

# Emotional and Mental Wellness

Category: 2 Symptom

## Emotional and mental health and Long COVID



Changes in your emotional and mental health are common in Long COVID. Dealing with Long COVID can be stressful, especially when symptoms last a Long time. It is common to have feelings of stress, anxiety (worry, fear) or depression (low mood, sadness, hopelessness).

Your mood can also be affected by feelings of frustration or grief about not being able to return to work or the daily activities that are important to you. You may experience a sense of loss around the changes in your health or sense of identity.

In an emergency or crisis (if everything becomes too much and too hard to bear):

If you or a loved one is at risk of harming themselves or others, please speak with someone immediately:

- **Call 9-1-1 or go to the nearest emergency room** if you are afraid of hurting yourself or someone else, or if no other options are available.
- **Call or text 9-8-8** from anywhere in Canada to reach the national suicide crisis line.

- Call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) if you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide.

## How Long COVID affects the nervous system

Long COVID can cause dysregulation in your autonomic nervous system. This means that your body likely spends more time in the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) versus the parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest). Having a dysregulated nervous system can mean an increase in emotional symptoms such as depression and anxiety.

Managing stress, feelings, and supporting your emotional and mental wellness are an important part of your recovery and can help you spend more time in the parasympathetic nervous system. It's important to know that many symptoms of Long COVID are linked -- an improvement in one area (such as sleep) can lead to an improvement in another area (such as fatigue, low mood).

## Managing stress

Stress can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression and can affect your emotional and mental wellbeing. You may be experiencing stress around your finances, your future and your sense of identity. However, by practicing simple stress management techniques, you may be able to find an increased sense of calmness and focus while navigating your stressors. Strategies that help with managing anxiety and depression may also be helpful with managing stress. Please see the next frames for more details.

Here are some additional techniques you can use to help manage stress:

- **Reduce responsibilities.** During recovery from Long COVID, it is important to ease the burden of responsibilities on yourself. Seek support from friends, family, or colleagues to help with tasks that might be overwhelming.
- **Keep to a routine.** Even if your day is filled with smaller activities or rest periods, our minds do best with routine. Keep to the same wake time and schedule whenever you can.
- **Practice mindfulness and relaxation.** [Mindfulness](#) is discussed later in this topic.

## Managing anxiety

People with Long COVID are about twice as likely to experience anxiety symptoms (worry, fear) than people without Long COVID.

## Anxiety about Long COVID

When dealing with Long COVID, it is natural to feel anxious or uncertain about your health, potential long term effects, and returning to your normal life. There are simple steps you can take to manage anxiety and find relief. It is important to note that these strategies will not change some of the stressors you may be experiencing, but they may help reduce some of the emotional impact they may have on you.

- **Create 'worry time':** If you find that you're constantly worrying about the same things over and over, set aside a bit of time every day (or as often as you like) to journal or write down your thoughts and concerns (you might want to keep a notebook). This can be your 'worry time' when you can let yourself worry freely. Choose a time when you can focus without distractions, for example 15 minutes in the morning or evening. When the time is up, remind yourself that you've addressed your concerns and that worrying can wait until your next 'worry time.' This strategy helps you to acknowledge your worries and thoughts without letting them consume your entire day.
- **Challenge anxious thoughts:** Anxiety can lead to irrational or exaggerated thoughts. When you notice yourself thinking negatively, challenge those thoughts. Ask yourself questions like, 'Is there evidence to support this thought?', 'What's the likelihood of this happening?', or 'Have I dealt with similar situations before?' By questioning and reframing anxious thoughts, you can gain a more balanced perspective, reducing the intensity of anxiety. It may be helpful to write your thoughts down or say them out loud to identify the negative thoughts. Consider which thoughts are within your control to change and which are not. You can also talk to a trained healthcare provider (such as a counsellor or social worker) to see if cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), combined with pacing, can help you to challenge anxious thoughts that may be interfering with your daily living (see [Canadian Guideline for Post COVID-19 Condition recommendation](#) for more information).
- **Learn to accept uncertainty:** Long COVID can be unpredictable, and accepting that uncertainty is a part of recovery can help lessen anxiety. Remind yourself that not everything is within your control, and it's okay not to have all the answers right away. Focus on what you can do to improve your wellbeing and what strengths and supports you do have.

With the right strategies, you can manage and alleviate the impact anxiety may have on your life. Remember that seeking support from loved ones and healthcare professionals can also be beneficial in your journey to recovery.

## When to see a healthcare professional

If you experience persistent anxiety, panic attacks, or similar symptoms, talk to a healthcare professional, such as a doctor or a nurse, especially if these symptoms are interfering with your daily life.

A healthcare provider may conduct a screening for anxiety, as suggested by the Canadian Guideline for Post COVID-19 Condition (CAN-PCC). The screening may lead to treatment for anxiety (medication and/or non-medication). **Please note that a positive screen for anxiety does not mean that all of your Long COVID symptoms are caused by anxiety.** Please see the [CAN-PCC recommendation for anxiety screening](#) for more information.

## Managing depression

Having a serious health problem can make you feel sad and hopeless, and feeling sad and hopeless can be tough when you are going through a serious health problem. It can be a vicious cycle.

People with Long COVID are about twice as likely to experience symptoms of depression than people without Long COVID. Often, a person can feel both feelings of depression and anxiety.

Depression might make you feel sad or hopeless, and it can affect how you think and do things every day. Sometimes, it can also cause physical issues like feeling tired, gaining or losing weight, trouble focusing, and having unexplained aches – all symptoms that can also come with Long COVID.

