

Peer Support Approaches for Responding to Fear

Many in our community may be feeling extra stress with all of the talk about the Coronavirus outbreak, officially now called COVID-19. As peer supporters, we are in a position to support others around their own fears as well as the general fear in our communities. Encouraging people to discuss their fears is a great practice. Our discussions can provide accurate information, and it can help others find accurate information from appropriate sources. In this way, people can decide what they need to do to in order to minimize their risk of becoming infected, and it also can have their minds put at ease if they realize that they have already taken necessary precautions.

We can respond to fear with compassion and also offer constructive support. Fear can be a lifesaver that protects us from real danger and spurs us toward positive action, but it also has the power to deeply disturb and limit us. Worst of all, fear can erode our trust in ourselves, in the goodness of others, and the joy in living.

Constructive responses to fear:

- 1) Put fear into perspective – our perception of fear is often increased by what we see, hear, and read in the media. It is important for us to become knowledgeable consumers of information, and be able to differentiate between accurate news and exaggerated, scary sound bites of skewed information and wrongly-projected statistics. Staying informed and choosing reliable resources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization will help. Resource link: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>
- 2) Media breaks – the key is to stay informed without being overwhelmed by a constant flow of upsetting information. Catch up on the news at a time of day you feel most rested, relaxed, and supported. Watch the news with a supportive friend.
- 3) Interrupt fear – interrupting fear can limit its power. When we are fearful we may also feel out of control. Doing usual tasks such as washing dishes, exercising, or talking with friends reminds us that we can be fearful but still make meaningful choices. Each task accomplished lessens fear's grip and restores our confidence and trust that we can cope with life's circumstances.
- 4) Use all of our senses – when fear takes hold of our thoughts, small concerns can grow large and take over. Awareness of all five senses can help us be in the present moment instead of losing ourselves to the "what-ifs" which can be circling around our brains. Breathing exercises, mindfulness routines, coloring, cooking, and practicing other ways of being in the "here and now" with the help of our senses is helpful.
- 5) Find your joy – turning to joy does not mean ignoring your own suffering or the suffering in the world. Finding your joy means being willing to remember that connection to others is one of the most important ways of restoring life's meaning. James Baraz sums it up this way in his book, *Awakening Joy*, "Focusing only on the terrible things can lead us to pull back from life and fall into despair. Staying in touch with the well of joy within us enables us to be part of the solution rather than the problem."

What helpful strategies do you have that help you to calm your fears?

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