

Stress Can Worsen Psychotic Symptoms: BeST Tips for CBT-p Informed Strategies for Responding

During a time of wide-reaching stress, it would not be unexpected or uncommon for new psychotic symptoms to occur or for current psychotic symptoms to worsen in relation to concerns about COVID-19 and the broader social actions, such as recommendations for “social distancing,” work-from-home and business closures, and media coverage, such as coverage of empty grocery shelves, that is likely to induce fear.

First and foremost, one of the best things you can do is **to help the person you are working with recognize their strengths and how well they are coping**. Provide appropriate affirmations and help the person see the successes and integrate those experiences into how they view themselves. We are resilient!

Some things to be on the look-out for during this time of heightened stress for those affected by psychosis

While the literature related to psychosis is limited, some authors suggest that the following symptoms may occur:

- **Increases in paranoia:** some themes we have heard include *government conspiracy* and *end of world* themes.
- **Aspects of media coverage may enter into existing psychotic symptoms:** these could include religious themes, voice content that reflects concerns and government surveillance
- **Concerns about infection:** these can sometimes include an increase in skin-related conditions, such as hives.

Certain unhelpful coping strategies are common for those who experience psychosis, and these may increase during times of stress:

- **Worry or rumination**, including expecting the worst (catastrophizing) and over-involvement with content (such as excessive attention to news coverage)
- **Suppression or avoidance**, including trying hard to not think about the risks and concerns and/or ignoring recommendations
- **Increases in substance use**, including smoking/vaping, which brings additional concerns because respiratory symptoms are one of the complications of this virus, and alcohol, a depressant that can compound other symptoms

Lack of insight/unawareness of the current risks may lead to not adhering to physical distance and “stay in place” recommendations.

Resources:

- [Fears, Outbreaks, and Pandemics: Lessons Learned](#)
- [Psychiatrists Beware! The Impact of COVID-19 and Pandemics on Mental Health](#)
- Khoury, B, and Lecomte, T. (2012). Emotion regulation and schizophrenia. *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy*, 5(1), 67-76

Common CBT-p Informed Strategies and Practical Tips for Responding During Times of Increased Stress

The most important thing is to remember your training: The skills you have learned for working with psychosis apply across all situations. Also remember that the BeST Center is available for consultation to address specific challenges you may face at this time.

Some CBT-p informed strategies that may be helpful to review at this time:

Engagement skills: Be sure to start your session in a light and friendly way, especially during these stressful times.

- Check in on the person's interests and activities.
- Listen to concerns (e.g. paranoia/ infection concerns) with openness and non-judgment.
- Reflect that you hear the concerns (i.e., connect with the feelings they are experiencing).

Normalize: Look for ways to normalize stress and encourage working together to address concerns and lower stress.

- Normalize and empathize. Use good clinical judgment and be intentional about sharing your experience. Model healthy coping.
- The stress bucket is one method commonly used for educating about how stress affects illness and overall health. It may be helpful to review sources of stress and current strategies for reducing stress and coping. If you have used this approach at other times in your work with a person, it may be helpful to revisit this strategy in the current context. If you haven't, perhaps try this now.

Educate:

- Direct clients to *reliable* sources of information for the current situation.
- Discuss strategies for weighing reliability of information they see and hear.

Help with coping with worry/rumination: If excessive social media use and worry are issues, start with your formulation and consider the following:

- Help to the person to recognize that searching for information can be helpful, but that in excess rumination/dwelling on the topic may lead to more anxiety.
- Help identify potential unhelpful thinking habits: Practice reviewing these with the 3Cs method (catch it, check it, change it).
- Set limits: Consider the practice of setting limits (scheduling specific times) on the time devoted to searching for information or listening to news.
- Identify alternative, personally meaningful activities for person to pursue, particularly in place of time spent listening to news and media sources.
- Seek additional resources for CBT informed strategies, such as [Managing Your Worries](#).

Strengthen emotion regulation skills: Review with individuals those practices that lead to reduced stress including:

- Breathing, mindfulness practices, guided imagery
- Favorite activities, cuing positive memories
- Refer to [Healthy Self-soothing Kit](#), [CBTp informed distraction and focusing Coping techniques](#) for ideas

Schedule activities: For some individuals, it may be helpful to collaboratively put together a new daily routine, especially if the person's social outlets have been closed during this time.

- Consider using an [Activity Schedule](#)
- Help individuals to identify alternative means of being socially connected without being physically connected with others, such as online groups, individuals they can call. Please see resources below.

Offer practical suggestions for social isolation/distance: When physically separated for long periods of time, consider the following ideas to help mitigate the effects of this type of isolation.

- Keep the individual informed. For example, how often you can meet? Explain the use of phone contacts. Assure them you will keep in touch. How long do you anticipate that this method of support will continue?
- Help the individual think of [meaningful home activities](#) or come up with a new routine
- Check that basic supplies are available (food, water, etc.). This will likely include utilizing community resources and increasing family/friend involvement whenever possible. Link individuals and their family members/friends to these community resources.
- Reinforce the message of [altruism](#) associated with limiting physical contact. Remind individuals that making this sacrifice literally saves the lives of others who are more vulnerable, and that national health authorities are genuinely grateful for their adherence to these mandates related to physical distancing.

Resources

- [The Psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence](#)
- [Tips For Social Distancing, Quarantine, And Isolation During An Infectious Disease Outbreak](#)
- Support groups are available online or by phone:
 - [Alcoholics Anonymous](#)
 - [NAMI Ohio](#)
 - [Narcotics Anonymous](#)
 - [Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America](#)
 - [SMART Recovery Online](#)

A note on medical co-morbidities: We have also heard from our partners that many individuals with additional chronic health conditions such as asthma, emphysema, COPD, cardiovascular disease and diabetes are unconcerned and relatively unaware of the risks associated with COVID-19. Please identify who may have these medical co-morbidities and consider additional contact and support.

For access to resources related to CBT-p informed strategies, visit:

- [BeST Center's CBT-p Resources](#) on www.neomed.edu/bestcenter
- [Treating Psychosis](#)