

▶▶ Dealing with stress or anxiety about SARS

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is concerning many of us. There is a lot of media attention and the number of cases of the disease appears to be increasing in Canada.

It is normal to be feeling anxious or worried about a spreading disease, particularly if scientists have not discovered the cause or a cure. Anxiety is related to fear of the unknown.

Under conditions such as these, it is extremely important to take the advice of the experts. Even though we do not know the specific cause, we have some information about how the disease spreads and what to do. The experts can tell you if you are in danger. If you are in danger, the experts will tell you how to protect yourself and those you love. Health Canada, provincial governments and most local public health offices have set up hot-lines where you can call to get the most up-to-date information. You can also call your family physician.

The vast majority of us are not in danger. We should go about our daily routines and not be afraid. This is the advice of the experts.

You may also want to follow developments in the media. However, it is really important not to spend a lot of time listening to programmes or reading about SARS if it upsets you. Much like September 11 and the war on Iraq, limit the amount of exposure you have to these events.

The best thing you can do is to take the advice of the public health officials and get on with your normal daily routine. This is the best thing to do for yourself, your family and your co-workers.

Talk about your thoughts and feelings with family and friends. This can help everyone feel less stressed.

▶▶ Am I too upset?

You will know you are becoming too upset if you change your daily routine when there is no need to. This might involve things like:

- watching too much television on SARS,
- thinking about SARS too much,
- sleeping poorly,
- not wanting to get out of bed,
- avoiding others,
- not wanting to leave the house,
- feeling anxious or depressed,
- feeling panic or having panic attacks,
- crying,
- drinking more alcohol,
- taking more prescription drugs,
- having little patience, etc.

▶▶ What do I do?

The first thing to do is to talk to someone you love or trust. This can be a family member, friend, clergy, teacher etc. Be honest. Getting it off your chest helps. You can support each other. You may need to talk more than once. Don't be shy. Bring it up as often as you need to.

If you notice a love one, friend, colleague or co-worker's behaviour has changed, ask them how they are doing. Make time to talk. If right now is not appropriate, set aside a dedicated time to talk. After you have talked, follow up to see how they are doing. Check in. It shows you care and it can be a relief to both of you. In fact, check in even if their behaviour has not changed. They may be upset but hiding it well.

If, however, you or someone that you know is experiencing these symptoms over a period of time, such as a week or two, you should consider seeing a regulated health professional. This is also true if you just can't cope. The professional will explain

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your reactions and help you find ways to better deal with the situation.

▶▶ SARS and your kids

SARS can be upsetting to children and teenagers as well. It is important to discuss these issues with them. Don't be afraid to bring up the subject. You may need to discuss it more than once.

It is important to tell them the truth, to reassure them and to let them know that they can count on you and the adults around them. Often giving them a hug will help reassure them along with the words.

If you notice the behaviour of your children or teenagers changes significantly at home or at school, discuss the situation with them. Don't be afraid to bring it up. If it's related to being afraid of SARS or other such situations, such as the war in Iraq, try to help them as suggested in the paragraph above. If this does not work over a period of a week or two, you may want to consider consulting a regulated health professional.

Some of the behaviour changes might include:

- sleeping too much or too little,
- being tired all the time,
- staying in their room or avoiding others,
- talking less,
- feeling cranky and irritable,
- more arguments and fights with others
- behaviour problems at home, at school or in the community,
- eating lots more or less,
- sad or anxious
- poor grades

▶▶ SARS and other traumatic events

People may feel more anxious about SARS because of their feelings about the war in Iraq. One situation can make the other one more difficult to handle. This is not unusual.

People who have recently experienced a sad or traumatic event may find SARS and/or the war in Iraq more upsetting. Sad or tragic events can include a car accident, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a serious health problem, etc. It's normal to feel more stressed under these conditions.

It is important to watch your behaviour and if it changes as described above, you may want to discuss the situation with a friend or loved one. If that doesn't work and the symptoms persist over a week or two, you may want to contact a regulated health professional.

▶▶ SARS and the health system

The actions taken by authorities to help keep us safe from the disease may cause disruptions that are difficult. Health appointments and procedures, some that have been planned for a long time, may be delayed. You may not be able to see loved ones or friends in the hospital. This can be very frustrating. Health care officials will do everything they can to resume normal operations as soon as possible.

▶▶ Who can help?

1. Get the correct information from the experts such as the public health hotlines or the government.
2. Follow the experts' advice.
3. Talk to people you care about and trust. Don't be shy.
4. See a regulated health professional if symptoms persist or they are too strong for you to handle. These professionals include your family physician, nurses, psychologists and social workers.

▶▶ For more information

See *Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts* at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgsp/mergency-urgence.

Visit the SARS Update on cma.ca for CMA shortcuts to the most current information on SARS from Health Canada and other expert sources.

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