

Crime: 10 ways to improve your mental health

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FULL TEXT

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In South Africa, rising crime rates can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and stress among individuals. Even just the fear of becoming a victim of crime can take a toll on mental health and well-being.

And where you live matters. The UK Centre for research on environment, society and health found residents of higher crime areas, even without direct experiences of crime, may be affected through increased fear and chronic stress, and through other responses such as lower engagement in physical and social activities in their communities. These can all contribute to mental health problems.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) agrees: exposure to such high levels of violence can lead to complex trauma and other psychological problems.

However, there are strategies and practices that can help you cope.

Educate yourself: Knowledge is power when it comes to managing anxiety related to crime. Stay informed about crime trends and statistics in your area, but be mindful of consuming excessive negative news which in itself can lead to a negative downward spiral. Understanding the reality of crime can help you take appropriate precautions and make informed decisions, while also avoiding unnecessary worry and fear.

Establish safety measures: Take proactive steps to enhance your personal safety and security. Install reliable home security systems, reinforce locks on doors and windows, and consider joining or forming a neighbourhood watch programme (see main story). By implementing practical safety measures, you can regain a sense of control and reduce anxiety about potential threats. Join your community in taking charge of the area in which you live. Become friends with your neighbours so you have each other's back.

Practise self-care: This is essential for maintaining mental well-being during times of heightened anxiety. Examples include eating healthy foods, not drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, staying away from drug use, exercising (even if it is just playing music you love and dancing), taking up a hobby, joining community activities, taking care of your spiritual life whether praying or meditating, and spending time with loved ones especially people who make you laugh. Make time for self-reflection and introspection to understand your emotions better and address any underlying fears or concerns. Writing can be an essential tool in understanding yourself and in healing. Journal your feelings daily.

Seek support: Talk to trusted friends, family members, or mental health professionals who can provide support. A mental health professional can offer guidance, empathy, and reassurance during challenging times. Consider joining support groups or online communities where you can connect with others facing similar anxieties. Facebook for instance has many support groups where you are even able to post your issues anonymously.

See a list below of free counselling services and hotlines.

Practice mindfulness: Cultivating mindfulness can help you manage anxiety related to crime by grounding you in the present moment. Engage in mindfulness techniques such as deep breathing exercises, meditation, or body movements found in tai chi, qi gong and walking, which can help reduce stress and increase your ability to cope with anxious thoughts. Focus on the present rather than letting worries about the future or issues of the past consume you.

Limit exposure to triggers: Constant exposure to news, social media, or discussions about crime can intensify anxiety. Set boundaries for yourself and limit your exposure to triggering content. Choose trusted sources of information and allocate specific times for news updates to prevent overwhelming yourself with constant negative input. Find alternate sources of content to uplift you. This can be reading uplifting literature, listening to upbeat music, watching comedies.

Engage in positive action: Taking positive action in your community can help alleviate feelings of helplessness and empower you to make a difference. Get involved in local initiatives that focus on crime prevention, community safety, or advocacy for change. Contributing to the well-being of your community can foster a sense of purpose and positively impact your mental health.

Seek professional help: If anxiety related to crime becomes overwhelming and begins to significantly impact your daily life, do not hesitate to seek professional help. A mental health professional can provide you with coping strategies, support, and guidance tailored to your specific needs. Therapy, counselling, or other forms of treatment can help you navigate your anxieties more effectively.

Practise gratitude: Try focus on the things you are thankful for. Some people get great benefit from a gratitude journal where you daily list the things you are thankful for. This has a profound effect on redirecting negative emotions and thoughts to more uplifting feelings.

Get into nature: It is not easy for everyone to access the outdoors or nature. However even putting your bare feet on soil or planting seeds and getting your hands full of earth has a way of alleviating stress and anxiety. Simply picking a flower and placing it in your home could be a way to connect with nature. Alternatively consider home plants. Gen Zers have found tending to plants to be akin to having a pet which had the ability to raise the feel-good oxytocin hormones. (And yes pets too can be a great ally in your fight to maintain good mental health.)

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