

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

through the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic



from your **Employee Assistance Program** provider



be resilient.

 **MANITOBA
BLUE CROSS**®
THE COLOUR OF CARING®

Table of Contents

Accessing our services	1
COVID-19 impacts us, but it does not define us ¹	2
Support for workers in the coronavirus (COVID-19) response	4
Managing anxiety during COVID-19.....	6
Helping children deal with stress.....	7
Messages for team leaders and managers	9
Difficult events in the workplace ²	10
Family stress.....	12
Breaking free of fear ³	14
Myths about seeking help ⁴	16
Resilience ⁵	18

¹ Frank Cantafio, M.S.W., R.S.W.
Manitoba Blue Cross
Manager, Employee Assistance Program

² Jodie Voth, MMFT
Manitoba Blue Cross
Counsellor, Employee Assistance Program

² David Charabin, M.S.W., R.S.W.
Manitoba Blue Cross
Counsellor, Employee Assistance Program

³ Myrna Greenberg, M.S.W., R.S.W.
Manitoba Blue Cross
Counsellor, Employee Assistance Program

⁴ George MacDonald M.A., C.C.C.
Manitoba Blue Cross
Counsellor, Employee Assistance Program

⁵ Mary Anne Appleby, MA
Manitoba Blue Cross
Counsellor, Employee Assistance Program

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting our community through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, video conferencing and text-based counselling options to all clients seeking support. Our team is highly aware of the potential impacts on mental health associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We are available to help.

We would like to share some important information about how to safeguard our health, mental health and well-being during the current pandemic.



ACCESSING OUR SERVICES

In-person counselling is suspended, but we are still here.

In accordance with social distancing protocols, we have temporarily suspended in-person counselling. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing alternate counselling options to all clients seeking support.

Current EAP clients

If you have been seeing a counsellor in person or are awaiting your first in-person appointment, your counsellor will contact you to make new arrangements to participate in counselling through telephonic, video conferencing or text-based counselling.

Alternate counselling methods

Our counselling services will be temporarily provided through telephonic, video conferencing or text-based options. Regardless of the counselling method, we assure you that your counsellor is committed to all their usual standards of practice related to confidentiality and privacy that govern counselling practices and our EAP.

New EAP clients

If you are not currently seeing a counsellor through us, please do not hesitate to reach out. Support can be accessed through your EAP in the usual fashion by contacting our intake line.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

COVID-19 IMPACTS US, BUT IT DOES NOT DEFINE US

How to reframe the current pandemic as an opportunity for community and compassion

As much as we have been encouraged to manage the physical space between one another, social distancing does not mean cutting off emotionally. Practice staying emotionally present for one another. Talk, share, live, love and laugh.

Let's encourage each other to share our fears and anxious moments. But also – let's give ourselves permission to take a break from COVID-19's emotional hold. Plan activities to facilitate this, even frivolous and light-hearted ones!



Finding ourselves through a storm

Our inner compass, the part of us that drives our decision-making, is really tested during a storm. However, it's our values and principles that can help see us through. Take time to strengthen these by talking about what is important with your loved ones and then living out those values.

Sometimes it takes a challenge to gain a sense of mastery. When we take an active role in helping others and doing good deeds for those impacted most, we foster a sense of community. We can talk with our loved ones and ask, who is the most vulnerable right now and how can we help? We can also consider how we can do our part in the community by acting responsibly to help mitigate the COVID-19 spread. And within our own family unit, we can exercise random acts of kindness between one another.

Modelling compassion for children

When we model kind and compassionate behaviour for our children, it is comforting for them. Engage children in talks about others and about how we can do our part to help. Children have wonderful means of expression through play, drawing and painting. When they paint a picture or make a card for someone they love, they exercise self-mastery over the conditions of worry and fear. And compassion is the best antidote to fear.

Appreciating what is

We can also celebrate our normalcy. The surreal nature of COVID-19's influence has disrupted our sense of what's normal, our sense of routine. Mark and celebrate small achievements, appreciate moments where we are able to just be, and remember it is okay that some things are outside our control.

This pandemic has triggered hard economic times for many. We can generate a culture of understanding around not being able to do some of the "usual things" that involve money. We can take this as an opportunity to reconnect to simplicity.

Right now, there is only so much within our control, so let's put our energy into things that are within our circle of influence.

Reframing COVID-19 as a means of connection – not one of distance

Although we are in an unprecedented time of socially distancing, our sense of community transcends the physical. We can maintain connections through whatever virtual means we have at our disposal, and encourage our children, family members and friends to participate collectively.

