

Managing Anxiety around COVID-19

It is highly likely that everyone is experiencing increased levels of anxiety at this time. This is an understandable reaction in the face of the current COVID-19 outbreak. It is therefore important that everyone dedicates some time to thinking about how they are going to look after their mental health during the challenging months ahead. We have compiled the following ideas to help and encourage you to make a plan around managing your anxiety.

1. Know yourself

Understanding and managing your anxiety requires a bit of effort. Due to the constant stream of news, social media and panic all around us, it may be difficult to unpick or express our main concerns. Stop and ask yourself: 'What am I most worried about?', 'On a scale from 1-100, how worried am I?' and 'Where in my body am I feeling this anxiety?' Avoiding thinking about worries is not an effective long term plan. Acknowledging and sharing (or writing down) worries, in a quieter moment, can help to reduce stress.

2. Do what works for you

Although we are dealing with an unprecedented situation, this will not be the first time that you have had to employ coping strategies to manage stress. Focus on what strategies have worked well for you in the past and make efforts to use them. This might include doing more of some things and less of others:

DO MORE OF:

- **Using your coping strategies**

These may include exercising, reading, taking long baths, yoga, mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing, being creative, watching TV or anything which you enjoy or that relaxes you.

- **Connecting with others**

Talk to people (possibly using video calls) who you trust and find calming and share your experiences with them; Also make an effort to talk about anything other than COVID-19.

- **Using distraction**

If there are no practical steps you can take to alleviate your fears then they fall into the category of 'unhelpful worries'. To avoid getting stuck in harmful rumination, use distraction techniques. These may include simple mind games like remembering the lyrics to a song, reciting the times tables or counting your breaths (see below exercise). Otherwise you can try to immerse yourself in any activity.

- **Focusing on what you CAN control**

Feeling out of control can increase anxiety so instead focus on what you can do, e.g. protecting yourself and others (washing hands, not touching your face, etc.); staying nourished and hydrated; resting; doing physical activity; taking 'head-breaks' from COVID-19 by doing something enjoyable/distracting, like the activities mentioned above.

DO LESS OF:

- **Overdosing on hype and misinformation**
Checking news and social media can cause short term relief but will cause longer term anxiety. Restrict yourself to checking maybe once or twice a day and only use reliable sources. Don't check before bed!
- **Self-criticising your own responses or emotions**
Feeling anxious is not a sign of weakness. It is okay not to be okay, so don't shame yourself on how you feel. Recognising and expressing what you're feeling can reduce stress.
- **Feeding other people's anxieties**
Be conscious of using dramatic language or sharing rumours or misinformation that could create panic in others.
- **Engaging in anxiety provoking conversations**
Give yourself permission to limit or stop any unnecessary discussions which are making you uncomfortable. You could try saying something like "I can't talk about this right now".
- **Using unhelpful coping strategies**
Avoid turning to tobacco, alcohol and/or drugs, which will cause longer term damage.

3. Managing heightened anxiety

If you are feeling particularly overwhelmed or panicked then you can use the following technique to calm your body and re-engage your frontal lobe, to think more clearly.

STOP, DROP AND BREATHE

- When you realise your anxiety is growing, **STOP**. Move to a quiet area and away from immediate stressors, if possible.
- **DROP** your attention to your feet. This is called a 'grounding technique' and it is a way of anchoring yourself in the present moment. Feel the ground beneath your feet and focus there for a moment.
- **BREATHE** – Visualise your breath travelling along a square. Inhale up the first side of the square whilst slowly counting one, two, three. Hold your breath along the top for the count of three. Then exhale down the other side of the square, counting slowly to three. And finally hold your breath along the bottom for three. Repeat this for a few minutes.

For further information see:

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing

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