

Choosing sources of information carefully is critical to COVID-19 mental well-being says Mental Health Commission of Canada

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In the midst of COVID-19, it is increasingly difficult to avoid the bleak headlines and bright-red news banners. Staying informed is, after all, one way many of us try to win back a semblance of control. But while it's natural to seek information about this unfolding public health crisis, we must also take steps to protect our mental health.

With guidance from Dr. Keith Dobson, clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Calgary, the Mental Health Commission of Canada has compiled the following tips to help Canadians protect their mental health as they strive to safeguard their physical well-being and that of their loved ones.

1. Understand the fight-or-flight response

It's normal to feel anxious in the face of a threat. Our body's fight-or-flight response is designed to keep us safe by heightening our response to perceived danger. Part of that response is the release of stress hormones, which increase heart rate, blood pressure, and overall alertness.

The brain is continuously seeking new informational cues to re-assess the threat level. Unfortunately, if we bombard ourselves with COVID-19 details, headlines, and images, we reinforce the threat signal and perpetuate the stress response. Remember, the information we allow in will affect how we feel - and we should monitor that intake with care.

Because of the impact stress has on our body's immune system, managing it during a pandemic is critical to the success of strategies designed to reduce contagion or the severity of the illness.

2. Be selective about news sources

Where we seek information matters! Credible sources, such as the Public Health Agency of Canada and the World Health Organization give us plain facts to counteract the sensationalism and fear-provoking imagery found in the news media. Updates from neighbours or other kinds of hearsay are more likely to include selective attention to fearful cases and stories.

Carefully choosing our sources is the best way to ensure accuracy. While there is plenty of fact-based content on social media, because of the way it works it is also much more likely to turn hearsay into misinformation. The facts - as fluid as they may be - are essential to facing the situation appropriately.

3. Consider the practical value of the information

Not all information is created equal. When we see images of workers in hazmat suits, empty streets, and armed guards, our brains detect a threat and react accordingly. Unfortunately, these images don't have a lot of value, as they convey very little meaningful or useful information. Where possible, focus on the facts in the story, not the extraneous details or peripheral images.

4. Don't discount the power of language

When the media reports that rates of infection are “skyrocketing,” for example, it can trigger more anxious feelings than if they’d said “increasing.” Although it may be difficult, it’s important to see through the sensationalistic language and focus on the message and the practical takeaways. If a particular news source uses a lot of alarmist language, consider avoiding that outlet altogether.

5. Set boundaries on news consumption

With such a rapidly evolving situation, it can feel like even a few hours without an update will leave us in the dark. But while the information about COVID-19 is constant, it is also highly repetitive. The more often we receive information, the more it will play on our minds, and the more difficult it will be to disengage.

So try limiting your updates to between one and three designated times per day. In the interim, make a concentrated effort to place your attention elsewhere. When it’s time to re-engage, it won’t take long to catch up.

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