Isolation is as much a psychological state as anything. We all have times of feeling isolated or distant from others. And isolation, ironically enough, has many companions – depression, anxiety, fear and worry to name a few. It may feel as though this pandemic is here to trick us into further isolation and loneliness – and we shouldn't underestimate this situation's ability to trigger conditions from the past or reinforce loneliness. But there is more at play.

Our sense of family is one of our primary connections and one of the most powerful means to keep space from COVID-19; our ability to find empowerment in connecting collectively to a greater purpose can drive a sense of community; and through connecting with others who are facing the same struggle, we can learn that we are by no means alone.

Leaving space for difference and practicing acceptance

COVID-19 has brought us into a world of extremes. While some have been lured, others have had a sharp entry. And as much as we share commonalities, we are different. Our unique circumstances, histories, personalities and coping styles all contribute to the impact we feel.

For some, COVID-19 is akin to the Apocalypse – and for others this may seem like an over-reaction. For people who have elderly parents or a weakened immune system or personal hardships like the recent loss of a loved one – COVID-19 is a real danger. For those without such experiences, conditions or hardships – not so much.

Wherever possible, we must leave space for difference and accept where people are at, even if we are in a different space. When appropriate, encourage a balanced perspective through listening, validation and dialogue. Fear and anxiety thrive in the shadow of judgement, so too does denial.

COVID-19 may not discriminate – but that does not mean we are equally impacted

As we are called to isolate within the safety of our own homes – what about those for whom home is not a safe place; those who are trapped in the cycle of abuse; or our homeless, who already live in adverse situations. What about those who reside in locations where access to services and supports are limited? What about our newcomers who already struggle to integrate and build stability; or our Indigenous peoples, who already face greater health vulnerabilities and fight daily for an equal footing?

If we take the opportunities available to us to care for our vulnerable populations and to cultivate a sense of compassion and community, we can help re-define this crisis.

Our compassion, ability to support one another and our sense of community are the most powerful means we have to take back space and transcend the isolation of COVID-19.

This pandemic is a condition that influences us but does not define us. What defines us is how we respond to it.

How can we help?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

SUPPORTING THOSE WORKING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) RESPONSE

Feeling stressed is an experience you and many of your colleagues are likely going through; in fact, it is quite normal to feel this way in the current situation. Workers may feel that they are not doing a good enough job, that there is a high demand on them, and additional new pressures including following strict Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) procedures.



How to make sure we are taking care of our own needs

Finding empowerment

Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak, even if you feel that way. In fact, stress can be useful. Right now, the feeling of stress may be keeping you going at your job and providing a sense of purpose. Managing your stress and psychosocial well-being during this time is as important as managing your physical health.

Remembering self-care

Take care of your basic needs and employ helpful coping strategies. Ensure you rest and have respite during work or between shifts, eat sufficient and healthy food, engage in physical activity and stay in contact with family and friends. Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies such as tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical well-being.

Finding social connection

Some workers may unfortunately experience ostracization by their family or community due to stigma. This can make an already challenging situation far more difficult. If possible, staying connected with your loved ones through digital methods is one way to maintain contact. Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted allies for social support – your colleagues may be having similar experiences as you.

Being gentle on yourself

If your stress worsens and you feel overwhelmed, you are not to blame. Everyone experiences stress and copes with it differently. Ongoing and old pressures from your personal life can affect your mental well-being in your day to day job. You may notice changes in how you are working, you may experience mood changes such as increased irritability, feeling low or more anxious. You may feel chronically exhausted or it may feel harder to relax during respite periods or you may have unexplained physical complaints such as body pain or stomach aches.

Accessing support

Chronic stress can affect your mental well-being and your work and can affect you even after the situation improves. If the stress becomes overwhelming, please approach your lead or the appropriate person to ensure you are provided with appropriate support.

How can we help those working the coronavirus (COVID-19) response?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

MANAGING ANXIETY DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

If you are feeling overwhelmingly anxious, you are not alone. This pandemic has brought up many anxieties for many people.

Anxieties include fear of getting sick. In the digital age, many of us are already prone to self-diagnose with the help of Dr. Google. It is easy to see how that worry could transition to a deep fear at the slightest sign of a scratchy throat or runny nose.

Many of us are experiencing anxiety associated with family and personal relationships. We may worry about our ability to access child care. We may fear for our elderly family members and those in our lives with pre-existing conditions. Many yet may also be experiencing a sense of turmoil if we are in any way separated from our family members – whether by physical distance or strained relationships.

We also may have increased anxiety about scarcity and the ability to get basic supplies and necessary items. We are well aware that many of us are anxious about having continued access to the food we normally buy, over-the-counter or prescription medications, toilet paper and sanitary products.

