



Dealing with Fear/Anxiety Related to the COVID-19 Outbreak

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This is a scary and upsetting time for many people, especially individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. All of the information and news about COVID-19 can be difficult to understand and might spark anxiety. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created a list of possible signs of fear and anxiety related to the outbreak, which include:

- **Excessive crying or irritation (yelling at others or lashing out at them, getting frustrated easily)**
- **Returning to past behaviors (for example, toileting accidents, bedwetting, self-injury)**
- **Excessive worry or sadness**
- **Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits (eating/sleeping too much or too little)**
- **Difficulty with attention and concentration**
- **Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past**
- **Unexplained headaches or body pain**
- **Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs (such as requesting medications more often than usual)**

To support individuals with I/DD through this situation:

- **Take time to talk about the COVID-19 outbreak.** Share facts and answer questions about COVID-19, phrasing the information in a way that is clear and understandable according to the person's needs (LINK: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/share-facts.html>). "COVID-19 Information By and For People with Disabilities," a plain language booklet created by self-advocates, is available at <https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plain-Language-Information-on-Coronavirus.pdf>.
- **Reassure individuals that they are safe.** Let them know it is ok to feel upset or scared. Share with them ways you deal with stress to help them learn how to cope. "Coronavirus Health and Safety," a video from ASERT (Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative) on is available at https://paautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1584048103.mp4?_=1.
- **Limit exposure to news coverage of the event, including social media.** It is easy to misinterpret what is heard, which can increase fear and anxiety. Tips from the American Psychological Association for previewing news coverage related to COVID-19 are available at <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/pandemics?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=0ee63567-f3a1-4ba2-ba28-a0842a905c39>.
- **Try to maintain regular routines.** When day programs and public areas are closed, create a schedule with relaxing or fun activities. The ASERT website offers tips and suggestions for activities to keep individuals and caregivers active at <https://paautism.org/resource/coronavirus-resources/>. (In the "Resources and Information"

section of the page, click on the “Supporting Individuals” header and then on the “Activities to Stay Engaged” link.)

- **Be a role model.** Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, and eat well. Connect with friends and family members. The ASERT website offers tips for maintaining physical and mental health during periods of social isolation at <https://paautism.org/resource/coronavirus-resources/>. (In the “Resources and Information” section of the page, click on the “Self Care” header and then on the “Physical Health” and “Mental Health” links.)
- **Reassure individuals with increased anxiety, about what you and they can control.** No one can make the virus disappear, but we can follow the advice of doctors to avoid getting sick and to help others avoid becoming sick, such as hand washing, social distancing. If the individual’s anxiety continues to increase, consider consulting a therapist/psychiatrist/physician for helpful interventions or medication needs. Caregiver tips for how to explain COVID-19 to individuals with I/DD is available at <https://www.yai.org/news-stories/blog/caregiver-tips-covid-19>.
- “A Social Story for Anxiety and COVID-19,” a resource for caregivers and self-advocates, is available at https://www.yai.org/sites/default/files/documents/socialstory-anxiety-and-covid-19_0.pdf.

For more information and assistance, you may contact the KEPRO HCQU at <http://hcqu.kepro.com> or 1-888-321-5861. If needed, mental health counselors are available through the SAMSHA Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5590. Visit their website at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline> for more information, including options for those who need interpreters or those who feel more comfortable communicating via text messaging.

Resource:

Information adapted from “Coronavirus Disease 2019 – Managing Anxiety and Stress” at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fabout%2F coping.html