



Living with Scleroderma: Ways to Cope with Anxiety and Isolation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Juliette Kleinman, LCSW, ACSW

Senior Social Work Manager, Rheumatology

Susan Rodriguez, LCSW

Social Worker, Rheumatology

Department of Social Work Programs

Emotional Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

This is a challenging time for all of us, especially for people and their loved ones living with a chronic condition like scleroderma.

In response to this pandemic, we may deal with the situation in different ways and experience a range of emotions such as fear, stress and anxiety.

Emotional Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic

We are being told to social distance, stay home and shelter in place. Our regular routines, work, family life and caregiving responsibilities have shifted and changed.

Since COVID-19 spreads so quickly and easily, self-quarantine and social distancing is even more of a concern for people diagnosed with scleroderma.

This distance from friends and loved ones may cause feelings of isolation and loneliness. This uncertain time can cause us to feel worried.

Emotional Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic

At this time we may worry about ourselves, family, friends, work and finances. Feelings of anxiety and concern about isolation are a normal and natural reaction to the situation we are in.

These feelings can even progress into panic, constant negative thoughts - and depression. There are many online and telephone resources that can be helpful at this time.

We all need to work on managing our feelings of anxiety. There are many positive ways we can use to manage during this difficult time. To follow we will present strategies and resources that you may find useful to help cope during these unprecedented times.

Learning Objectives

- Identify ways to cope with anxiety and isolation that might be helpful to you
- Discover techniques to manage feeling overwhelmed
- Learn ways to effectively use support and resources to feel less alone

Ideas that frame this presentation

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

..... 85

In times of **crisis**,
people reach for
meaning. Meaning
is strength. Our
survival may depend
on our seeking
and finding it.

Dawna Markova

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WWW.VERYBESTQUOTES.COM

*“You have power over your
mind, not outside events.
Realize this and you will find
strength.” – Marcus Aurelius*

“The ultimate measure
of a man is not where
he stands in moments
of comfort and
convenience, but
where he stands at
times of challenge
and controversy.”



Martin Luther
King, Jr.

OurPassionworks.com

Anxiety due to COVID

Anxiety can be described as thinking patterns we experience when our mind fixates on threat, uncertainty and negativity. It can occur on its own, as a response to stress, or it can trigger stress.

Anxiety includes these components:

- Emotions: stress, fear, worry, sadness, irritability
- Physical: changes in sleep or eating
- Cognitive: inability to focus or concentrate
- Increased use of substances- drugs, alcohol, etc.

Anxiety can be a vicious cycle, and already having anxiety can make symptoms worse. Anxiety can feed anxiety. Therefore, it is important to learn ways to cope with anxiety symptoms which will help us gain more control during this very stressful time.

Strategies for Coping with Anxiety

- Stay informed from trusted resources, so that you can follow important safety recommendations. Getting the facts may also help give us a sense of control.
- Limit or take breaks from the news when you begin to feel overwhelmed or anxious. You may want to consider setting a time limit when it comes watching the news or using social media.
- Use mindful breathing to reduce anxiety
- Use distraction strategies to calm yourself and let your mind focus on something else
- Consider reducing caffeine intake, as caffeine can make us feel more anxious

Strategy: Mindfulness to Reduce Anxiety

- Mindfulness can actually lower stress hormones, reduce your heartrate and calm your breathing
- Often used for relaxation and de-stressing
- Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations
- Focusing on the present moment precludes worrying about the past or future, or planning for or anticipating events, whether good or bad.
- Using the breath is an often used technique for experiencing and practicing mindfulness.
- A mindful approach can be used for other activities, such as eating or walking.

Strategy: Using the Breath for Relaxation

According to research, your breath can be a very effective tool for managing anxiety. Using the breath is a mindfulness activity.

- The breath is always there for you
- The breath is a natural relaxer
- Stress hormones can be reduced
- The breath provides a sense of well-being
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27404329>

Strategy: Simple Breathing Exercise to Reduce Anxiety

Here is a simple exercise to practice using the breath to reduce anxiety and bring relaxation:

- During this exercise, thoughts will come into your mind. Just let them pass by like clouds in the sky. Neither try to push them away nor attach to them.
- Sit in a comfortable position
- Let your belly expand as you take an easy breath through your nose
- Exhale slowing your breath and notice how you feel

Web/App based tools for Reduce Anxiety

Free Online Tools:

