

Coping with Anxiety About Hurricanes

Every fall in the United States, hurricanes threaten Hawaii, the Pacific Islands, our eastern seaboard and the Gulf States. When an event of this magnitude occurs in your home and community, you may experience a heightened sense of anxiety and concern for yourself, your family members and co-workers. You may notice yourself being on edge, jumping at loud noises, scrutinizing strangers, paying closer attention to the weather reports and feeling a sense of dread that you can't explain. All of these feelings disrupt your sense of safety and security.

These can be symptoms of what's known as "anticipatory anxiety." **Anxiety is defined as the "subjective state of apprehension and uneasiness."** Anticipatory anxiety is worry and nervousness about future events which may or may not occur. These could be either positive or negative. We anticipate that we will not be able to control a situation or ourselves. These thoughts and feelings affect people differently, but in general, when we are anxious, we tend to think about the worst possible outcomes, we feel a sense of fear and our hearts race.

Common reactions associated with anxiety:

Physical reactions:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Body temperature changes
- Sweating
- Rapid breathing
- Light-headed or dizzy feeling
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dry mouth
- Fatigue

Behavioral reactions:

- Fidgeting
- Pacing
- Yelling
- Rapid speech
- Increased aggression
- Road rage
- Change in eating habits (eating more or less)
- Change in sleep pattern
- Avoidance
- Substance abuse

Emotional reactions:

- Fear
- Excessive worry
- Anger
- Rage
- Depression
- Irritability
- Agitation
- Crying

Mental reactions:

- Racing thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating
- Negative thoughts
- Catastrophizing
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or helplessness

Usually, the symptoms of anticipatory anxiety build in intensity gradually and decrease quickly after the anxiety-provoking situation has passed. However, in circumstances that don't have a clear ending, anxiety-provoking triggers may continue to occur in unexpected ways or at unexpected times.

Strategies to help decrease your own anticipatory anxiety:

- **Focus on what you can control:** You have control over your thoughts, your feelings, your physical activity, your interpersonal interactions... yourself.
- **Be alert:** Stay aware and mindful, but not so much that you become fearful.
- **Redirect to healthy thoughts and actions:** Focus on your work, your health, taking care of yourself and your family and continuing on with your daily routines and schedules.
- **Be prepared:** Follow the recommendations of your local Division of Emergency Management.
- **Challenge catastrophic and irrational thoughts:** Stay focused on the present and avoid making assumptions about the future or thinking about “what if”. Redirect your thoughts to include a plan of action.
- **Reach out and connect:** Staying in touch with your feelings. Share them with friends and family in order to provide a sense of community, comfort and feelings of safety.
- **Respect co-worker’s attitudes:** Some people may want to talk a lot about their concerns, but others may prefer to be silent. Respect whichever style you face.
- **Try deep breathing to calm yourself:** This is done by slowly inhaling through the nose allowing your stomach to expand and then exhaling more slowly through your mouth.
- **Explore stress management options:** Get some exercise, play or watch sports, engage in your hobbies, etc.
- **Create a “private sanctuary” in your mind:** Use positive images to mentally create a safe place to retreat to; repeat a short phrase, prayer or mantra while you are there.
- **Look to professionals for guidance and support:** Discuss your concerns with Human Resources and EAP.

Additional Resources

- **Red Cross**, [redcross.org](https://www.redcross.org)
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**, [fema.gov](https://www.fema.gov)
- **Anxiety and Depression Association of America:**
adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety/hurricane-season-here-how-reduce-your-anxiety

Your EAP is here for you.

We’re available to talk 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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