During this time, many are also fearing for financial and job security. Some businesses depend on face-to-face interactions and a brick and mortar commerce. Many work in the service sector or in jobs that depend on large groups of people congregating. And we know that those working in the health care field are balancing all of these concerns with an additional layer of being front line – and may be feeling the weight of the world on their shoulders.

Those who already have pre-existing mental health issues surrounding anxiety and depression may be hit harder still with the many layers of stress that we are all experiencing.

How to manage anxiety

- **Find good, reliable sources of information:** Find credible sources for the information you receive and set up updates, instead of constantly checking for new information. Look to sources like the Government of Canada and the World Health Organization.
- **Stay in touch:** Take advantage of the many remote forms of communication available to us in the digital age, like phone and video calls and social media. Share your thoughts and feelings with friends and family members.
- **Cultivate empathy:** Check up on the vulnerable people in your life. Focusing on others may help re-center your personal anxieties and cultivate a sense of community and togetherness.
- **Distract with books, movies, or household hobbies:** Let yourself devote your time to mindless and light-hearted activities. Don't get sucked into the "all news all the time" vortex, which can fuel catastrophic thinking.
- **Contact your mental health practitioner:** If you are feeling overwhelmed by anxiety, contact your EAP.

How can we help with managing anxiety?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH THE STRESS



Allow children to express and communicate their feelings

Encourage active listening and an understanding attitude. Children usually feel relieved if they can express and communicate their feelings in a safe and supportive environment.



Help children find positive ways to express difficult emotions

Every child has their own way to express emotions. Sometimes engaging in a creative activity, such as playing or drawing can facilitate this process. Help children find positive ways to express difficult feelings like anger, fear and sadness.



Provide a sensitive and caring environment

Children need adults' love and often more dedicated attention during difficult times. If appropriate and depending on the age, parents/caregivers are encouraged to hug their children and repeat that they love them and are proud of them. This will make them feel better and safer.



Manage your own emotions well and remain calm

Remember that children often take their emotional cues from the important adults in their lives, so how adults respond to the crisis is very important. It's important that adults manage their own emotions well and remain calm, listen to children's concerns and speak kindly to them and reassure them.



Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible

Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible or help create new ones in a new environment, including learning, playing and relaxing. If possible, maintain schoolwork, study or other routine activities that do not endanger children or go against health authorities.



Provide facts about what is going on and give child-friendly information

Provide facts about what is going on and give clear, child-friendly information about how to reduce risk of infection and stay safe in words they can understand. Demonstrate to children how they can keep themselves safe (e.g. show them effective handwashing).



Avoid speculating about rumors or unverified information in front of children

Provide information about what has happened or could happen in a reassuring, honest and age-appropriate way.



Support adults and caregivers with activities during home isolation

Adults should explain the virus but also keep children active when they are not at school. For example, provide hand washing games with rhymes, or tell imaginary stories about the virus exploring the body.



Make cleaning and disinfecting the house into a fun game

Draw pictures of the virus or microbes for children to colour and explain Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to children so that they are not scared.

Children may respond to a difficult situation in different ways

- Clinging to caregivers
- Feeling anxious
- Withdrawing
- Feeling angry or agitated
- Having nightmares
- Bedwetting
- Frequent mood changes



How can we help?

We can provide support to parents looking for ways to help their children cope with current stressors. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video counselling options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

MESSAGES FOR TEAM LEADERS OR MANAGERS

If you are a team leader or manager, keeping all staff protected from chronic stress and poor mental health during this response means they will be better able to fulfill their roles.

Promote open dialogue about mental health at work

Regularly and supportively monitor your staff for their well-being and foster an environment that promotes open communication about mental health.

Ensure accurate information and updates are provided

Ensuring accurate information and quality updates are provided so staff can help mitigate any worry about uncertainty that workers may have and help workers feel a sense of control.

Allow for rest and recuperation

Rest is important for physical and mental well-being and this time will allow workers to implement their necessary self-care activities.

Provide space for employees to air their concerns

Allow workers to express their concerns and ask questions and encourage peer-support amongst colleagues. Without breaking confidentiality, pay particular attention to any staff who are experiencing difficulties in their personal life or have previously experienced poor mental health.

Support training where possible

Training in Psychological First Aid (PFA) can benefit leads, managers and workers in having the skills to provide the necessary support to colleagues.

Facilitate access to supportive services

Make sure staff are aware of how they can access mental health and psychosocial support services, including on-site Mental Health & Psychosocial Support (MHPS) staff – if available, or other remote-service options.

Ensure you have access to the supports you need

Managers and team leads will face similar stressors as their staff, and potentially additional pressure due to their role's level of responsibility. It is important that the above provisions and strategies are in place for both workers and managers, and that managers are able to demonstrate self-care strategies to mitigate stress.

