

UW Health: Psychologist offers tips for coping with anxiety as Delta variant surges

Posted on Tuesday, Sep 28, 2021

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MADISON, Wis – The Delta variant has Americans' stress level rising again. A recent poll found that Americans' anxiety over COVID-19 is at its highest level since last winter.

With the Delta variant surging, schools back in session, and children under age 12 not yet eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine, many people have become increasingly concerned about their safety. The poll, conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, found that 41% of people reported being "extremely" or "very" worried about themselves or their family becoming infected with the virus. That was up from 21% in June, and about the same as in January, during the country's last major surge.

Shilagh Mirgain, distinguished psychologist, UW Health, shares the following tips on ways to cope with the rising anxiety:

- **Identify and validate your feelings:** After vaccines became available, many people believed the end of the pandemic was in sight and started reconnecting with friends and family and reengaging in activities avoided during the previous year. Just as things were reopening, the Delta variant emerged and cases surged, causing a collective sense of grief. Anxiety, worry, uncertainty, and even anger are normal reactions to the pandemic right now. To cope, recognize that your feelings are valid. Then manage them constructively by using emotion skills. Acknowledge your emotional experience and then express them in a healthy way, such as talking with a loved one, therapeutic journaling, exercising, getting a good night's rest, or expressing your experience through

something creative.

- **Future Forecasting:** With anxiety, our mind can go down a rabbit hole of worrying about what might go wrong in the future and about things we can't control. Watch out for catastrophizing, a cognitive distortion that focuses on the worst-case scenario of what might happen in the future. Instead, ask yourself, "Is this thought helping or hurting me? Is this thought promoting peace and well-being or is it creating additional suffering?" If it is not helpful, change the train of thought to something that is more hopeful, makes you feel good, and reminds you of your ability to cope. Reduce anxiety by choosing thoughts that bring you a sense of calm, resilience, and strength.
- **Focus on What You Can Control:** Uncertainty makes people feel anxious. One of the best ways to cope is to focus on what you can control. Put your attention there, such as creating a daily gratitude practice, engaging in good self-care to strengthen your health, feeling a sense of accomplishment by checking things off your to-do list, or creating success in your relationships and at your job. Continue to practice COVID-19 safety precautions such as mask wearing, social distancing, hand washing, and getting the vaccine if you haven't yet.
- **Seek professional help:** Nervousness does not have to be the new normal. If you find yourself struggling with heightened levels of anxiety that are causing significant distress or impairment, please reach out to your doctor or schedule an appointment with a behavioral health specialist.

Shilagh Mirgain is available for video interviews today.