Caring for the Ages is the official newspaper of AMDA – The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine and provides post-acute and long-term care professionals with

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Caring for the Ages

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Caregiver’s Corner

Anxiety About COVID-19: How to Support Your Loved Ones

Crises can increase fears, panic, and anxiety for older adults. David Smith, MD, CMD, a Texas-based geriatrician, talks about how you can help.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be anxiety provoking. If your loved one seems obsessed with news about COVID-19, gets upset or agitated when talking about it, is losing sleep over it or having bad dreams, or has stopped eating (or is binge eating), he or she may need your help to ease these fears and anxieties.

Here are a few tips you can use to help your loved ones cope:

• Listen to your loved ones. Urge them to share concerns with a trusted person, such as a practitioner. It may not make the anxiety go away, but it helps person to express their feelings and get some support and understanding. It is important to identify their specific concerns so that you can correct any misconceptions, share uplifting news, or help get support to ease these fears.

• Limit their exposure to social media and the news. Instead, encourage the use of movie or classic television channels. This is the perfect time to give/send your loved ones some new audio books or music.

• Fact-check information. If you or your loved ones read or hear something upsetting or surprising, check to make sure the source is reliable.

• Encourage daily relaxation. Whether your loved ones enjoy exercise, meditation, or a favorite hobby, encourage them to take the time for one of these daily.

• Be prepared. Your loved ones may be isolated in their

Model calm: Put on a positive face and do your best to be comforting.

facilities. Arrange opportunities for phone calls and video conferences so that you can help them feel less isolated.

• Model calm. Try to keep your own fears and concerns in check. Put on a positive face and do your best to be comforting.

Your loved ones may need help with their anxiety if they find it difficult to control their worry and if they feel three or more of the following consistently over time:

• Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
• Being easily fatigued
• Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
• Irritability
• Muscle tension
• Sleep disturbance

Anxiety does more than just make a person feel unhappy, distracted, and worried. It can cause or lead to depression, a pounding heart, headaches, irritability, breathing problems, an increase in blood pressure, muscle aches/pains, an upset stomach, loss of libido, and/or extreme fatigue.

The first-line treatment for treating anxiety is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This is aimed at helping reduce anxiety and worrisome thoughts, cope with stress and panic, and calm the nervous system. The second-line treatment is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), where patients learn to accept their thoughts without trying to change or reduce them.

Guided imagery, where one focuses on a calming and positive memory from the past when one feels anxious, can be a helpful. Another variation of this is to create activities or conversations that take anxious people back to a time in the past when they were happy, powerful, and productive.

Belleruth Naparstek, ACSW, BCD, is the author of popular guided imagery programs that may be useful (https://www.healthjourneys.com/).

If your loved one has demen-

Practitioner

Questions to Ask Your Practitioner

• What is the difference between having an isolated case of anxiety (such as crying over a scary news story or having a bad day) and generalized anxiety disorder that requires treatment? When should I seek help to address my loved one’s anxiety?

• How do I know what to do or say to help my loved one?

What You Can Do

• Provide your loved ones with food, music, photos, movies, and other things that will bring them comfort.

• Look for environmental issues you can manage, such as limiting loud noises, keeping TVs and radios off of news channels, and making sure your loved one has a soft blanket or stuffed animal for comfort.

• Use positive language, and avoid words such as “disaster,” “hopeless,” “chaos,” “terrifying,” and “crazy.” Model calm.

• Practice self-care for your own stress and fears.

For More Information


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announced for 2021, the latest in a series of publications that provide practical tools and resources for providers. The 2021 edition includes new content on COVID-19 guidance, mental health, and patient outcomes. For more information, visit the AMDA online Learning Center at https://www.amda.org/education/caregivers-corner.

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