure to bathe and put on clean, comfortable clothes. If you do go out, wash your hands well when you get back. Wipe down surfaces frequently touched by your family (refrigerator handle, door knobs, kitchen counter).

Get plenty of sleep. When we are under stress and are adjusting to new challenges, we may tire more easily. Allow yourself to rest.