How can we help managers and leaders?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program can provide consultation and coaching to managers and leaders to support them in responding to employee concerns. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

DIFFICULT EVENTS IN THE WORKPLACE

As we all face unprecedented changes to our work environments during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it is important to draw from our bank of resources on the impacts of stressful events in the workplace.

A variety of events that happen in a workplace can impact a person's emotional well-being and ability to do their job.

Sometimes these events are critical incidents or "near misses" where a person's life is threatened. However, an event doesn't need to be critical to be stressful. Something like seeing a child the same age as one of your own, injured in the emergency department where you work, could be just as impactful.

Other events, although not critical, may still be upsetting. Examples of such events are grief at the loss of a colleague, a breakdown in workplace relations or conflict with colleagues.

People may also be affected by experiencing an accumulation of events – such as in the case of compassion fatigue, which happens when people repeatedly deal with the distress of others. It's important to remember that the results of these incidents can reach far beyond the individuals directly impacted or injured.

Stressful events impact us all differently

No one is immune to the effects of these types of events, but everyone is affected differently. Several factors work together to influence how deeply an individual may be impacted by a difficult event.

The first of these factors has to do with the amount of stress that a person is already experiencing in their life. This includes both current issues and past stressors. Think of a drinking glass with water in it. The amount of water in that glass represents the current stress in an individual's life. If the glass is already full, it won't take much to make it overflow. One difficult event may overwhelm our usual ability to cope.

In addition, a person is more likely to be overwhelmed by an event if it reawakens difficult experiences from the past. Even the most diligent employees may be unable to concentrate if stress is too high.

Second, the more directly involved a person is with the event or those impacted by the event, the more likely they are to experience a greater degree of distress. For example, a person is likely to be less affected if they were simply to hear or read about the event than if they were present when it occurred.

Third, a person's ability to utilize healthy coping strategies will help. Healthy coping strategies may involve talking to friends and family, maintaining a good balance between work and home, exercise, and good eating habits.

What happens to people when difficult things happen?

Following a distressing event people may experience physical, mental, behavioural and/or emotional aftershocks. Physical complaints such as headaches, upset stomach, chills, feeling tired, and trouble sleeping may occur. As well as these physical reactions to the incident, confusion, difficulty concentrating, and a sense of reliving the event in one's mind can happen. Some may notice changes like being easily startled, avoiding the place where the incident occurred, or withdrawing from friends and family. Others might feel irritable, angry, sad, guilty, afraid, lost or numb.

Individuals may experience some or all of these effects as well as others not listed. Even though these reactions are normal responses to a stressful event, people may feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with day-to-day demands. For most people, things go back to normal quickly but for some, symptoms may last longer. If this happens, it is important to seek additional assistance, including using your Employee Assistance Program.

How to respond

Because these types of events may seriously affect emotional well-being, how we respond can affect a person's recovery and limit further risk. This means there are things that can be done right after an event by the people affected and the organization that will help people return to their lives and work.

Personal responses

There are several things that people can do to help manage the effects of a stressful event. Many of these activities are healthy lifestyle habits that become especially important during a time of distress.

- Regular exercise
- Healthy eating
- Social connection
- Rest and relaxation
- Journalling
- Hobbies
- Normal routines
- Avoiding drugs and alcohol
- Avoiding life changes or big decisions
- Self-acceptance*

*remember that your reactions are normal and that you are allowed to feel out of sorts.

Organizational responses

The whole workplace may suffer when people feel overwhelmed by a stressful event. People may become disillusioned with their workplace if they believe their problems are not being taken seriously or that they are not being given adequate support.

Leaders can play an important role by providing support to their employees following a difficult situation at work. Shortly after an event, it is essential that those affected be provided with a chance to talk about what happened. Getting people together for a few minutes to acknowledge the event can help to restore some stability in the workplace. During the current pandemic, leaders and organizations may need to substitute various digital platforms or channels to do so. This is a time to talk about what people experienced and decide if additional support is needed. If those involved feel that they would benefit from additional support, it is a good time to talk about what might be helpful and to tell the group that it will be arranged. Sharing information about what has occurred is often useful to staff as this can answer questions about the event.

It is important to remind the group of the supports that are available to them, both inside and outside the organization.

Finally, make sure everyone has information on how to get in touch with these supports. Staff and management can both be impacted by an event in the workplace. When those in leadership positions are affected, helping others to pull together may be difficult. In such times, leaders may draw on the support of their Employee Assistance Program for consultation about how to respond in a manner that is supportive and appropriate to the event that has taken place.

In any workplace there is the potential for difficult events to happen. We know that each person will have a different reaction to the same event. The correct response to difficult events helps the individuals involved and improves the health of the organization as a whole.

How can we help?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

FAMILY STRESS

What is family stress?

