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Taking Care of Yourself - *Common reactions and suggestions for coping*

News reports and discussions with family and friends about Coronavirus (COVID-19) may bring about some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite *normal*, for individuals to experience waves of emotions during stressful events or uncertain times. Some of these “symptoms” may include:

- Uncertainty/fear
- Anxious/overwhelmed
- Difficulty concentrating
- Emotional outbursts
- Hyper alert to environment
- Restlessness/agitation
- Appetite changes
- Sleep disturbances
- Headaches
- Nausea/stomach issues

These responses are very natural reactions to stressful times. Everyone is unique in their response because of personal history, beliefs, outlook, support system, health status and coping strategies.

Helpful suggestions for you to try:

- Talk about what you are hearing & how it impacts you to people you trust when you are ready.
- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. This may sound silly but we often forget to hydrate when we are stressed or feeling anxious. Dehydration can make those feelings worse.
- Eat well-balanced meals throughout the day.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Practice deep breathing exercises to calm yourself and try to relax. Check out apps like *Calm* or *Headspace*.
- Consider taking a break from watching the news or accessing social media sites to shield yourself from the constant barrage of information.
- Try to focus on what you can control like proper hand-hygiene, preparing emergency supplies, etc.
- It's natural to think about the “what if..., could of..., should of...” thoughts. However, these thoughts will not help you. Focus on positive outcomes and facts.
- To manage reoccurring, stressful thoughts, simply acknowledge the thought and try to imagine holding a remote control in your hand and changing the channel by shifting your focus on a joy-filled moment or peaceful place. You may also want to consider saying a repetitive, positive statement out loud.
- Incorporate self-care and joy into each day – read a book, play with your kids or pet, listen to your favorite music, or watch a funny movie.
- Try to maintain your daily routines and structure your time. You will likely find that maintaining your routine will help gain back a sense of control and order in your life.
- Engage in physical activity (exercise), alternated with relaxation. It will help to alleviate some of the anxious “energy” you may be feeling.
- Sometimes, when our thoughts become overwhelming, professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. Consider calling WellSpan EAP for further assistance.

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Helpful suggestions for family and friends:

- Listen carefully. When others talk about their experiences and feelings, their emotional load seems lighter to bear. One of the best ways you can help is to just listen. You don't have to come up with solutions or answers. It's okay if someone breaks down and cries.
- Spend time being "present"; presence is more important than words.
- Be understanding. Your perceptions and reactions to an incident may be very different from others based upon past experiences, beliefs, and coping skills. Recognize that everyone has their own unique response. Do not judge or impose your response or coping strategies on to others.
- Accept feelings. A wide range of emotions may be felt such as fear, anger, sadness and guilt. These emotions may be strong and change from moment to moment. If directed at you don't take them personally. Allow free expression without judgment or critique.
- Respect their need for balance in being together and personal time.
- If asked, be a buffer to extended family members and friends who may reach out to offer support. Having to retell the story over and over again about the traumatic event may be difficult and painful.
- Reassure them that they are safe. We often take this for granted. However, they may understandably feel very violated by what has happened and we should do everything we can to help support them.
- Be careful not to promote gossip or rumors. A lot of information is being shared, be sensitive and respectful to all parties. Don't make assumptions or "fill in the gaps" with information that may not be accurate. Direct questions to the appropriate parties.
- Respect differences. Everyone responds and copes differently to traumatic situations. Some will reach out, while others will be more private and introspective. Show respect by giving each person what they need. If you don't know, ask. Be careful not to impose your own coping strategies onto someone else.
- Respect privacy and confidentiality. If someone shares information, be courteous and do not repeat what is shared. The only time confidences should be broken is when someone is at risk of harming themselves or others. Provide a safe, secure area to ensure privacy.
- Ask to lend a helping hand. By nature, people will not ask for help or may not know what to ask for; take the lead and offer a helpful hand. Suggestions may be sharing their work load, taking a walk or going out to lunch. Even small things like cleaning, preparing meals, running errands and caring for family members can be a huge help.
- Be supportive and sensitive – Simple statements like "I care about you" and "I'm here for you" demonstrate care and concern. Remember, you may not know all the circumstances of the event, their past experiences or current situation. Multiple stressors may exist. Provide positive and encouraging words to give strength and hope.
- Reflect on the advice from author Henri Nouwen:
"The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares".