

Write a diary, take action: Hubei residents on fighting coronavirus anxiety

Coronavirus outbreak

As Covid-19 spreads worldwide, the people of Hubei explain how they dealt with the lockdown

In the centre of the coronavirus outbreak, where millions have been under lockdown for the last two months, Hubei residents have been coping with uncertainty, anxiety and stress.

As the virus spreads around the world, people living in the province spoke to the Guardian about how they coped with prolonged confinement, isolation and panic, and the strategies they used to protect their mental health.

Guo Jing, 29, Wuhan: ‘Make yourself a point of connection’

At the beginning, the decision to close the city was so sudden that everyone was at a loss. I only knew about it the next morning. There was no time to react, no option to leave. I was panicked and at a loss. I didn’t know when the lockdown would end, so went out to buy vegetables and see how the food supply was, which alleviated my anxiety to some extent.

Every day, I have tried to get up and exercise, cook and eat, write a diary and do some volunteer work. Taking action and doing things makes you feel better.

Everyone has been worrying and I have been restricting the time spent outside. I am isolated here. But human beings are social. So I have been going out every day to interview sanitation workers. I have asked them about their problems and working conditions. This connection

has been very real. Talking online to friends has also been a kind of mutual support.

There was also a sense of anxiety from not knowing when it would end. I have looked at the numbers every day.

It has also been very difficult to be locked in the community. It deprives you of some sense of control. Food has been bought by the residential community. I can't even control what I want to buy. It feels like I have had to rely on other people to live.

By writing a diary online, I have connected with other people. People have sent masks to me that I have donated to sanitation workers or to a hospital. [I recommend] making yourself a point of connection and forming a network to serve the needs of different groups.

It is very important to rebuild your daily life, to maintain social connection, to connect with friends and the people around you. If you can participate in some volunteer work this can alleviate the sense of powerlessness in the face of a huge disaster. Caring for others, seeing their needs and doing what you can to help, is also a way of helping yourself.

Chatting with my friends we have all commented on what a luxury it is to talk every day. We have shared what we have done every day. Some people have started to exercise while others have started studying. Some people who normally don't like to go out are now going out every day. It has felt precious.

Werther Huang, 22, Wuhan: 'Ask for help'

It's hard to describe. Never-ending anxiety and heart palpitations. Most recently, I haven't been able to concentrate on my work. I don't absorb what I'm reading. I'm constantly looking at Weibo to see the latest developments. Really, it just makes things worse, but I can't help it.

I have tried to shift my attention. I have played games online with my friends. When I need to work, I have used the time-management app, Forest. But when I look at the news again, all this effort is for nothing. If you feel stressed, you can communicate with your relatives and friends, or ask a psychologist for help. Take advantage of this time to care for yourself and your family.

Shen Miao, 30, Tianmen city, Hubei province:

‘I write I came home from Wuhan the day before the lockdown. Like most people, I didn’t know before that the epidemic was so serious. So when I went home, I was very worried I had been infected and afraid I would infect my family.

I sprayed alcohol all over my body. I consciously kept a distance with my family. After half a month of self isolation, nothing happened. Finally, the stone hanging in my heart was lifted. Seeing the messages online of people begging for help and unable to find a hospital bed was really hard for me. I felt like I couldn’t help. If I was in Wuhan maybe there would have been something I could have done. The more [messages] I saw, the guiltier I felt. As much as I could, I tried to forward on people’s requests for help online. Reading the news and these posts, I felt despair and like my heart could not bear that much.

I feel like I am a survivor. It’s a privilege to be healthy. I have read books, watched plays and movies. I have watched the news. I started writing a “lock down” diary, and plan to write until the end of the lockdown. I have written every day. Sometimes I just have just posted a picture. Several of my posts have been deleted but it has helped me. It has provided a channel for me to express emotions. Seeing other people reply has let me know that I am not alone. Everyone is in this situation. I am not special.

Hu, 22 Huanggang city, Hubei: ‘Talking with friends is really important’

I have documented what was happening through conversations with people or by going out. I have also volunteered in the hospitals. This has kept me busy, and allowed me to relax while also helping some of the rescue efforts. It has helped relieve some of the mental and emotional pressure.

Talking with friends is also really important. On the night of 6 February [when the Chinese doctor and whistleblower Li Wenliang died], I spent all night reading the news on Weibo and WeChat. Like me, my friends didn’t sleep. Every update someone saw, they would immediately share.

This was the hardest time for me. There’s no way to really deal with this except to remember it. Also, in late January when the outbreak first exploded ... seeing all the messages online of people asking for help and the huge gap between what was being reported in the news and what was really happening also caused a lot of mental pressure.

Additional reporting by Lillian Yang