

Fear can be contagious, but programs step up to combat anxiety

In challenging times, it is normal for people to feel anxious.

It is a natural response, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, but there are ways to manage and cope.

That is the message from CMHA York's Rebecca Shields as the organization looks for ways to continue to serve in need and at-risk people in our community as social distancing becomes the new normal for the next few weeks.

What we need is to manage that anxiety and not let it overtake us, says Ms. Shields. When you're just feeling anxious, we often tell people to stop and breathe not through your lungs, but put your hands on your belly and breathe through your belly with some deep breaths, hold it for three seconds and then release it. Try to calm yourself down. Think about, am I catastrophizing? Then [we advise] we only go to trusted news sources like Public Health to make sure you're not getting your news from places where there is a lot of the biases you might find on social media.

Another very important technique in managing anxiety, says Ms. Shields, is simply taking a break.

Don't consume information all day all the time, it will absolutely escalate for you, she says. Try and consume your news maybe an hour a day or a couple of times a day, then take a news break and turn it off. If you follow all day, it is just going to keep you going. We really recommend people taking a news break and really practicing good self care, like eating healthy meals, making sure you're getting sleep and getting outside. It is beautiful right now; make sure you're getting outside, taking a walk, and exercising. Those core things are critical at this time in terms of self care.

Practicing what Ms. Shields describes as practicing gratitude can also be beneficial.

Write down three or five things every day that you're really grateful for: make phone calls to the people you love and let them know to just connect with people, keep the social connection, even in this time of social distancing. Find a way to call your friends, message them, and check in with those you love.

Beyond these techniques, resources are still available for individuals in crisis.

Crisis lines are operational, with the hotline 310-COPE available for anyone struggling, along with York Support Services' Streamlined

Access program, which connects individuals to mental health, addiction, and dual diagnosis services in York Region and South Simcoe. (yssn.ca/streamlined-access ? 1-888-695-0070).

The CMHA is also continuing with the Province's Bounce Back program, a free skill-building workshop to help adults and youth manage low to mild and moderate depression and anxiety, stress, worry, and low mood ? all delivered over the phone at 1-866-345-0224.

?This helps people manage anxiety?and learn those skills of anxiety management,? says Ms. Shields. ?It is free, available over the phone, and available in French, English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Farsi, South American Spanish, and we also have coaches that speak 12 other languages. If people are feeling anxious, they really need to get that under control and there's a free program available through the day, but also evenings and some weekend hours.

?A lot of the community agencies are moving a lot of their support services to virtual and phone call. All of that is emerging. What I want to tell people to do in the Region is two things: One, they can check out 310-COPE for crisis, they can go to Streamlined Access and ConnexOntario (connexontario.ca) to find out other services. You can reach out to the Canadian Mental Health Association. We are redeploying a lot of our staff to support people as virtually as we can so we're all doing our part to flatten the curve by practicing social distancing. Everybody is really working hard to do that. We're redeploying staff who might do other things to be able to support our clients and we have some essential services ? some of our clients who require access to nursing and medication, we are ensuring that no client is left without appropriate medical care.

?This is a time of a lot of unknowns and that can be a difficult time. They talk about COVID-19 being contagious but fear can also be contagious. We really have to support ourselves and do the self care and manage our own fears and do the right things, that we know are going to keep us and our community safe. The CMHA is doing our part and we ask everyone to work together to come together do this with us. We're here for you and please reach out to us if you need us.?

By Brock Weir