There are ways to deal with depression, improve how you feel, and find hope again.

- **Speak to your doctor or other trusted health professional.** If you do not have a family doctor, try a walk-in clinic or call 8-1-1 to speak with a nurse any time of the day or night from anywhere in Canada (except in Manitoba, call 1-888-315-9257). A healthcare provider may do a screening for depression, as recommended by the Canadian Guideline for Post COVID-19 Condition (CAN-PCC), which can lead to treatment for depression. **Please note that a positive screen for depression does not mean that all of your Long COVID symptoms are caused by depression.** Please see the [CAN-PCC recommendation for anxiety screening](#) for more information.
- **Talk to someone:** It could be a friend, family member, a peer living with Long COVID or even a professional counsellor. Sharing your feelings with someone can make you feel better and less alone. For a list of peer support groups and directory of counsellors for your region, please see the Resources list for your province or territory.
- **Eat healthy foods:** Eating well-balanced meals with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can make you feel better. Make sure you get enough protein as well. Healthy foods give your body the energy it needs to stay strong and happy.
- **Support your sleep:** Sleep is essential for your well-being. Do your best to get enough rest each night so your body and mind can recharge.
- **Physical activity is often used to support mental wellness.** However, many individuals with Long COVID have an abnormal reaction to exercise in which it makes their symptoms worse rather than better. If this is the case for you, you may need to rely on other coping strategies to support your

mental wellbeing. Physical activity needs to be approached cautiously for people with PEM and support from an informed clinician is recommended.

- There may be **other coping strategies** you used in the past that may not be available to you right now due to Long COVID such as socializing, attending community events, or various hobbies. It is important to reflect on the value behind these activities and how you may be able to modify them or engage with them differently.
- **Identify activities that are most meaningful to you or bring you joy**, and do not make you feel too tired. This could be things like reading a book, drawing, or listening to music. Try to include some of these activities if they are within your energy envelope, and do them in quantities that do not make you feel tired.

In an emergency or crisis (if everything becomes too much and too hard to bear):

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You can learn more about coping with mental health crises and emergencies from the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#), which has regional chapters in most provinces and territories.

## Mindfulness

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of bringing awareness to the present moment and noticing thoughts, feelings, and sensations without judgement or expectation. It can be applied to many different situations and activities to care for your emotional and mental wellness. Specifically, it can reduce stress, allow you to feel safe and relaxed, and calm your mind from racing thoughts.

There is some scientific evidence suggesting that mindfulness, relaxation, and breathing techniques can help improve quality of life, anxiety/worry, depression/sadness, and stress for people with Long COVID. Please see the [CAN-PCC recommendation for mindfulness, relaxation, and breathing techniques](#).

## How to achieve mindfulness in your day to day

Some of these may feel better than others. These are skills... so practicing when you feel good will make them more accessible when you are not feeling well. Please listen to your body and do not push through uncomfortable symptoms for any of these strategies. If you find mindfulness to be difficult, it can be helpful to practice with an informed clinician.

- **Guided relaxation and meditation practice:**  
Following an audio or video recording of a guided meditation can be an accessible way to trial mindfulness and work towards incorporating into your daily activities. This could include progressive muscle relaxation, body scans, and guided imagery, etc. Start with something short and slowly increase the duration. [Insight Timer](#) is a free app for guided relaxation and meditation.
- **Breath work:**  
Bringing awareness to the breath and performing slow deep breaths can be powerful stress-relieving techniques for some people. For others it may induce more stress, especially when feeling breathless or when symptoms are quite severe. Always be sure to listen to your body and only perform breathing exercises in amounts that feel comfortable. See Breath Work topic for more.
- **Integrating mindfulness into daily activities:**  
Examples include mindfully eating, noticing the texture, the taste, the smell, etc., mindfully washing your face, brushing your hair, or putting on lotion.
- **Engage in other relaxing activities:**  
Listening to soothing music, spending time in nature, and other mindful exercises can promote relaxation. Make sure that these activities are within your energy envelope (see Pacing for more about your energy envelope).

## Take home messages

Recovering from Long COVID can be an uphill journey, and low mood can make it feel like you are carrying a heavy backpack on that journey.

Talking about what you are experiencing can be very helpful. It can help those close to you understand what you are going through and help you unpack that heavy backpack of items weighing you down. You might also want to share something positive that has happened in the day, or something you are grateful for. Reflecting on even very small or simple things we are grateful for each day can be a very effective way to improve your emotional and mental wellbeing.

Remember that seeking support from others is valuable during this time, and taking care of your emotional and mental wellbeing is just as crucial as managing physical symptoms.

## Where to next?

- Read the recommendation by CAN-PCC on:
  - [Cognitive Behavioural Therapy](#)
  - [Anxiety screening](#)
  - [Mindfulness, relaxation and breathing techniques](#)
- If you do not have a family doctor, try a walk-in clinic or call 8-1-1 to speak with a nurse any time of the day or night from anywhere in Canada (except in Manitoba, call 1-888-315-9257).
- Visit [healthexperiences.ca](https://healthexperiences.ca) and read or watch videos on the following topics.
  - [how mental health affected](#) people with Long COVID and how they received support.
  - [psychological impact of Long COVID](#)
  - [coping and self-care strategies after Long COVID](#).
- Try using [Insight Timer](#), a free app for guided relaxation and meditation.
- If you or your loved one is at risk of harming themselves or others, please speak with someone immediately.
  - Call 9-1-1 or go to the nearest emergency room if you are afraid of hurting yourself or someone else, or if no other options are available.
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