



Minding your mental health: Ways to cope during the COVID-19 outbreak

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Mitigating the effects of the fear and anxiety caused by the novel coronavirus is no mean feat, given our situational uncertainties and biological penchants.

Dr. Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor in psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University, believes the first steps are to avoid hysteria, look rationally at the situation and spread that rationality to others.

“Right now there’s a sort of digital distortion that’s occurring whereby people are being inundated with negative information,” he said.

“Every headline and every click is feeding a steady diet of panic and anxiety to us. So people need to consider the idea of there being too much information and to limit their exposure to things like social media, because in social media in particular, panic sells.”

“Caution is indicated here, but panic is not.”

“Just like a virus can be spread from one person to another, fear can be spread from one person to another. So there’s such a thing as emotional contagion. If all you’re doing is talking about COVID-19, you become a source of transmission of fear yourself.”

Steve Joordens, professor of psychology at University of Toronto, has some recommendations to help quell those fears, and weather the storm, including limiting news consumption to a couple of hours a

day, and never right before sleeping. Instead, he suggests watching a light sitcom, or a mindless reality show, or even karaoke with the family before bed.

In addition, he suggests listening to guided relaxation recordings as you go to sleep. The idea is to teach your body how to relax again, and re-enter that mellower “rest-and-digest” mode.

“I’m recommending to people just before they go to bed, put one of these things on. It’ll help you sleep better, because you’ll be relaxed before bed,” he said. “And if you do this every night, you can start to have this as a skill that you just carry around with you in your back pocket.”