Family stress can mean troublesome relationships or crises that create distress. Stressors can include conflict in the family, circumstances external to the family that affect family members or significant changes that make life difficult to manage. Distress can be short term, long term, easily resolved or even difficult to imagine getting past because it seems so overwhelming.

Some signals that family members are overwhelmed can be the inability to sleep or eat, loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed, persistent negativity, excessive discouragement or increased conflict in relationships.

A visit to the family doctor or a counsellor is a courageous first step to developing a better understanding about what's behind these signals and recognizing that something may be off track.

Developmental stresses

Different family developmental stages can present different types of stresses. Families with small children often experience caregiver overload or marital/couple problems with the demands of raising children. The teenage years can bring conflict as parents and teens negotiate independence – balancing good judgment with freedom to make one's own choices. Young adults leaving home can be a challenge as both parents and children develop new relationships.

Other stress factors

Mental or physical health issues can occur throughout the family lifecycle and often create distress for the person experiencing the illness. Distress is also a symptom for other family members who worry, take on more chores around the house or experience a loss of income. The term "sandwich generation" describes those parents who take care of children and aging parents at the same time. One of the primary concerns with this group is caregiver burnout. Research shows that women are still most often the primary caregiver. Personal time for caregivers is often put aside in the interest of looking after others and therefore women often experience stressors due to lack of self-care.

What is self-care?

Self-care is a balance of well-being where one feels able to manage and enjoy life. Usually this involves a balance among physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, economic, and social factors so that no one area of life has become central at the expense of all the other important factors for well-being. Parents sometimes recognize the importance of developing a balanced lifestyle when reminded that they are modelling a life path for the next generation.

Coping strategies

We can develop coping strategies to handle challenging situations. Coping and self-care strategies can include:

- sharing chores at home to help achieve balance while modelling life skills for your children
- enjoying activities that offer comfort such as taking a hot bath, phoning a friend or getting absorbed in a movie
- eating, sleeping and exercising regularly and practicing smart money management
- taking time to enjoy your spouse's company or being on your own
- having one-on-one time with each of your family members
- cooking and eating meals with other family members
- scheduling family activities such as movies with discussion afterward or special board game nights

Aim to balance fun activities, household chores, working tasks and relaxing time together.

Develop problem solving skills

One of the easiest problem-solving skills is the principle that is expressed in the “Serenity Prayer” – to separate the things you can change from the things you can’t. We have influence over some things in our lives and no influence in others – and it is important to let go of the things we can’t change.

The problem is that sometimes we are so embroiled in our situation that we can’t get a good perspective on our relationships or problems. That’s where good friends or a counsellor can be helpful for talking things over.

Freeing children and parents from restrictive roles

Sometimes it is easy to get locked into a role like the “troublemaker child,” or the “disciplining parent,” or the “good child,” or the “fun parent.” In the end, everyone in the family loses out when someone’s role has become too restrictive. Parents can practice looking beyond the most immediate behaviours and search for slight variations or differences from expected roles.

Then parents can strategically attend to the desired behaviours or reactions. If children are “seeking attention” then why not offer attention for positive contributions? It is much more difficult than it sounds to comment less on behaviours we don’t want to encourage. It is a bit like planting a seed and waiting for the germination and growth with patience.

Other coping strategies

Learn some simple ways to diffuse conflict by using humour, side-stepping the issue temporarily or dealing with your own temper. These approaches can be most useful when teaching calmness and conflict resolution to children.

Understanding more about reasonable expectations for different developmental stages can be very helpful. Self-help books and parenting classes are useful to assist parents and children in developing problem-solving skills.

How can we help?

Manitoba Blue Cross’s Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

BREAKING FREE OF FEAR

All of us experience fear. It is our best-known, worst-hated companion. It holds us back and pushes us forward. It stops us in our tracks. It limits our freedom and takes a toll on our emotional and physical well-being.

So how do we break free of it?

Whatever we focus on tends to expand in our vision. When we feel fear, it is like using a close-up lens on a camera. The subject of our fear fills up the whole picture and becomes all we can see. Our thinking becomes distorted and we tend to overreact to situations and what others say or do. We lose the ability to see the long-term consequences of our actions. We can no longer relax and enjoy the moment.

Fear triggers a genetic response in our bodies known as the fight-or-flight response. This automatic process was designed to protect us from an external threat by stimulating a part of our brain called the hypothalamus. Stress hormones such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into our bodies to prepare us to fight or flee. Our breathing becomes shallow, decreasing the amount of oxygen we take into our cells. Our pupils become dilated, our sight sharpens, and our awareness intensifies. Our perception of pain is diminished. Blood is diverted from our digestive tract to our muscles and limbs. We perceive our environment as a threat to our survival. We see everyone and everything as a possible enemy. The physical changes taking place in our bodies can trigger emotional and physical symptoms.

