

How To Calm Your Anxiety About The Coronavirus In 90 Seconds

By Lise Van Susteren, M.D.

Discomfort and uncertainty are facts of life—that's always been true. But now we're encountering new levels of these feelings, given the [global outbreak of the coronavirus \(aka COVID-19\)](#) and the anticipation that it will only get worse. These worries reside on top of the myriad pressures we already face on a regular basis, and the cumulative toll can lead to a highly stressful state called "emotional inflammation."

As a psychiatrist in Washington, D.C., I am increasingly seeing the debilitating effects of this condition—which is not unlike post-traumatic stress but stems from simply living in a world that feels increasingly out of control. On a regular basis, I am seeing emotional inflammation in my patients, my friends, fellow climate activists, political insiders, media professionals, and even in my own life. Not only does it take a toll on the quality of someone's life, but it also can affect his or her physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

How do we manage this level of anxiety?

How can we learn to manage this level of uncertainty and hyper-reactivity to every news alert? Cultivating greater self-awareness can help. We can start by recognizing that—like many things in life—stress ebbs and flows. The same is true of illness outbreaks, which is why influenza, or flu, is typically limited to the late fall and winter months. When multiple challenges are upon us, rather than fighting them—which only increases their capacity to penetrate and dominate our minds and spirits—learning to accept or tolerate them and even think of ways to learn from them will help us cope in a healthier way.

This line of thinking is a feature of [acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT](#), a hot topic in psychology that encourages people to mindfully accept their feelings and reactions and then choose to behave and live in ways that are consistent with their values. It's an approach that allows us to move forward without struggling to stamp out our inner feelings.

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How do we accept our emotions?

Rather than fighting flashes of frustration, anxiety, or anger, sometimes it's better just to sit with those feelings and accept them. Notice that they're present without judging or latching on to them. Instead, view them as if they were leaves floating on a stream, and they'll likely pass naturally.

When someone has an emotional reaction to something in his or her environment, a chemical process in the body is activated that puts it on alert, but it lasts for only 90 seconds, according to neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor, Ph.D. After those 90 seconds have



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REV 3/20

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passed, any remaining emotional response stems from the person choosing, consciously or not, to stay in that emotional cycle.

How can the 90-second effect help?

Since I learned about the 90-second effect, I have become a big fan. Often when I start getting ratcheted up by an issue, I can quickly lapse into a ruminative state, grinding back and forth over the same material, which makes me feel even more frustrated and agitated.

Now, when I become aware of what I'm doing, I firmly and repeatedly say, "Ninety-second rule! Ninety-second rule!" to remind myself: The hold the emotional chemical alert has on me is short-lived. I also remind myself that it is my choice whether to hold on to these emotions. It doesn't work instantly, but the strategy becomes more effective each time I use it, and as the grip of strong emotions gives way to reason, I feel an empowering sense of relief.

If you simply notice that swell of emotions and don't hold on to it, you can feel it fade away, too. The key is not to engage, not to judge or ruminate about your feelings or what triggered them. Instead, acknowledge and name how you're feeling, as if it were an object outside of you. Let yourself feel what you feel, but then be willing to let go of it.

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How do we continue dealing with COVID-19?

The uncertainties arising from the coronavirus crisis provide a good opportunity to keep the principles of ACT in mind, as we seek to deal with our collective rising anxiety:

1. Listen to what acknowledged experts are saying about the virus.
2. Learn what you can from these respected sources.
3. Discuss what you can do to protect yourself and the people you love. Make a plan and commit to it, then remind yourself that you are doing everything you can. Accept that reality, and that a perfect solution, isn't possible in this context. Then, move on and focus on what else you *can* control in this world—your attitude and thinking patterns, your home environment, your work ethic, and how you take care of your body's needs, day and night.

https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/how-to-calm-your-anxiety-about-coronavirus-in-90-seconds?mbg_mcid=777%3A5e6950a9102e512cdb717e87%3Aot%3A5c1d05cc9799ec3cc61d7594%3A1&mbg_hash=9b2aea749e3c9a780c1e62a50648af75&utm_source=mbg&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily_v2_20200312&fbclid=IwAR25blzNJQFINFgtNj5DMgrqLCqeK1alBRGjZdPpzOY1qd8KxpdCelZNRHc



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