

COVID-19 – AN UNWANTED VISITOR

HOW IT HAS AFFECTED OUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

The 2019 Novel Coronavirus, better known as COVID-19, came uninvited and unexpectedly into our lives, and we're now going through many changes and uncertainties. Therefore, it's normal for many to experience tension, worry, anxiety and depression over how to deal with a situation never confronted before.

And while it's true we must take care of our physical health and follow all the guidelines issued by the government and Department of Health, we cannot forget to take care of our emotional health. Therefore, it's important to recognize feelings of frustration, anxiety or depression, in order to establish priorities and ensure our well-being. In fact, several studies have shown that stress can manifest itself physically, affecting the immune system.

For example, it has been observed that in stressful situations, the hormonal system is affected, setting off a chain reaction that affects the production and behavior of immune system cells. The immune system is made up of cells that act as an army, ready to identify something bad in the body, and attack and eliminate it. In turn, these cells produce proteins that help fight infectious processes, and are responsible for various symptoms such as fever and overall discomfort. Therefore, when you constantly experience stress, the immune system activates, and various symptoms develop.

Other symptoms caused by stress include muscle aches, headaches, upset stomach, reflux, palpitations, and changes in one's appetite and sleep patterns. Difficulty concentrating and irritability are also signs that stress is affecting you.

On the other hand, when we do things that strengthen the immune system, we not only experience a sense of well-being, but that army of cells (which we call the immune system) is more prepared to fight any type of disease, including COVID-19. Given this situation, many ask: "What can I do to take care of my mental health?" And we all react to stress and difficult events in different ways. The first is to accept that circumstances cannot be changed. You can only adapt and modify your behavior, and everyone has the ability to change how they react to adversity.

There are also strategies you can incorporate into your daily life to better manage this situation:

- Maintain a routine. To the extent you can, keep a schedule, get up and go to bed at the same time each day, schedule activities, etc.
- Don't isolate yourself. While we understand we're under a quarantine, and that it's important to follow it to prevent the spread of the virus, we can communicate with our loved ones by phone, email or social media. Let them know how you feel. If you know someone who lives alone, call that person, make sure he or she is well, and offer support. Keeping in touch helps reduce feelings of loneliness, boredom or sadness.
- Eat well. Eat healthy, and not out of boredom, or when you're not hungry.
- Create and maintain an exercise routine. Not being able to go out for a run or walk, or go to the gym has been a big challenge. However, there are exercises you can do at home, and even enjoy as a family.
- Practice sleep hygiene. It's important to have a regular routine of getting a good night's sleep, as your body needs to rest. Avoid sleeping during the day. There are apps you can download on your phone to help you rest better at night.
- Practice relaxation techniques, such as meditation, mindfulness, yoga, breathing exercises and muscle relaxation. There are many cell phone apps or videos that can be of great help as well.
- Hobbies. Take up gardening, sewing or any hobby of your choice. Reading can be a great help in distracting you. If you don't have any books available in your home, there are many online options, whereby you can download and read them for free on your phone, computer or tablet. For many, writing and drawing is a way to express one's frustration, sadness or anger, and be a great help. You can also watch movies or documentaries that make you feel better, or listen to music or even dance.
- Family activities, such as puzzles, board games, or cards. The important thing is to spend time with your family. If you don't have board games in your home, use technology such as FaceTime, Zoom or Skype to connect with family and friends.

You can also visit MCS's social networks to follow the activities of the "Stay at Home with MCS" initiative. Go to @MCS Puerto Rico for more information.

While it's important to stay informed of new developments, it's not advisable to be listening, watching or reading news that is only about the pandemic. This will only make you feel more anxious.

Avoid using alcohol, tobacco or illegal substances to manage your stress.

Remember, by better managing your stress, your body will stay strong and healthy.

These brief recommendations do not substitute a mental health consultation. If you constantly feel anxious or depressed, or already have a mental health condition, contact your healthcare provider, or call MCS Solutions at 1.866.627.4327. We're here to help.

We know these are difficult times – emotionally, socially, economically and from a health standpoint in general. However, MCS is here to help and support you during these times of uncertainty.

Together we'll defeat this virus.

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