

How Therapists Can Help Patients Manage Coronavirus Anxiety and Isolation

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Start by acknowledging that their anxiety is real, valid, and *normal*. Let them know that this is horrible for everyone. Encourage them not let anxiety take over their lives. Have them do productive things like the ideas that follow below to manage it:

1. Help them focus on today, and try not to worry about tomorrow. It will come anyway, and they can focus on it then. Have them make a “To Do” list for today or a schedule for today. Have them review it at the end of the day so they can feel a sense of accomplishment.
2. If they worry, have them set aside 15 minutes daily for Worry Time. When it comes, they can just worry, and only worry. The rest of their day they can focus on what they can do today. If worries come, have them write them down and put them aside to worry about tomorrow during their Worry Time.
3. Encourage them to go on a media diet and limit their exposure to depressing or stressful media content. This means in the media, books, movies, newspapers, and TV shows. No more than one hour per day - and yes, that includes information about the coronavirus. Watching and reading news should be limited to no more than twice a day. Limit screen time, and increase reading; visuals are much more powerful emotionally. Increase media content exposure to pleasant things.
4. Help them to look for silver linings. For example, if they are staying home, is it spending time with their children or their pets, gardening, etc.? Cook a special meal or chocolate chip cookies. Work outside if it’s a nice day. Take that 15 minute break and go for a walk. Play more card games or board games. Do a puzzle. Do house projects or read books that they’ve been meaning to get to.
5. Help them find ways to make social contact virtually. Make at least one social contact daily. Eat virtual meals with friends. Play games virtually, with both sides using the game materials or cards. Call someone they have not been in touch with recently. Watch the same movie at the same time as friends and text each other or discuss it afterwards.
6. Encourage them to focus on what they can control, and try to let go of what they can’t. Have them take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle. Write at the top what is causing them stress. On the left column, write “What I can control”, and on the right column, write “What I can’t control”. Put their efforts into the things they can control, and don’t waste time and energy on what they can’t.
7. Remind them to be kind to themselves. Say nice things to themselves. Remind them to remind themselves that they are doing as much as they can. Remind them to remind themselves that this will pass. Remind them that they’ve been through hard times before and have gotten through them. Take those 15 minute breaks instead of working.
8. Encourage them to get 3-4 hours of aerobic exercise every week, split into at least 3 different days. Do online yoga or meditation. Get outside at least once a day to take a walk, run, bicycle, garden, etc., preferably in the morning, when light is an antidepressant. While outside, follow social distancing guidelines.
9. Teach them to self-soothe with their senses. Look at pretty pictures, pictures of people they love, of fun times and vacations they’ve had. Listen to calming or uplifting music, and avoid depressing and angry music. Fill their home with smells like from candles, scents, and foods. Take long baths and pet their pets for at least 20 minutes. Savor their favorite foods.

10. Have them do something hopeful each day. FaceTime, Zoom, or otherwise connect visually with young children in their family. Play with children. Do something that will pay off down the road, like planting a garden. Have them download and use the Virtual Hope Box app. Dream about the future. Plan a vacation. Watch a hopeful movie or read a hopeful book. Carry something that inspires you in a positive way: a picture, something religious, a memento.

While you are at it, please remember to *be kind to yourself*. This is new to all of us, and none of us were trained to deal with a pandemic as a therapist while we ourselves are experiencing it. Trust the therapeutic knowledge and skills you already have. Remember your own resilience and sense of purpose and draw upon them. Give yourself the gift of self-compassion you encourage in your patients.