

Practical Tips and Ideas

A self help guide to manage your mental wellbeing during Coronavirus

This resource has been designed to support the wellbeing of everyone with practical information, links and suggestions, allowing people to take some control back, develop self care methods and link in with a large selection of online resources. It's more important than ever before to take good care of ourselves physically, mentally and socially.



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Managing worrying and anxious thoughts

Right now it seems like there are so many things increasing worry and anxiety for the general population. Therefore, this time may be particularly hard for those already experiencing mental health problems. Following, are effective techniques to manage worry:



When there is a lot of change, uncertainty or something is occurring that is causing anxiety we can find ourselves having endless "what if" thoughts or assuming the worst. No matter how hard we try we don't seem to be able to make those thoughts stop. This is because our brains try to "fix" the problem by thinking about it, hence worrying.

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Managing worrying and anxious thoughts - continued:

However, many of the problems we are thinking about either can't be fixed because we have no control over them or, even if there are some practical solutions, these don't always come to us because our minds are going round in stressed circles. In the end we just over think and make ourselves feel very anxious.

The Worry Tree can be a very powerful tool to help distinguish between the problems we can control and those we can't.



Once you have identified a problem that you do have some control over then try to write a practical list of solutions. If you are worrying about things you have no control over i.e. whether you or someone you know will catch the virus then it can be helpful to try and let the worry go or distract yourself. Of course it's easier said than done to stop worrying (and trying to stop sometimes makes it worse!) but acknowledging that thinking about a problem all day won't make a difference can be a powerful first step. See our section on page 6 about mindfulness, with further techniques to help you let go of unhelpful thoughts.

Also, there may be some problems that at first you felt you had no control over, but in fact writing a list of some practical solutions might help to ease your anxiety. For example, are you worried about lack of items in the shop? Perhaps meal plan some recipes of more easily available ingredients to keep you going.

Worry time

It can also be helpful to designate yourself "worry time". If you are used to worrying as a way of coping then, when a worry pops up, write the worry down and tell yourself you will worry about that later. Set aside some time (30 mins at first) and pick up your list. You may find some of the things you were worried about do not seem as concerning now or have resolved themselves. If not, let yourself think about the problems for the designated time. Plan something relaxing and distracting to do after, such as a puzzle or your favourite TV programme. See if you can reduce the worry time a little every day although that's not essential.

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Challenge your thoughts

Often when we feel anxious, stressed or low about something it can be due to the way we are thinking about it. Obviously at the moment there are some real events going on in the world that are worrying for everyone. But we could also be making ourselves feel worse by how we are viewing the situation. Our thoughts affect our feelings and we can change how we feel by changing our thoughts.

For example, are you assuming the worst about the situation or jumping to conclusions? I.e. that you are bound to get seriously ill, probably lose your job and home or that there will be no food left. That's known as "catastrophizing" and can lead people to experience very anxious feelings.

It can help to write down the thoughts that are causing you the most worry and look at the likelihood of this happening and/or write a more positive and optimistic view. It can be helpful to do this after you have used some relaxation techniques (see P6 and P7) which may have calmed your mind.



Don't think too far ahead

If you are overwhelmed by your emotions and thinking the worst about everything remember that, although things might be very difficult for many people right now, this time will pass.

Can you think of a time when you have been in a difficult situation which really worried you at the time, yet now you look back things have turned out okay? Or can you just try to focus on getting through each day without getting caught up in how awful you expect things to be.

Some days may feel worse than others but if we don't get caught up in these feelings and allow them to come and go we may find we feel more positive the next day. Eventually daily life will return to normal for most people.

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Reduce access to information

We live in an age with limitless access to information via social media and other outlets. It's important to be informed but constantly checking your phone for more information about the virus can make your anxiety spiral.

Also, when we feel anxious we crave more information as a way of coping but it just makes it worse. On social media in particular, there is likely to be a lot of unreliable information which could have an unnecessarily negative impact on your mental health.

Notice if every time you go on social media you read something that makes you feel more anxious. If so try and stay away. Allow yourself time each day to update on the virus (e.g. 5pm news for example), use WhatsApp to keep in touch with your friends but avoid large amounts of time on social media if you can.

