

Managing Pandemic Related Academic Stress and Anxiety

FACE COVID is a set of practical steps for responding effectively to the impact of the Corona crisis, using the principles of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). These are built on the concepts of Dr. Russ Harris.

Here's a quick summary of the key steps:

F = Focus on what's in your control
A = Acknowledge your thoughts & feelings
C = Come back into your body
E = Engage in what you're doing

C = Committed action
O = Opening up
V = Values
I = Identify resources
D = Disinfect & distance

Let's now explore these, one by one

F = Focus on what's in your control.

The current situation can affect us in many different ways: physically, emotionally, economically, socially, and psychologically. When we are facing a crisis of any sort, fear and anxiety are inevitable; they are normal, natural responses to challenging situations infused with danger and uncertainty. It's all too easy to get lost in worrying and ruminating about all sorts of things that are out of your control. While it's completely natural for us to get lost in such worries, it's not useful or helpful. Academically much has changed. Classes are different and may feel overwhelming even for the most prepared students. Focus on what you can control.

The more we focus on what's not in our control, the more hopeless or anxious we're likely to feel. The single most useful thing anyone can do in any type of crisis is to focus on what's in your control.

You can control what you do - here and now. And that matters. Because what you do - here and now - can make a huge difference to yourself, and anyone living with you, and a significant difference to the community around you. Our number one aim is to take control of our behavior - right here and now - to respond effectively to this crisis.

So, the first practical step is to 'drop anchor', using the simple ACE formula:

A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
C = Come back into your body
E = Engage in what you're doing

Let's explore these one by one:

A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

Silently and kindly acknowledge whatever is 'showing up' inside you: thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, sensation, urges. Take the stance of a curious scientist, observing what's going on in your inner world. Are you upset about the transition? Are you feeling stress about being at home? Are you feeling overwhelmed by the change in academics? Are you grieving your final spring semester?

While continuing to acknowledge your thoughts and feelings, also

C = Come back into your body

Come back into and connect with your physical body. Find your own way of doing this. You could try some or all of the following, or find your own methods:

- Slowly pushing your feet hard into the floor.
- Slowly straightening up your back and spine.
- Slowly pressing your fingertips together
- Slowly stretching your arms or neck, shrugging your shoulders.
- Slowly breathing

E = Engage in what you're doing

Get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on the activity you are doing. Find your own way of doing this. You could try some or all of the following suggestions, or find your own methods:

- Look around the room and notice 5 things you can see.
- Notice 3 or 4 things you can hear.
- Notice what you can smell or taste or sense in your nose and mouth
- Notice what you are doing
- End the exercise by giving your full attention to the task or activity at hand.

NOTE: please don't skip the A of ACE; it's so important to keep acknowledging the thoughts and feelings present, especially if they are difficult or uncomfortable. If you skip the A, this exercise will turn into a distraction technique – which it's not supposed to be.

COVID

Dr. Harris has created specific steps he intends to help manage your anxiety during the current pandemic. He uses the COVID acronym.

C = Committed Action

Committed action means effective action, guided by your core values; action you take because it's truly important to you; action you take even if it brings up difficult thoughts and feelings. What are simple ways to look after yourself, those you live with, and those you can realistically help? What kind, caring, supportive deeds you can do? Can you say some kind words to someone in distress – in person or via a phone call or text message? If you can't take care of others, how can you make sure you are doing your best?

O = Opening up

Opening up means making room for difficult feelings and being kind to yourself. Difficult feelings are guaranteed to keep on showing up as this crisis unfolds: fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, frustration, confusion, and many more. We can't stop them from arising; they're normal reactions. But we can open up and make room for them: acknowledge they are normal, allow them to be there (even though they hurt), and treat ourselves kindly.

V = Values

Committed action should be guided by your core values: What do you want to stand for in the face of this crisis? How do you want to treat yourself and others? Let them guide and motivate your committed action. Of course, as this crisis unfolds, there will be all sorts of obstacles in your life; goals you can't achieve, things you can't do, problems for which there are no simple solutions. But you can still live your values in a myriad of different ways, even in the face of all those challenges.

I = Identify resources

Identify resources for help, assistance, support, and advice. This includes friends, family, neighbors, faculty, staff, mental health professionals, emergency services. Also reach out to your social networks. And if you are able to offer support to others, let them know; you can be a resource for other people, just as they can for you.

D = Disinfect & distance physically

Disinfect your hands regularly and practice as much social distancing as realistically possible, for the greater good of your community. And remember, we're talking about physical distancing – not cutting off emotionally.

(Adapted from The Happiness Trap and COVID worksheet Russ Harris, (2020))