We are so used to planning ahead, being in control, and having our hands firmly cemented to the steering wheel. We need to let go of trying to control things. When we feel fearful, we are in a state of resistance, and we struggle.

It is often said that what we resist, persists. So when we resist what is going on, the challenges we face not only feel more pronounced than they actually are – they also tend to hang on longer. We rarely look at the good things in our lives and celebrate that we did something right. Instead we focus on the tiniest negative things and believe we messed up. When we can let go of the struggle, we can make space for the things we fear to change.

Helpful techniques

Deep breathing

One of the simplest ways to decrease fear is to breathe deeply into the abdomen for five minutes, closing your eyes on the last breath. Deep breathing sends a message to your body that you are safe, and when you feel safer, you calm down.

Meditation

Meditation is a practice that involves noticing our thoughts and seeing how they affect our emotions. Thinking the same thoughts over and over can actually form a belief. If we activate our internal witness by witnessing our thoughts, we can then let them pass by. That is what meditation is all about. It is not about stopping ourselves from thinking. We have the power to choose the thoughts we want to keep and which ones to let go.

Emotional symptoms of fear

- Frustration
- Confusion
- Feeling trapped or imprisoned
- Decreased concentration
- Hopelessness

Physical symptoms of fear

- Headaches
- Upset stomach
- High blood pressure
- Fatigue
- Immune system disorders

Physical exercise

Any exercise you do that makes you perspire for five minutes will metabolize excessive stress hormones. Yoga is particularly helpful because it helps you to focus, quiets your mind and lessens your fear.

Yawning

When you yawn and stretch, your brainwaves automatically slow down and you enter an alpha brainwave state. This brain state is the same as when you are doing a light meditation and will alleviate fear.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Contracting and relaxing each muscle group from your head to your feet will promote relaxation.

Listening to music

Modern recordings are made using binaural beats where the sound of one frequency goes into one ear and another frequency goes into the other ear. The difference in cycles results in musical beats at an alpha frequency and the brain resonates with this, producing a state of relaxation.

Anything you do that helps you to become calm and more peaceful when you are fearful is the perfect thing to do. Reminding yourself of all of the times you faced challenges in your life and survived them will boost your confidence.

Practice, practice, practice

A daily breathing and meditation practice would be highly beneficial. Five to ten minutes a day would be a good start. As with learning any new skill or exercise, we need to be patient with ourselves. It is always harder to do something at the beginning, and it gets easier the more we do it. If we practice breathing and meditation on a consistent basis, we will not only become more successful at letting go of our fears, we will begin to notice other positive changes in our lives.

If we practice when we are calm, it will be easier to remember to do it when we are in fear. It will become more automatic, like a muscle we use frequently. So we breathe, we change our focus, we meditate, and we let go of needing to control things. Most importantly, we let go of judging and criticizing ourselves. Judging what we are experiencing is a form of resistance. It intensifies our negative feelings and makes it more difficult to do what we need to do to become calm and more peaceful. We remember to be patient with ourselves, we persist, and we break free of fear.



How can we help?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)

MYTHS, FABLES AND FACTS ABOUT SEEKING HELP

In some cultures, there is a belief that if you are worried, anxious or stressed, you should tell your worries to a worry doll, place the doll beneath your pillow before you go to bed, and then in the morning all of your worries will be gone.

From a psychological standpoint, it is easy to understand why maintaining a worry doll makes good sense. It signifies your firm intention to solve a problem, it embodies an optimistic attitude that problems can be solved, and it suggests that you have faith that help is available to you.

Unfortunately, many attitudes embraced in North America can actually keep people from seeking help.

We can recognize the problems – but not the need to seek help

Most people would agree that there seem to be as many different problems out there as there are different human beings. We struggle with multiple types of issues that can include addictions, anxieties, depression, fear, loneliness, anger and relationship problems, to name a few. These problems can consume our lives and they can greatly interfere with our personal desires to not live a life imprisoned by our problems.

Despite this desire, why do so many people carry the weight of their problems with them daily and allow them to take up full-time residence in their lives rather than facing them? What prevents many of us from seeking the help we need and developing the abilities necessary to overcome the problems in our lives?

Myths and beliefs that discourage us from seeking help

For years, popular media has painted the image of a troubled individual lying on a couch in a "shrink's" office while the good doctor digs into the patient's murky unconsciousness and determines the nature of their problem. This process was said to take years and cost a king's ransom.