Managing anxiety and panic feelings

If you already experienced symptoms of anxiety or panic attacks (such as heart beating, breathlessness, feeling light headed, feeling of dread) these may have increased or you may be experiencing these symptoms for the first time.

Anxiety and panic can be very unpleasant but there are techniques that can help.

Panic attacks

The first step is understanding that these sensations are merely the body's natural reaction to feeling under threat which we have evolved with. It's known as "fight and flight" and would have helped us attack or run from danger in stone age times. It doesn't mean you are physically unwell or losing your mind.

Remind yourself that you are safe and not in immediate harm

Focus on your breath and slow your breathing down.

Try to breath out for longer than you breath in for example: Breath in for 5 secs and out for 7

Focus on some physical sensations in the immediate present. This can be your feet on the floor or back against the chair. These will calm your system down and send a signal to your mind that you are safe right now.

Find 4 things you can see, 3 you can hear and 3 you can feel. This can help to ground you and get some distance from panicky thoughts and feelings.



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General anxiety

If you are not quite having panic attacks, but still experiencing feelings of anxiety then being more aware of your breath and body so that you can slow your breathing or relax your muscles will help. It can be helpful to spend some time each day practicing relaxation techniques to help reduce your overall feelings of anxiety. More information can be found here. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress/>

Also, when we are feeling anxious we tend to want those feelings to go away. This can often increase them because we are fighting fear with more fear. In fact when we accept and are curious about our physical feelings they are more likely to reduce. For example, that feeling of dread you may be having. Where is it? Can you locate it in your body (i.e. your chest) can you sit with it for a bit? Is it as bad as you think? Can you explore the soft edges and be curious?



Mindfulness

Mindfulness can offer a really wide range of different techniques to help manage difficult times. It is now used in the NHS to help people with common mental health problems.

Here is a basic guide to some initial tips to get you started but there are more on page 10.

With mindfulness we are exercising the part of our brains that help us become present (rather than worrying about the future) and also choosing where we place our thoughts.

It involves focusing our attention on sensations in the present moment and using those as anchors to get distance from troubling thoughts.

Start small. Focus on some activities you do each day (like drinking a cup of tea or having a shower). Try to move your awareness to your senses rather than in your head. Notice how things taste or feel. When your mind wanders (which it will) just notice the thought and gently (and kindly) escort your thoughts back to the sensations.

It can also help to label your thoughts as they pop up. E.g. “a worrying thought” or a “future thought”. Remember you’re mind will keep wandering but it’s about bringing it back each time. Maybe start by spending about 5-10 minutes a day focusing on your body (body scan). or just being aware of your breath.

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Mindfulness continued:

Mindfulness can seem hard at first but gets easier with practice. Dedicating time each day as part of a self care routine to practice mindfulness can be a really good way of managing your mental health long term.

For more information:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/mindfulness/about-mindfulness/>

Accept and adapt

If you're facing real threats such as losing loved ones or income, then it's okay not to be okay. This time may pose real challenges to your mental health and it's important to seek emotional support you may need or just practical advice and information to feel better.

But, hopefully for most people, this time will result in either a minor illness and/or temporary, albeit major, disruption to daily life. Nobody wants to be in this situation at the moment, but it is what it is. Sometimes the more we fight a situation or wish it was different the worse we feel. If we practice accepting the challenges that come our way with faith that it will pass then we might be able to cope better and feel less anxious. Now is a time to try and be resourceful and adaptable. Can't find your usual items in the supermarket? Accept you will need to eat something different for a few days until they come back in. Used to seeing your friends every Friday? Set up some online socialising until things return to normal.

Look after your wellbeing

Of course our routines are very different at the moment and it can be easy to forget to look after yourself with so much going on, or with your usual habits and access to things not available. The 5 ways to wellbeing can still be a really good way to simply look after your mental health. Now more than ever is a good time for self-care:

1) **Connect.** Obviously lockdown is making this hard at the moment. Evidence shows the importance of talking and linking with others for good mental health, especially at times of stress. But if you have access to the internet then video face timing loved ones can be a good replacement. Or if not make sure you call people for a chat on a regular basis.



