

Maintaining Emotional Well-Being: A Resource for COPD Patients During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The current COVID-19 pandemic is impacting all aspects of daily life and is emotionally challenging for us all, but particularly for individuals with a chronic lung disease.

We are all experiencing increased stress from:

- **Reduced social interaction with others.**
- **Altered and limited work, social, educational, leisure and entertainment activities.**
- **Increased worries about our personal health, the health of loved ones and the overall health of our communities.**
- **Increased worries about how our personal and national economic health—both in the short term and long term.**

The Panic/Anxiety/Stress Downward Spiral

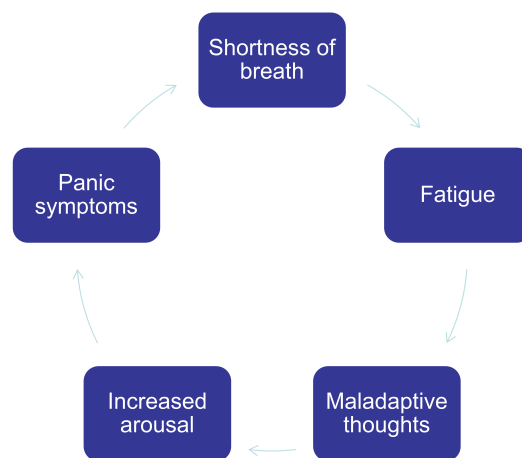
Individuals with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are already at an increased risk for anxiety and depression (aside from the stressors from COVID-19)—these are common comorbidities (*other secondary conditions or illnesses that you may have in addition to your primary COPD condition*).

In fact, approximately 15%-20% of individuals with COPD have anxiety and/or depression symptoms. And with the current COVID-19 pandemic stress, that number has likely escalated.

Individuals with COPD can sometimes experience shortness of breath. This symptom can naturally lead to fatigue/exhaustion. This reduced physical state can be the perfect stage for negative thoughts to be triggered:

- **“I can’t breathe--am I going to get sick?”**
- **“Will I end up in the hospital?”**
- **“Are my symptoms from my ongoing COPD or the virus?”**

These negative thoughts can lead to heightened, *physiological responses*— basically, your body’s automatic, beyond-your-control reaction to stress: heart beats faster, hands get sweaty, stomach starts to hurt, muscles tense and your head aches.



AND ultimately, this physical response to stress causes you to have more shortness of breath or breathing issues. Sadly, this can lead to more fatigue, more negative thoughts, more increased physical panic responses—causing not just a continuous cycle, but a *downward health spiral*.

Avoiding the Stress/Anxiety Downward Spiral

The first step to avoiding the downward, stress-related health spiral, is remembering the following:

- **Panic and feelings of anxiety can have a direct impact on breathing**—a worrisome symptom right now that can lead to confusion and more stress about COVID-19
- **Over time, constant physical reactions to chronic stress can affect your physical health**—your sleep, your mood, your quality of life and even your immune system, making you more likely to get sick.
- **Being aware of “triggers” for negative thoughts, can help stop this downward cycle before it begins.**
Examples of “triggers”: a news report, not being able to participate in an activity, constant concern about a loved one.

Tracking Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors That Lead to Stress/Anxiety/Depression

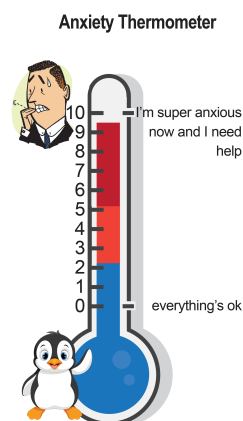
- **Track your anxious feelings/thoughts to be more aware.**

Rate them 1 to10:

1= “everything’s ok”

to

10= “I’m super anxious now and I need help”



- **Use the “ABC’s to help you understand what caused the anxious thoughts or depressive feelings:**

A=Activating event: “What was the situation?” “What is going on right now?”

B=Beliefs and Behaviors: “What was I thinking?”

C=Consequences: “What happened next?”