Myth 1: I will have to hash out painful details

We now understand that solving problems does not always involve rehashing a person's history. Exploring solutions to problems can be more beneficial, for some, than solely discussing the problem itself. Sometimes the idea that problems require in-depth analysis for a person to feel relief prevents the person from seeking the help they need or from recognizing that they can make changes quickly.

Myth 2: I should handle my own problems

We can also be kept from seeking help by our own embarrassment at having a problem. We live in a culture that encourages a rugged self-reliance and a stiff upper lip. This attitude remains a bigger obstacle for men than women, yet it factors into everyone's reluctance to talk about their problems with a professional. It is an unfortunate belief of many that admitting to having a problem is a sign of weakness.

However, if we have a toothache or a chest cold, we immediately seek the help of a dentist, doctor or a pharmacist. We need to embrace the fact that seeking help for personal problems is as wise as seeking help for our physical ailments.

Myth 3: There is something wrong with me

Another fear that prevents many people from seeking help is the belief that those who experience problems are somehow abnormal. There is a saying that states “the problem, not the person, is the problem”. This saying conveys the impression that “problems are problems” and “people are people.” However, people can be taken by problems. It is a normal circumstance of living our lives. When we are swept up by the emotional stream of a problem, it can be very difficult not to become overwhelmed and feel like we are drowning in our problems. At these times, it makes sense to seek an outside perspective and find a coach, counsellor or therapist who can help us find perspective.

Myth 4: Therapy won't work for me

Finally, a major obstacle to many people choosing not to seek help is the belief that talking to someone will not really make a difference in how we are feeling. At times, our problems can seem so insurmountable or numerous that we are unable to see the forest for the trees. Finding help and talking about problems can be a major step in identifying solutions that will defy a problem's hold on you. You will discover that speaking with a counsellor can be a huge relief, as it will allow you to be open about your thoughts and feelings in a safe setting. This can restore balance in your life and enable you to restore or gain your own sense of control.

Important ideas to keep in mind when you need help

Keep these tips in mind when you feel ready to take your life back and conquer a significant problem.

- There is more than one way to look at a situation. You likely experience unique moments during your day when the problem's hold on you feels less profound. Ask yourself, “How is this possible?” A counsellor can help you find different ways to view the situation.
- You are not your problems. Your problems don't own or define you. You have the strength, resources and ability to resolve the challenges that you are facing in life.
- There is nothing so wrong with you. A counsellor can help you see the strengths that you possess that the problems don't want you to see.
- What you are going through is normal. Remember that the one thing we can always depend on is that life is full of change and as a result it is always possible for you to make more changes happen.
- You don't need to understand what caused a problem to resolve it. Emphasizing solutions and not just problems can lead to positive changes and problem resolution.

Finding help***Reach out to your EAP***

Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video counselling options to all clients seeking support. **Please call: 204.786.8880, 1.800.590.5553 (toll free) or 204.775.0586 (TTY)**

Talk to friends and family

You will likely be surprised at how many people you know who have sought help from a professional and benefited from it. A friend might also be able to steer you in the direction of someone who they feel would be the most helpful for you.

A note on finding the right fit:

It is important to be aware that not every counsellor will be the right fit for every person. Be assured, however, that there is a counsellor out here who is a good match for you.

Telling your worries to a worry doll and placing it beneath your pillow at night, in the hope that all of your problems will be gone in the morning, is certainly one method of finding the help that you need. However, there are many more ways of finding help that make it a less solitary activity.

Perhaps taking that first step in asking for help will be the beginning of a behaviour change on your part that will help you take your life back from the hold a problem might have on you.

RESILIENCE

Our modern world moves quickly and we must constantly adapt to the changes. The stresses of working full time and managing a home, taking care of children, or perhaps aging parents, can fill up our days – not to mention create potential for some very difficult situations. Fitting in friends, exercise, hobbies or relaxation can be difficult.

And as rates of depression and anxiety continue to rise – especially in light of difficult situations – we need to manage the stress.

Have you ever wondered why some people are better able to adapt and go with the flow? They have developed resilience, which is a concept that has grown out of psychological research over the past 30 or so years.

But what is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to spring back into shape after being bent, stretched or compressed – sound like one of *those days*?

As it applies to people, resilience means the ability to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions. This definition needs qualifiers because there are many situations in life that we cannot recover quickly from, nor would we want to. Sometimes just getting through a major loss exhibits resilience.

The competencies of resilient people reveal some important skills for us to consider, and some fascinating new brain science indicates the simple ways in which we can enhance our own resilience.

