

LIGHTEN UP

Swine flu has finally reached our shores but there is no reason to panic. Persistent anxiety can adversely affect our immunity and cause us to be more vulnerable to disease, says Henry Lew, psychologist, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics.

Most of us are cautious to some extent, if not worried, about the possible spread of viruses and other bugs like the Swine flu or what is now known as the H1N1 virus. These reactions are understandable because the spread of the illness is uncertain.

Anxiety and worry about the virus and possible repercussions in our lives and our loved ones is our body's normal response to a perceived threat. It is a variety of biochemical changes related to our personal history, memory and social situation. However, persistent and/or intense anxiety can lower our immune response and cause us to be more susceptible to viruses, bacteria and other diseases. Hence, it is important that we manage our anxiety well to boost our immunity.

There are several steps that we can take to manage your anxiety to enhance our emotional and physical well being.

Taking perspective

Governmental preventive efforts often prepare for worst-case scenarios in order to protect the public and this could give us the impression that things are extremely serious.

Look at the facts

Gather information that will help you accurately determine your risk so that you can take reasonable precautions. Find a credible source you can trust such as news from the Ministry of Health. This is a rapidly evolving situation, so gather information at regular intervals in order to help you distinguish facts from rumours. Unsubstantiated rumours can be upsetting and may deter you from taking appropriate action.

Stay healthy

A healthy lifestyle — including proper diet, exercise and sleep — is your best defense against any disease threat. Adopting hygienic habits such as washing your hands regularly will also minimise your exposure to all types of germs and disease sources. A healthy body can have a positive impact on your thoughts and emotions, enabling you to make better decisions and deal with the flu's uncertainties.



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Build on your own strengths

Look back on skills you have used in the past that have helped you to manage anxieties successfully and use those skills to help you manage your emotions now.

Maintaining social networks

This can foster a sense of normalcy, and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. If officials have recommended limiting your social contact to contain an outbreak, you can stay connected via e-mail and telephone.

Seek additional help

If you have intense feelings of anxiety or hopelessness or are having trouble performing in your job or other daily activities, seek help from a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist, counsellor, social worker and psychologist. He or she can help you develop an appropriate strategy for moving forward.

References: American Psychological Association