

The outbreak of COVID-19 may be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. However, it is very important to keep in mind that **everyone reacts differently to stressful situations**. For this reason, **recognising** and **knowing how to manage** our own anxiety is very important to **support children coping** with their own stress and anxiety. Children will pick up on our own response to what is being said or written in news or social media, so it helps them to know we're **calm** and **in control**.

Stress symptoms during a disease outbreak can include:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones;
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns;
- Difficulty concentrating;
- Worsening of chronic health problems;
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

In children some common changes to watch for include:

- Excessive crying, irritability and *acting-out* behaviours;
- Returning to behaviours they have outgrown (e.g., toileting);
- Excessive worry or sadness;
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits;
- Poor school performance or avoiding school;
- Difficulties with attention and concentration;
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past;
- Unexplained headaches or body pain;
- Use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

If you're feeling anxious or upset, take time for yourself and reach out to family, friends and trusted people in your community. Make some time to do things that help you relax and recuperate.

Things you can do to **support yourself**:

- Take breaks from watching, reading or listening to news, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting;
- Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and other drugs;
- Try to do some other activities you enjoy;
- Connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling;
- If stress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row, call your GP and ask for professional support.

Margarida Neves

Clinical Psychologist