

Advice from the Trenches: Dealing with coronavirus anxiety

Dear C,

As you've probably noticed, the entire world has suddenly gone to hell. I am feeling sick to my stomach. Every job I had for the spring has been cancelled. The reception for an art show I was supposed to have this week was cancelled. I am not sure what I am going to do.

I realize that everyone is basically in the same boat here, but what I don't know is what I am supposed to do with this sick feeling in my stomach. I can't go out or go shopping to distract myself. I can't afford to keep drinking until it's over. I can't really afford food, and there isn't any in the stores right now anyway. I think all of us walk around fearing the day when some disaster would hit and change our lives. It seems like now it has happened. Great! Now what??????

Lorelei Lost

C says: This pandemic is a big change, and above all, people fear change and uncertainty. There is no sugar coating this one - things are looking very bleak and the future is a big question mark. The natural thing for most people to do first when a big disaster hits them in the face is to freak out — hence the hoarding, the crashing stock markets and the general panic. But the thing we all have to remember is that although the life that we knew has been at least temporarily halted, humans are adaptable creatures. We will soon adapt to these circumstances, and a new normal will begin to prevail.

This crisis is bringing out either the best or the worst in all of us. We all still have some choice and control when it comes to our reactions and behavior. This is the wrong time to give up and start drinking, drugging, eating or sleeping our way through the day. When the going gets tough, the tough start coping.

If the world becomes unstable, we can create our own stability. Your #1 priority? Take care of yourself. This is more important than ever, because if anything goes wrong, there is no one to take care of you if the hospitals are overcrowded. To that end, eat healthy and maintain a daily routine. Having our accustomed routines in life interrupted is unsettling. For those who struggle with mental illness, it's even harder. If you set up a system for yourself it can be very comforting to follow familiar steps every day. I remember a therapist once telling me he had a patient whose condition was very well controlled,

but when he went on vacation, “the voices” came back. The therapist asked some questions and discovered the patient abandoned morning yoga and other routines when traveling. When the patient restored his usual patterns, he felt grounded again.

Another good idea is to exercise, for both physical and emotional health. This pandemic is enough to make the best of us depressed as hell, and exercise is one of the best natural antidepressants there is. Get out of your house and go to the park or go hiking. Just keep a safe social distance; the fresh air will do you good.

Use this time to do all the stuff you’ve made a list of and put off “until I have time.” In regular life, there is never time. We have work, shopping, social events, travel...who ever gets around to cleaning the back storage room? Now is a good time.

We may have to practice social distancing, but that is no reason to be emotionally distant from each other. The phones still work. Social media is going gangbusters. Stay in touch with friends and family and if you know of anyone who is disabled, alone or economically challenged, help whenever you can. We have to help each other. That’s what community is all about.

Finally - stay informed, and follow all of the recommended guidelines for self protection and pandemic control, but don’t keep the news on 24/7, it’ll just make you a nervous wreck. And don’t forget - we really are all in this together. Other countries have been able to slow the spread. If we cooperate and do the right thing, we will get through this.

Dr.B: On the best-in-people side - a lot of restaurants, non profits and temples/churches have created programs to help. The YMCA offers free childcare, local restaurants have free or discount food to go, delivery of necessities by churches, etc... these are but of the few things I’ve seen start up in my area. Call any local church or temple or your town hall or check their Facebook page and you should be able to get a list of available services.