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Look after your wellbeing continued:

- 2) **Be active.** Again this may be limited at the moment, but many people can still leave their homes for exercise. To help with social distancing try to pick somewhere with a lot of space such as open countryside or parks. Maybe build a daily or weekly walk into a self-care routine. If you can't get outside to appropriate space there is plenty of exercise you can do indoors. From walking up and down the stairs to basic aerobic exercises. YouTube offers a variety of free clips or dig out old fitness DVDs.
- 3) **Give.** In moments of stress we may not always feel, or be able, to help others. However, many people have reported that acts of kindness have helped them feel more positive about the situation. If you are able, can you help out a neighbour? Or give to charity? Call an elderly relative to make sure they are connecting with people?
- 4) **Notice.** See previous section on mindfulness.
- 5) **Learn.** Evidence shows that continuing to grow and develop our skills and knowledge is great for our wellbeing. Learning a new language may not be at the forefront of your mind at the moment but something like that can help to distract you and also take up time if you are at home more than usual. Learning new recipes, how to grow your own veg, new children's craft activities will be particularly useful at the moment!



Other self care tips

Stay healthy. At times of stress it can be tempting to drink alcohol as a way of escaping and relaxing. But drinking heavily will greatly reduce your ability to cope as it increases the chemicals that cause depression and stress as well as disrupting our sleep and immunity. Trying to drink small amounts as a treat and having a few days break from alcohol is a good idea. Try to eat well too with fresh fruit, vegetables and plenty of water.

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/about-food-and-mood/>

Sleep. Disrupted sleep can be one of the biggest results of anxiety. Unfortunately the less we sleep the more anxious we can feel. Even though some of that is outside our control, there is a lot we can do to help us have a good night's sleep. Click below for more information on sleep. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/10-tips-to-beat-insomnia/>

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Get close to nature. Although staying indoors as much as possible is required at the moment, depriving yourself entirely of fresh air or nature can be bad for our wellbeing.

Walk in a quiet area, open your windows, use your garden or balcony as much as possible (if you have one), grow herbs, flowers or veg.

10 mins of walking can boost our wellbeing. 2 hours a week near nature can too.



Keep Busy. Rather than sitting around watching the news or looking at social media on your phone, make an effort to engage in activities that give you a boost. This can include stuff you enjoy such as films, hobbies, puzzles etc but also things that give you a sense of achievement. Are there tasks you've not been able to do for a while due to lack of time e.g. clearing clutter? DIY or decorating? (See P6 and 8 for learning new skills).

The principle of ACE has been shown to boost our wellbeing. Achievement, Closeness, Enjoyment. Try to incorporate A.C.E. daily or weekly.

Have a structure. Without our daily routines to keep us going it can be easy to become inactive which can have a negative effect on our mood. The lower our mood, the less we want to do, so this becomes a vicious cycle. Having a loose plan for how you want to spend your day will help. Click below for fantastic activity scheduling suggestions and principles.

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/headroom/cbt/activity_scheduling.pdf

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More self-help resources and exercises

Online support groups

[http://www.sane.org.uk/what we do/support/supportforum](http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/supportforum)

<https://www.elefriends.org.uk/>

Online resources including guided self help courses

Every Mind Matters

<https://littf.com>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus>



Wellbeing/Therapeutic Vlogs or webinars etc

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/infinitemindfulness>

<https://soundcloud.com/infinitemindfulness/sets/infinite-mindfulness-free/s-klmKiiW4CBM>

APPS for mobile devices

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

Further sources of help - Emotional support

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>

[http://www.sane.org.uk/what we do/support/helpline](http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/helpline)

To be referred for more support contact your GP or local mental health charity/IAPT service (although be aware that some services have closed or may not be offering face to face sessions but should be able to provide you with access to an online support programme).

If you feel your mental health is so severely affected by the situation and you are at risk of harming or ending your life call 999 or see the following for information about managing suicidal thoughts.

<https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-mental-illness/learn-more-about-symptoms/suicidal-thoughts-how-to-cope/>

Local support for Coronavirus outbreak: Oldham: 0161 770 7007

Tameside and Glossop: 0161 342 8355