

Resilience During a Disease Outbreak, Epidemic, or Pandemic

The constant news media coverage and warnings of a possible disease outbreak, epidemic, or 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 steps you can take to be prepared to cope should your community be affected.

Get the facts

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

Keep up-to-date on advice from public health experts. Find a reliable source of information, such as the Department of Health, or the World Health Organization. Since the status of an outbreak can evolve rapidly, gather information regularly so you can take appropriate action when necessary.

Develop a plan

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

- 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 Australia.

Manage your anxiety

While we all have our own personal response to a crisis, most of us will feel some level of anxiety during a disease outbreak. 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. By reframing your thinking and focusing on your strength and resourcefulness, you can boost your confidence, accept the situation, and focus on circumstances that you **can control**.

Also be mindful of physical effects of anxiety, such as trouble concentrating or difficulty sleeping. Concern about the event may also intensify the effects of other stresses in our daily lives. This can affect your built-in physical stress response, which may leave you more vulnerable to illness 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 behaviour, 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 interpersonal 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, medicine, 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 can trigger our body's automatic fight-or-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 spread of infection may mean avoiding social situations and increased isolation. However you can still maintain contact with people, by phone or online.

Keep physically fit. During a disease outbreak, 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 make sure you 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 disease outbreak, epidemic, or pandemic to ensure that 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 such an event occur.

© LifeWorks 2020



LifeWorks
Well-being Experts
Last Reviewed Mar 2020