

# ASK AN EXPERT: Tips for Controlling Fear and Anxiety in a Crisis

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Are you feeling afraid, nervous or anxious about the coronavirus and other catastrophes? If so, you are not alone. A threat such as this may only happen once in a lifetime, and we may not feel prepared to deal with it and the associated emotional impacts. The most common of these impacts relate to feelings of anxiety and fear.

These fears are likely caused by distorted thoughts that impact our ability to stay calm and rational. These happen automatically. Some of the most common distorted thoughts include:

1. All-or-nothing thinking. You might think in extremes, or that things are black or white.
2. Over generalization. You may assume that if one negative event happened, then something else is bound to go wrong.
3. Mental filter. You dwell on one negative point, making the entire situation feel negative.
4. Jumping to conclusions. You make negative assumptions, even though the facts may not support them.
5. Magnification or catastrophizing. You blow a situation out of proportion or make more of it than may be merited at the moment.
6. Emotional reasoning. You take the negative emotions you feel as evidence of the truth, allowing emotions, rather than logic, to do the reasoning for you. Can you see a connection between thinking this way and feeling more anxious or fearful?

Unfortunately, we cannot control if these thoughts come into our minds. However, we can learn to manage them when they come. That is where we gain control over the thoughts and their associated impacts. How do we do this?

1. Identify the negative automatic thought. The most helpful thing you can do to stop negative automatic

thoughts is to recognize them when they occur. This helps you objectively see that it is the thought or the “what if” that is making you anxious or fearful.

2. Examine the evidence. Instead of assuming that your negative automatic thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. Find evidence to support the more positive alternative and focus on that evidence.
3. The double-standard method. Imagine a close friend asked you for help with a problem like the one you are facing. What advice would you give him or her? That same advice can help you.
4. The survey method. Talk to people you trust and ask questions so they can help you see the situation more objectively and logically.
5. Re-attribution. Instead of focusing entirely on the problem, focus on managing the problem and finding solutions rather than using your energy on fear and anxiety.
6. Cost-benefit analysis. List the advantages and disadvantages of thinking negative thoughts. Don't put pressure on yourself to never have negative automatic thoughts. Everyone does. I have been teaching these principles for 15 years, and I still catch myself jumping to conclusions and reasoning with my emotions. However, when I remind myself that it is the distorted thoughts that are talking, I can slow the negative emotions that tend to follow.

It will take practice, but it's possible to take back the thoughts that control fear and anxiety.

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