- Now, challenge yourself, after you rate your feelings and answer the ABC questions, ask: **“What is under my control to change?”** Ask yourself:
 - Do I need to limit exposure to this trigger? (*Example:* stop watching so much news about COVID-19)
 - Do I need to consider more positive thoughts?
 - Do I need to practice relaxation or social connection to improve my mood?
- **Try re-framing a negative thought.**
Example: Instead of “I can’t go anywhere” think instead, “I get to be safe in my home.”
Example: Instead of “Everything is shutting down” think instead, “The most important places are still open—hospitals, pharmacies, grocery stores, doctors’ offices.”
- **And finally, practice good self-care** (See below)

Improve Emotional Well-being by Practicing Good Self-Care

- **Practice good sleep habits**—go to bed and wake up on a consistent schedule, avoid staying in bed when you are not sleeping
- **Get outside**, in nature and sunshine, for at least 30 minutes each day
- **Engage in some form of exercise each day**
- **Avoid alcohol/drugs**
- **Be informed, but not *over*-informed**—try to avoid watching the news all day—limit your news consumption
- **Explore new things—online**. Take a free online course, listen to a podcast about a topic you are interested in, explore the online offerings from your local library system such as free audiobooks and magazines.
- **Try to find something to laugh or smile about**—watch a comedy on television or your computer, read a funny and lighthearted novel or short story, look at photos from past family gatherings or events.
- **Meditate**—consider downloading a meditation or calming app on your phone or explore YouTube for any number of free guided meditations or online relaxation exercises.

Check-in and Engage

- **Social distance does not mean social isolation**—it is really “physical” distancing.
- **Connect with friends and family** by phone, email, text, Facebook, Skype or COPD360social. (<https://www.copdfoundation.org/COPD360social/Community/Activity-Feed.aspx>)
- **Schedule times to check-in with family/friends frequently**. Put these on your calendar to give you something to look forward to.
- **Offer to help others**—call a neighbor who is living alone or struggling to see how they are doing or share an easy online recipe with simple ingredients with others.
- **Thank others**—leave a thank you sign for your email carrier or person delivering your packages, write a thank you note to your grocery store or pharmacy, look into any number of online campaigns showing appreciation for first responders and health care workers.

Additional Resources

1. Virtual Museum Tours

<https://www.businesstraveller.com/business-travel/2020/04/02/these-museums-are-offering-free-virtual-tours/>

2. Mindfulness Exercises

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/mindfulness-exercises/art-20046356>

3. Online Book Clubs

<https://www.bustle.com/p/14-online-book-clubs-you-can-join-right-now-8088085>

4. Online Courses

<https://www.freecodecamp.org/news/ivy-league-free-online-courses-a0d7ae675869/>

5. NTM Info and Research Blog

<https://ntminfo.org/news/2020/03/keeping-busy-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

Seeking Outside Help

If you have tried all of the above and your anxiety and/or depressive thoughts are impacting your daily life in such a way as to make you unable to function, it is time to consider seeking additional help.

- Just as you would seek out help for an exacerbation of COPD, or an injury to a limb, there is no shame (and you should not hesitate) to seek out mental health assistance as well.
- Consider seeking out a therapist/mental health professional for “virtual” therapy via the phone or computer.
- Telemedicine will allow you to schedule an appointment with a physician who can discuss your individual needs.

The global COVID-19 pandemic changes daily and the World Health Organization updates their recommendations regularly <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>. We also encourage you to regularly visit the [CDC website for high-risk populations](#) and check in with your state health department’s website for local information.

In addition the COPD Foundation is providing updated information on its website: <https://www.copdfoundation.org/Learn-More/I-am-a-Person-with-COPD/Coronavirus-Information.aspx>

And on the COPD Foundation blog:

<https://www.copdfoundation.org/COPD360social/Community/COPD-Digest/Article/1553/A-Coronavirus-Update-for-the-COPD-Community.aspx>

The COPD Foundation acknowledges and thanks Michelle Eakin, PhD, Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine for allowing us to reprint, adapt and share content from her original presentation, “Coping strategies for people with COPD during COVID-19” March 2020.