Qualities of resilient people

Drawing upon research, highly resilient people often:

- learn from experience, assimilating new and unexpected information and integrating the insights that comes from them
- adapt quickly and are flexible mentally and emotionally
- have solid self-esteem and inner strength that can be a buffer against the unpleasant or hurtful things that come at us
- have strong self-confidence and know that future actions can be based on current experience and past success
- have good friendships and loving relationships
- know that talking to others who truly care diminishes the impact of difficulties
- can modulate their emotions
- can express feelings honestly and when circumstance warrants, can repress strong feelings
- expect things to work out well and have optimism based on values and beliefs, as well as tolerance for uncertainty
- view others with empathy – even the perspective of antagonists can be considered
- use intuition and trust creative hunches
- have curious natures and playful, childlike curiosity of wondering and asking questions
- have clearly defined boundaries and will not accept mistreatment
- know how to find resources and support
- can take difficult situations or misfortune, learn from it, and not feel victimized

While these all seem like wonderful qualities that many of us would love to possess, the intent is not to shame those who do not yet possess such strategies in their emotional or cognitive tool kit. We are not all raised on even footing and we know that we haven't been given equal opportunity to develop our resiliency to the same capacity.

Emphasizing the concept of resiliency does not undermine the challenges some have faced – in fact it is quite the opposite. The greater the challenge, the greater the testament to a person's strength and ability.

While there is no magic bullet for possessing the qualities above – we know it is completely possible to learn new skills.

Looking at an example from the list of resilient qualities – if we know that seeing the glass as half empty doesn't serve us – how do we become more optimistic? Optimism is a practice that can be learned. If we develop these skills, our stress levels drop. Worry and negativity can sap our energy and take away the potential for happiness.

Here are three concepts to think about as you go about your daily life. If you start to consider things a little differently you will further develop the competencies of resilience.

Taking things personally

Have you ever come into work in the morning and said hello to a co-worker and had them quietly mutter a response? Did your mind go back to the afternoon before wondering if you had done or said anything to them that would cause them to be angry with you? How about a situation with a family member who may not have wanted to talk to you? Did you wonder what you had done to cause their withdrawal?

We misinterpret the world frequently by taking things personally that have nothing to do with us. We can ask people we're close to if there's a problem, but it is also up to others to let us know if we have offended them. We can waste a great deal of energy worrying about problems that don't exist.

The ABCs of cognitive understanding

This skill can be very helpful in managing our emotional responses and developing empathy and optimism. We can also gain insight into what is behind our behaviour.

A stands for Adversity, representing the difficult things we have to deal with in life.

B stands for Belief, what we believe about the adversity will determine C.

C is the Consequence. This is the emotional response we have.

Here is a simple example:

A Someone cut me off in traffic.

B How dare they do that to me! That is not right.

C The emotional response could be anger or frustration.

If we think about this situation differently, than our emotional response will change.

New belief:

A I remember the last time I cut someone off.

B It was a mistake.

C That person doesn't know me, why should I take it personally?

The new emotional consequence could be little or no emotion, just an acknowledgement that the person made a mistake as we all do. This quick self-analysis comes in handy for many of life's frustrations.

Change your brain

In *Hardwiring Happiness*, author Dr. Rick Hanson puts forth new brain science and some surprisingly simple techniques to literally change the structure of our brain. Dr. Hanson states that parts of our brain are primitive and lean towards awareness of negative stimuli because that is what humans had to pay attention to in order to survive. However, the research being done in neuroscience indicates that new pathways are always being created in the brain by positive experiences as well. This malleability is called neuroplasticity.

Dr. Hanson says that our positive experiences can be fleeting, but all we need to do to create positive pathways that lead to greater happiness is to hold onto the experience and take it all in for 20 more seconds. If we do this six or more times a day, the pathways become hard-wired. The positive experiences can be small moments such as holding a baby, seeing something beautiful in nature, feeling love, or being absorbed in something creative. He states that taking in the good is the deliberate internalization of positive experiences in implicit memory.

HEAL

Have a positive experience

Enrich it

Absorb it

Link positive and negative

There are simple things we can do to increase our resilience. We can take things less personally, look for the beliefs in our head and change them to create less emotional stress, and make a point of absorbing wonderful moments in our lives. We have much to be thankful for, and in our busy lives it is important to value and pay attention to what matters.

How can we help?

Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting you through this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services. We will be providing telephonic, text-based and video conferencing options to all clients seeking support.

To speak to an intake worker, please call:

204.786.8880

1.800.590.5553 (toll free)

204.775.0586 (TTY)



**MANITOBA BLUE CROSS
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE CENTRE**

599 Empress Street

P: 204.786.8880
TTY: 204.775.0586
TF: 1.800.590.5553

mb.bluecross.ca



®*The Blue Cross symbol and name and Colour of Caringare registered marks of the Canadian Association of Blue Cross Plans, independently licensed by Manitoba Blue Cross.
†Blue Shield is a registered trade-mark of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association. 2020-0323