

# Coping with Influenza – Outbreaks & Pandemic

Massachusetts Department of Mental Health –  
Emergency Management & Disaster Behavioral Health Services

## I am worried. What can I do?

A flu pandemic is a stressful event. During a pandemic, you may worry about your own health and the health of those you care about. Worry, fear, anxiety and concerns about the future are common and normal reactions in this kind of situation. When you go through a stressful event, it is normal to experience some of the following:

- Change in sleep and appetite
- Forgetfulness
- Less interest in daily activities
- Increased irritability and impatience

Some people may have more severe stress reactions. These reactions can affect your life at home, work, school and in the community. These can include:

- Pounding or racing heart
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Chills or hot flushes
- Fear of losing control or “going crazy”
- Trembling, shaking, sweating
- Feelings of choking or smothering
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Feeling like things are unreal
- Nausea or stomachache

Sometimes when people have feelings of stress, they think that they are sick. Feelings such as worry, fear and anxiety are usually not signs of a physical illness. They are usually signs of stress. However, it is **always** important to check with a medical provider to assess your health status if unusual symptoms occur.

## How can I cope with severe stress?

1. To reduce stress, try to breathe slowly and deeply. (Remember to exhale slowly!) If you have severe anxiety and feel breathless, it may help to breathe into a paper bag.
2. Try not to think or talk about fears for the future. **TRY TO STAY IN THE PRESENT.** Notice what is really happening *now*, rather than what might happen in the future.
3. Focus on simple routine tasks.

If fears about pandemic flu seem overwhelming, think about the facts, not your fears. Get the facts. Visit the Massachusetts Public Health blog: <http://publichealth.blog.state.ma.us/h1n1-swine-flu/> or [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) or <http://www.cdc.gov/> for the CDC’s H1N1 info.

## How can I cope with the stress of an outbreak or pandemic?

- Continue routines for yourself and your family, such as regular meals, bedtimes and exercise.
- Keep busy. Find tasks that you and your family can do together. Focus on day-to-day plans.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol. These can make you less alert and can cause serious health problems.
- Stay connected with friends and family. Reach out to people by phone and email.
- Try to avoid upsetting images. Listen to the television or radio for health and safety information. Turn off the TV or radio if they continue to play frightening images or stories.
- If you feel scared or overwhelmed, talk with someone about your feelings. This can reduce your stress and help you feel less lonely.

## How will children respond to the stress of an outbreak or pandemic?

Some children may start acting like they did when they were younger:

- Thumb sucking or bed wetting
- Unusual amount of crying
- Nightmares
- Withdrawal
- Clinging to parents
- Not wanting to go to bed

Teenagers might:

- Worry about what might happen
- Use drugs or alcohol
- Withdraw or become depressed
- Act without thinking or act aggressively
- Resist parental authority
- Become easily irritated or impatient

## How can I help my child to cope?

- Talk about your own feelings clearly and calmly. This shows your child that many different feelings are a normal response to stress.
- Encourage children to draw pictures. Art work can help children to express their feelings.
- Provide information that your child can understand.
- Hold and hug your child often. This provides extra reassurance, comfort and caring
- Encourage questions. Expect repeated questions.
- Spend extra time with your child, especially at bedtime.
- Tell your child that you will do everything you can to keep him safe. Repeat this often.
- Maintain your child's routine.
- Help your child to keep in touch with friends by phone and email.
- Teach your child things s/he can do to protect herself/himself (hand washing, coughing into a sleeve).
- Praise good behavior.

## When will the feelings of stress go away?

A flu pandemic can be a stressful event. The effects of stress may show up right away or may come months later. For most people, stressful feelings go away soon after the stressful event ends. Sometimes, people still feel stressed long after the emergency, such as a flu pandemic, is over. These are all normal responses to a stressful situation.

If you have feelings that make it difficult to function in your daily life, consider seeking professional help. Find help through your health care provider or clergy person.

## What can I do to recover after going through an Influenza outbreak or pandemic?

- Remember that stress reactions are NORMAL responses to abnormal events. For most people, THEY WILL GO AWAY in time.
- Talk to someone about your feelings.
- Find fun and relaxing activities for you and your family.
- Get plenty of rest and exercise.
- Find ways to help others. Offer support to others. Share information about resources.

Get information on how to make an emergency plan for your family at [www.Ready.gov](http://www.Ready.gov)