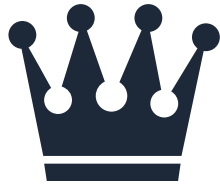




Keeping mentally healthy

A toolkit for supporting your mental wellbeing during the coronavirus outbreak



**KEEP
CALM**

AND

**USE OUR
TOOLKIT**

Introduction



These are unprecedented times. The impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) public health crisis cannot be underestimated. Yet while we try and find a way to keep going amidst all the uncertainty, fear and change, there are things we can do to manage and cope.

This toolkit is designed to provide you with information, tools and techniques to help you keep mentally healthy at this difficult time. If you have an ongoing struggle with your mental health, this might seem a near impossible task. However, all of the things we suggest are small changes which when added together can make a big difference. Try what you can.

Managing the ‘unknown’

Sudden, unexpected, and distressing events such as the COVID-19 public health crisis can have a dramatic impact on our mental wellbeing. Most of us lead regulated and organised lives, with routines and habits that create a sense of order and ‘normal’. These can lead to an experience of predictability and safety that allows us to function in everyday tasks. However, when our lives are disrupted by a distressing or threatening event (or series of events) that challenges this state of affairs, our inherent sense of being ‘safe’ can be ruptured, resulting in a range of emotional and behavioural reactions. Such reactions may include:

- Extreme anxiety, worrying and panic (about COVID-19 or anything else)
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Hyper-vigilance – not being able to switch off and feeling in ‘danger’
- Anger, frustration, and conflict
- Social withdrawal and avoiding contact with others
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Plus a range of many other emotional and behavioural responses that may be specific to you.

For those people who experience (or may have experienced in the past) any kind of difficulties relating to mental health, these reactions may be magnified and added to in very significant ways. For some, the current situation may feel almost unmanageable and hard to bear. However, there are some small and simple things that can be done to help, even in the most difficult of circumstances. We call this our basic toolkit.

The ‘basic’ toolkit

We have put together this basic toolkit to help us all manage the impact of the COVID-19 public health crisis. It comprises tried and tested techniques used by psychologists to promote mental health and wellbeing in a range of ways. You are free to use the toolkit in whatever way works best for you – some people find different tools more helpful than others. However, in combination, all of these elements work together, so please do try to implement as many as you can.

The fundamental idea behind the toolkit is that we, as human beings, have the ability and resources to adapt to different circumstances as they arise. However, this is not necessarily something we do automatically – particularly when faced with new and distressing events that we haven’t come across before. Hence it can be quite useful to implement a range of strategies to help us get back to our ‘normal’ as much as possible.

“As human beings, we have the ability and resources to adapt to different circumstances as they arise.”

Tool 1 – Keep calm

Whenever we encounter an event or situation that we perceive as threatening to us in any way, it triggers our biological/bodily response to danger. This is commonly known as the 'fight or flight response', and is our body's way of keeping us safe by providing us with the energy and resources necessary to either 'run away' (flight) from the perceived danger, or confront it and fight it off.

These responses are physical. Our body releases a chemical called 'cortisol' which produces adrenaline, energises our muscles, makes us physically and mentally hyper-alert, minimises unnecessary bodily activity (e.g. digestion), and so on. It is this bodily response that we often will associate with feeling very stressed or anxious. It can be extremely difficult if we experience it in high degrees or for a long period. When experiencing high degrees or prolonged periods of stress, keeping calm can be incredibly difficult, and we may find ourselves in a vicious circle, whereby we worry and focus on the threats we perceive which causes the body to make more cortisol and so on. This can make us feel very unwell, out of control and, for some, extremely panicky.

Learning ways to keep ourselves calm and manage our physical response to the COVID-19 public health crisis is a vital step in supporting and maintaining our mental health in the present circumstances. This may not be easy, particularly for people who experience anxiety and worry more generally. However there are some key techniques that can be helpful, all of which are designed to help your body produce less cortisol. This then starts a positive spiral involving increasing feelings of calm, relaxation and being in control.



Technique 1 - Avoid TV and media stressors

One of the most crucial ways to help ourselves feel calm is to avoid situations and circumstances that bring about anxiety and stress (i.e. circumstances that make us feel 'endangered' or threatened). In the current COVID-19 public health crisis, such stressors are everywhere and there are so many different strands and elements that may worry us or make us feel unsafe.

If we are exposed to such stressors to a significant degree, we can become saturated and overwhelmed, making it difficult for us to feel calm and not panic. It is essential to be very careful about the degree of engagement we allow ourselves to have with TV and media coverage – despite how tempting this may be. Try to set some ground rules for yourself around how much exposure you have to TV and media coverage of COVID-19 (for example 30 minutes in the morning, and the same again late afternoon), and stick to these if possible. This will provide you with a bit of breathing space, and allow you to switch off, both mentally and physically, from what is going on around you for some periods of the day.

Technique 2 – Distraction

Another technique that can be useful for anyone experiencing anxiety is distraction. Often, when we perceive a situation as dangerous, we have a tendency to focus our attention on it. We think about it, read about it, talk about it, and so on. Although this is a natural response (we don't take our eyes off the lion that may be about to come into our cave...!), it often makes things worse.

