

COVID-19 Mental Health & Coping Resources

F O R E V E R Y O N E

BUILDING RESILIENCE SERIES

For many of us, facing the COVID-19 situation has brought up difficult feelings. Whether we are angry toward the virus, frustrated about our compromised routines, worried about our health and the safety of elderly relatives, nervous about patient cases, or anxious about our kids, we may be experiencing a lot of overwhelming and uncomfortable emotions. How do we build resilience and conserve our psychological energy? Part 1 of the "Building Resilience Series" is on accepting negative feelings.

Acceptance

Many of us fall into the trap of trying to fight or avoid uncomfortable feelings. We avoid and distract ourselves with endless TV, or fight by telling ourselves not to worry (usually that only makes us worry more). Both methods can be ineffective long term.

The fact is, building resilience to adversity isn't about getting rid of the worry – its about changing our relationship to it. The way we respond to uncomfortable feelings can make or break our mental, emotional, physical and relational health. The transformative skill of acceptance is about opening up to those feelings, as opposed to designing our life around the avoidance of them.

What does acceptance really mean? Acceptance is giving yourself permission to be human, to embrace whatever emotion comes up no matter how unpleasant or unwanted. John Forsyth, a professor of psychology at the University at Albany in New York and co-author of "*Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Anxiety Disorders*," notes that research shows the avoidance of difficult emotions will only make them stronger and longer-lasting.

Practicing Mindful Acceptance

Acceptance is not passive. Because our interpretation of COVID-19 is mostly negative, our systems are actively in threat mode. Proactively practicing acceptance helps build tolerance and openness. Over time, we learn to feel safe with our feelings, not like we want to flee from them.

1. Pause, take a few breaths, and acknowledge that you are worried.
2. Notice the qualitative elements of feeling, thoughts, and physical sensations of worry. What does it feel and look like to worry about those we love? Mind cloudy, shoulders tense, heart racing? Look into those experiences with curiosity.
3. See if you can observe the worry with clarity instead of judgement. Saying "this is not how it should be," is judgement, which takes up more mental energy. Instead, try saying, "I see and feel that I am experiencing worry." This allows the experience to pass through instead of remaining stuck and heavy.

*To get started practicing acceptance, listen to the mindfulness recording that accompanies this tip sheet.