- **Breathe2Relax App:** This app helps slow your breathing down. We tend to shorten our breaths when we feel stressed. This only makes it worse and creates muscle tension. Controlling your breathing can be done anywhere.
- **Calm App:** Calm created a page of resources with free mindfulness tools to support everyone as we all navigate this time of uncertainty. There is a variety of content including breathing exercises, and journaling prompts to help you stay grounded. <https://blog.calm.com/take-a-deep-breath>
 - This page includes materials for younger audiences. You can navigate directly to a selection of content from the Kids section here: <https://www.calm.com/blog/take-a-deep-breath#calmkids>

Online resources

- <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/coronavirus-anxiety.htm>
- <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/covid-19-and-anxiety>
- <https://thewellnesssociety.org/free-coronavirus-anxiety-workbook/>

Strategy: Distraction to Reduce Anxiety

Distraction can be an effective tool to grab your attention away from a distressing situation and to help to reduce anxiety.

- Distraction means shifting or moving your attention away. It does not mean that the anxiety is no longer there, but you may be better able to put your worry in the background when you focus on other things.
- It is a good idea to practice distracting activities when your worry is manageable, as first trying them when anxiety is intense may be difficult.
- Distraction activities have the added benefit of helping you feel happier, more motivated and more energized, as well as combatting feelings of boredom.

Strategy: Distraction Activities

- Watch a funny movie or listen to music
- Physical Activity: stretch or walk
- Read a book, article, magazine, or a newspaper
- Log on to online or app based programs- museums, parks, etc.
- Cook
- Play a board game or complete a puzzle
- Draw or color
- Journal
- Communicate through a message board

Strategy: Distraction Activities

Try these virtual options to help reduce anxiety and as a positive distraction:

- Take a virtual museum tour: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/igKSKBBnEBSGKg?hl=en>;
<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner?hl=en&tab=pop>
- Take a virtual hike through a national park: <https://artsandculture.withgoogle.com/en-us/national-parks-service/parks>
- Watch animals in real time: <https://explore.org/livecams>; <https://explore.org/livecams/oceans/wild-dolphins>;
<https://explore.org/livecams/brown-bears/brown-bear-salmon-cam-brooks-falls>
- Browse a free digital library for e-books and audio books. Libby lets you borrow free e-books and audiobooks from local libraries. You can enjoy them right from your phone, tablet, or Kindle: <https://www.overdrive.com/apps/libby/>
- Do Nothing for 2 Minutes Challenge: <http://www.donothingfor2minutes.com/>
- <https://thewellnesssociety.org/free-coronavirus-anxiety-workbook/>

Coping with Isolation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Humans are social animals. That is how our brains are built.
- It's important to interact with other people and feel connected to others for support, laughter, pleasure and joy.
- Participating in social connections and activities has a positive impact on our mood.
- Isolation and disruption to routine can create feelings of sadness and loneliness.
- It's important to find ways to continue to connect during this time, and a lack of essential social connection can cause anxiety and distress.

Tips for Coping with Isolation

To follow are strategies you can try to reduce feelings of isolation and care for your well-being.

- **Stay connected with friends and loved ones:**
 - Call, text, video chat with friends and family on the phone or plan a video call instead.
 - Chatting with each other can help to cheer you both up. A lot of people are struggling right now and seeing a friendly face can really make a difference in feeling connected.
 - Plan time to talk online or by phone- use platforms like Facetime, Zoom, etc.

Tips for Coping with Isolation

- **Keep to your regular schedule:** We thrive when we keep our normal routines.
 - Go to bed and wake up at your regular time
 - Make your bed- your first accomplishment of the day
 - Avoid staying in bed or sitting all day in one place.
 - Try to move around your home by doing activities, such as watering your plants, organizing your space, cooking and trying out new healthy recipes with family, and just doing little things that bring you joy and permit you to stay active.

Tips for Coping with Isolation

- **Stay active:**
 - Moderate physical activity is an important part of maintaining good health and wellbeing. Low impact activity can help with many symptoms of scleroderma .
 - Speak to your doctor about what may be the best program for you that you can practice at home during COVID. There are many online exercise programs as well. How to feel better from home: <https://www.hss.edu/feel-better-from-home.htm>
- **Get some fresh air:**
 - If you can, and please practice social distancing, take a brief walk outside. To stay connected set up a walking date with a friend or family member, but walk 6 feet from each other.
 - Going outside has many benefits and walking has been proven to be effective to reduce stress and anxiety. If you can't go out or leave your home, open a window or door to get some fresh air and see a bit of the sky.
- **Take time with your pets:**
 - Pets can be an excellent source of comfort and connection. Petting a dog or cat has been shown to reduce blood pressure and provides a sense of companionship.

