

How to cope with the stress and trauma of the COVID pandemic

Gary R. Proctor, MD, Senior Behavioral Health Medical Director, Magellan Complete Care of Virginia

Anyone who has gone through a traumatic event can develop symptoms of stress disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although the COVID-19 pandemic in general would not meet the criteria for formally causing a stress disorder, many of the same issues can result from such a widespread and overwhelming event.

The pandemic could be viewed as a long-term stress event. It has become life-changing for the whole world. As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, people may experience increased anxiety and fear triggered by the pandemic and constant news. In addition, the pandemic can be traumatizing for others: healthcare workers, people who have lost friends and loved ones, and people whose lives have drastically changed.

What are stress-related disorders?

Stress-related disorders can occur after you have been through a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something horrible and scary that you see or that happens to you. During this type of event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening. These symptoms can change your behavior and how you live your life.

How can reaction to the COVID pandemic be similar to a stress disorder?

When you struggle with a stress disorder, it can be hard to anticipate when anxiety or depressive symptoms may flare up. Although it may appear that symptoms come out of nowhere, in most cases they are cued by factors called triggers. Internal triggers are the feelings, thoughts, memories, emotions, and bodily sensations that you feel or experience. External triggers are the people, places, and situations that can bring back memories of the traumatic event. In the current environment this could be caused by news reports, social media or discussion with friends or family.

The first thing to realize is that many fears are unwarranted; anxiety may arise when you are in a completely safe environment. When you begin to despair or your fears consume you, try to remember that your worries and fears may be extreme because of previous experiences and not current facts. Once you've realized what may trigger these fears and anxiety, you can begin to try to deal with them.

How to cope with stress-related symptoms amid COVID-19

- **Cultivate ways to be calmer.** It's understandable to feel anxious and worried about what may happen. While circumstances may be stressful and beyond your control, you can try to offset them with positive, calming activities. Practice slow, steady breathing and muscle relaxation, as well as any other actions that are calming for you (yoga, exercise, music, keeping the mind occupied).

- **Understand what is within your control.** Accept circumstances that cannot be changed and focus on what you can do. Evaluate your risk of contracting the virus, practice social distancing and follow clinical guidance on other practices. If you are in quarantine or isolation, do things that can support your mental health. Review Magellan Healthcare’s tip sheet, How to safeguard your mental health while quarantined for helpful information, on [MagellanAscend.com](https://www.magellanascend.com). Focusing on what you can control and do can help you deal with the unknown.
- **Remain hopeful.** Keep a long-term perspective. Look for opportunities to practice being more patient or kind with yourself, or to see the situation as an opportunity to learn or build strengths. Celebrate successes, find things to be grateful about, and take satisfaction in completing tasks, even small ones. Remember that this will not last forever.
- **Lean on your network.** Make the most of technology and stay in touch with colleagues, friends and family via phone calls, texts, social media and video conferencing. Consider joining a free support group online to stay connected. Visit [MagellanHealthcare.com/COVID-19/Recovery](https://www.MagellanHealthcare.com/COVID-19/Recovery) for information about virtual meetings for several programs. If you have a therapist, try to continue your treatment by phone or online.
- **Focus on the potential positives.** Try and focus on the things that can be viewed positively such as spending more time with family and experiencing a potential to grow. Many times, going through a stressful time like this can lead to post-traumatic growth. This growth can be seen as though the stressful event was a trial or challenge that you conquered, something you learned from and became more resilient through. Sometimes stress can be seen as stimulating personal growth and improved overall coping.

Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Sources:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. (n.d.). Retrieved March 25, 2020, from <https://www.healthwise.net/magellanhealth/Content/StdDocument.aspx?DOCHWID=hw184188#hw184190>
VA.gov: Veterans Affairs. (2020, March 9). Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/COVID_managing_stress.asp