Resilience during a pandemic

The constant news media and health organization warnings of a possible flu pandemic may cause us to worry about our own and our family's health and safety. While it is perfectly normal to be concerned, there are ope with a pandemic should it occur in your community.



Get the facts

Having the facts and understanding the potential threat is the best defence.

Get the facts on flu:

"flu *pandemic*" is defined as a new influenza (flu) virus that spreads easily between humans and affects a wide geographic area.

- The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that Influenza *epidemics* usually occur yearly during autumn and winter in temperate regions.
- While the flu may cause only mild symptoms in most healthy adults, some flu strains can be life-threatening for young children, the elderly or individuals with chronic illness.

Keep up-to-date on flu pandemic status in your area. Find a reliable source of information, such as your local public health office, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the World Health Organization. Since a flu pandemic can evolve rapidly, gather information regularly so you can take appropriate action when necessary.

Develop a plan

Being prepared to respond if a flu pandemic spreads to your community can greatly lessen your anxiety. Since a pandemic can last a number of weeks, you may want to consider:

- Stocking up on non-perishable foods, water, flu medicine, etc., in case officials recommend staying home or you self-isolate due to a family member becoming ill
- Developing a plan for how you would care for sick family members
- Creating an emergency communication plan to keep in touch with other family members or friends if you or they become isolated
- Using community resources or websites to create a family preparedness checklist that you can follow, should a pandemic occur in your area.

Manage your anxiety

While we all have our own personal response to a crisis, depending on our cultural, social and religious backgrounds, most of us will feel some level of anxiety during a pandemic. This can cause both physical and emotional reactions. To manage your anxiety and fear, try to put the potential threat or current events in context by keeping a broader, more hopeful perspective. You can "reframe" your thinking by focusing on your strength and resourcefulness. By seeing yourself as a survivor you can boost your confidence, accept the situation and focus on circumstances that you **can control.**

Also be watchful for physical affects of anxiety, such as trouble concentrating or difficulty sleeping. Concern about the pandemic may also intensify the effects of other stresses in our daily lives. This can impact your built-in physical stress response, which may leave you more vulnerable to the flu as well as other health risks. It is therefore important to take care of yourself and build your resilience.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to effectively cope with, recover from or adapt to challenging life situations. A person who is resilient is able to cope with crisis situations due to behaviours, thoughts and actions that they have learned and developed. The steps to building resilience differ from person to person, based on culture, values, beliefs and inter-personal relationships. However, some common resilience-building factors include having:

- a positive view of your strengths and abilities
- the capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out
- the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses
- a sense of purpose and long term focus
- a social support network

Tips for building resilience

We can boost our resilience levels in a number of ways, including the following:

- **Keep a positive outlook.** Having an optimistic attitude can help you focus on the good things in your life, rather than worrying about things you may not be able to control. This means acknowledging your own strength, resourcefulness and abilities. This will help you avoid seeing the pandemic as an insurmountable crisis.

- If you have children, it is important for parents or guardians to appear calm and confident, since children may feel anxious or fearful about their family's or their own personal health.

- **Develop realistic goals and take decisive action.** By having a plan, you can focus on specific tasks that will enable you to move towards your goal. This might include ensuring you have a supply of food, water, flu-related medicines or activities that you and your family can do at home if you become isolated. By keeping yourself busy, your mind will be occupied, having less time to dwell on worries and fears.

- **Control stress by managing your worries.** Intense worrying about what might happen or how the situation with ill family members might get worse can trigger our body's automatic "fight-flight" stress response. Over time, this physical response to stress takes its toll on our bodies. Consider finding effective ways of managing stress, such as:

    - **Quarantine the worry.** Create a regular half hour each day as "worry time" to identify and tackle each worry as if it were a problem to solve. When you feel yourself slipping into a worried frame of mind, try to postpone the feelings and focus instead on what is actually happening at that moment.
    - **Find a quiet place each day where you can write down your worries and fears undisturbed.** Sometimes by articulating your worries, it is easier to find solutions or simply deal with them. Periodically, collect what you've written, read through it and destroy it as a symbolic way of acknowledging that you've dealt with those worries.

- **Learn from your past.** Think back to past experiences and sources of personal strength that helped you through other crisis situations. For example, how have you typically responded to stressful events? Who did you turn to for support? How did you overcome the situation? What did you learn that would be helpful in this situation?

- **Stay connected.** The fear of infection and the desire to protect yourself and your family from the flu may mean avoiding social situations and increased isolation. However you can still maintain contact with people, by phone, letter or email. Also be sure to regularly gather up-to-date information on the pandemic from a reliable source.

- **Keep physically fit.** During a pandemic, you may not be able to enjoy your usual level of physical activity. However, it is important to exercise your body and stretch out tense muscles as well as finding time for relaxation. Eat a healthy diet and be sure to get enough sleep. By taking care of yourself, you will be better prepared to deal with situations that require resilience.

- **Reach out for professional assistance.** If intense anxiety is preventing you from performing your job or other daily activities, consider contacting a professional for counselling support.

A professional can provide you with the knowledge, guidance and peace of mind on how to cope during a pandemic to ensure you and your loved ones stay healthy and safe. Being well informed and putting to rest any fears can put you in a good position to protect yourself should one occur.