Tips for Coping with Isolation

- **Help others:**
 - Helping others can give us feel a sense of connection
 - Reach out to others who live alone or have mobility needs- your support can make a huge difference to that person and to you
 - Showing kindness and support to others will not only improve their mental health but is good for you too.
- **Plan for future events:** You may not be able to be with your family and friends right now, but you will be able to in the future.
 - Plan family get-togethers
 - Plan holiday celebrations...again, not right now, but there will be a time
 - Make a date for plans with family or friends so that you have something to look forward to

Tips for Coping with Isolation

- **Use online support:**
 - COVID-19 Lockdown Guide: How to Manage Anxiety and Isolation During Quarantine <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/covid-19-lockdown-guide-how-manage-anxiety-and>
 - Coping and Managing Stress and Anxiety <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
 - How to deal with social isolation during COVID 19 <https://www.avera.org/balance/behavioral-health/how-to-deal-with-social-isolation-during-covid-19/>
 - How a Chat App may help relieve loneliness during COVID 19 outbreak <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/quarantine-chat-app-may-help-relieve-loneliness-during-covid-19-outbreak>

When things feel overwhelming...

Should you feel your anxiety becomes unmanageable or if you find you are becoming depressed, you may want to consider getting professional help.

Signs of unmanageable anxiety and depression may include the following:

- your mood is very negative for a period of several days
- you or your loved ones notice increased irritability and frustration
- you may have thoughts about harming yourself
- you may experience changes in your eating or sleeping patterns

To follow are some mental health resources that can help support you during this challenging time.

Where to get help:

- National Disaster Distress Helpline (DDH), provides crisis counseling and support for anyone in the U.S. experiencing distress or other mental or behavioral health concerns related to any natural or human-caused disaster, including public health emergencies. Call 1-800-985-5990 or text “TalkWithUs” to 66746.
- Talkspace Therapy Resources COVID 19 Response: <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/coronavirus-talkspace-resources/>
- Better Help: <https://www.betterhelp.com/> - Online professional counseling by licensed and trained mental health professionals.
- SAMHSA, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: <https://www.samhsa.gov/>
- **Get Help:** [FindTreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov/), **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, Free and confidential support for people in distress, 24/7. [Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#) Find treatment facilities confidentially and anonymously, 24/7. [National Helpline](#), **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** Treatment referral and information, 24/7.

Where to Get Help

- Free, no-cost services for immediate support all throughout the United States, including the Crisis Text Line (text CONNECT to 741741 and National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.)
- **Free Coronavirus Support for Chronic Illness Patients:** Global Healthy Living Foundation's free COVID-19 Support Program for patients with chronic illness and their families. s tailored specifically to your health and safety.
 - <https://www.ghlf.org/coronavirus-patient-support/>
 - <https://creakyjoints.org/symptoms/coronavirus-symptoms-different-with-autoimmune-conditions-chronic-illness/>

Then there is hope...

“They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.”

— **Tom Bodett**

“You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming.”

— **Pablo Neruda**

“Hope can be a powerful force. Maybe there's no actual magic in it, but when you know what you hope for most and hold it like a light within you, you can make things happen, almost like magic.”

— **Laini Taylor, [Daughter of Smoke & Bone](#)**

“I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains.”

— **Anne Frank, [The Diary of a Young Girl](#)**

Program Evaluation

We very much appreciate you completing this evaluation which is extremely important to our programming during this crisis.

Please click on this link to complete the following program evaluation: <https://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/5544408/Living-with-Scleroderma-Evaluation-4-13-2020-Ways-to-Cope-with-Anxiety-and-Isolation-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic>

What about you?

Comments and questions...

- What do you do to manage anxiety?
- What are your tips for reducing isolation?

hope

If you only carry one thing throughout your entire life, let it be hope. Let it be hope that better things are always ahead. Let it be hope that you can get through even the toughest of times. Let it be hope that you are stronger than any challenge that comes your way. Let it be hope that you are exactly where you are meant to be right now, and that you are on the path to where you are meant to be... Because during these times, hope will be the very thing that carries you through.

- Nikki Banas

Resources: HSS

- <https://www.hss.edu/playbook/coronavirus-and-rheumatic-disease-how-to-stay-safe/>
- <https://www.hss.edu/playbook/living-with-rheumatic-illness-tips-for-coping-with-stress-and-anxiety-during-covid-19/>
- <https://www.hss.edu/health-video-library.asp>
- <https://www.hss.edu/playbook/living-with-chronic-illness-top-10-tips-to-emotional-well-being/>

Thank you