So when you find yourself feeling anxious or stressed about COVID-19, or any aspects linked to it, distract yourself by doing one of the following:

Longer distractions (use regularly to help you become more relaxed and to 'switch off')

Put on a comedy or other 'light' television programme that you enjoy.

Try and find something absorbing and if you drift away into worrying, try and refocus.

Do a task or an activity that will force you to focus – this should be something you find interesting and engaging.

Set aside an hour to undertake a household task, such as ironing, and focus on doing this as perfectly as you can.

Call a friend or family member to find out how they are getting on. Pick someone you enjoy speaking to, and who is unlikely to want to spend the time talking about worries.

Shorter distractions (use when you are preoccupied and anxious and don't know how to stop worrying)

Stand up and walk on the spot for 30 seconds, focusing on particular spot in the room and describe it to yourself in words

Take three deep breaths, counting three seconds in and three seconds out. While doing this, try and feel the sensation of your breath on tip of your nose, and feel the coolness of the air as you inhale and the warmth as you exhale.

Read the first three paragraphs of a book you enjoy from your bookshelf, or magazine article (please do not go online!)



Distraction: *Call a friend or family member to find out how they are getting on*

Technique 2 – Formal relaxation

We have to teach our bodies to calm down and produce less cortisol, and we can only do so by helping ourselves relax. This can be very difficult when we are feeling extremely anxious, and we can be very easily put off by setting ourselves relaxation or mindless tasks that are too much to manage. So start small, and build up – even doing these for a couple of minutes a few times a day will help.

Relaxation technique 1: Counting ten breaths back

Allow yourself to feel passive and indifferent, counting each breath slowly from 10 to one. With each count, allow yourself to feel heavier and more relaxed. And with each exhale, allow the tension to leave your body.

Relaxation technique 2: Whole body tension

Tense everything in your whole body, stay with that tension. Hold it for as long as you can without feeling pain. Slowly release the tension and, very gradually, feel it leave your body. Repeat three times.

Relaxation technique 3: Imagine air as a cloud

Open your imagination and focus on your breathing. As your breathing becomes calm and regular, imagine that the air comes to you as a cloud. It fills you and goes out. You may imagine what the cloud looks like, its colour, how it moves.

Relaxation technique 4: Mini vacation

With eyes closed, visit a favourite peaceful spot in your imagination, maybe a happy memory from the past. Notice all the enjoyable sights, sounds, and sensations. With each breath allow yourself to feel heavier and more relaxed. It fills you and goes out. You may imagine what the cloud looks like, its colour, how it moves.



There may also be less formal ways of relaxing that you know work for you. Use these too, and do so in a systematic and planned way. Some examples of things that might help you relax are as follows:

- Having a hot bath (you may have candles or other calming objects that can help too)
- Using a guided meditation or relaxation sound track with the lights dimmed and your eyes closed
- Playing video games
- Listening to music that you enjoy

Use your relaxation techniques in a structured and systematic way every day, setting aside time to do the things that you know work for you to help you relax. Even if they don't make you feel better, keep doing them, as you need to teach yourself to calm down. This can take a while, so perseverance is crucial.

Technique 3 – Mindfulness

Lots of people find the ideas and practices associated with mindfulness incredibly helpful for introducing a feeling of calm. They don't work for everyone and certain techniques may be easier or more difficult than others. However, they have been proven over time to be very helpful for lots of people in managing anxious feelings. Try one or both of the following, and if you find either helpful, try to do them a couple of times a day, for about five minutes. It would be helpful to set a short timer on your phone so you don't have to worry about when to stop.



Mindfulness: Spend some time really looking at what you see in front of you

Exercise 1: Find a comfortable place to sit and place your hands open-palmed on your lap facing upwards. Start breathing through your nose, and pay attention to what you feel when you do so. Try and feel the sensation of your breath on the tip of your nose as you breathe in and breathe out, slowly. Your mind will wander and start thinking about other things, and when it does, simply bring your attention back to the feeling on the tip of your nose as you breathe in and out.

Exercise 2: Sit in a comfortable place, by a window where you can see out. Spend some time really looking at what you see in front of you, the colours, the shapes, the movements. Really try and focus on the detail that you see. Appreciate the curve of a car roof, the shape of a puddle, or the colour of a building. Spend time focusing on each aspect that you notice, bringing your attention back to what you are seeing when your mind starts to wander. Don't dwell on thinking about anything, just notice what you are seeing as if looking at a painting in all its detail.

Tool 2 – Think flexibly

In the current circumstances, many of us will find it very difficult not to worry or to have a strong emotional response (e.g. feel despairing, low, helpless) to the many challenges we see both now and in the future. Fundamental to our emotional response to the current COVID-19 public health crisis is how we think about what is happening.

We can very easily inhabit ways of thinking and perceiving the situation that are unhelpful to us. For example, we may over-focus on the negatives, perhaps spending our time thinking about worst imaginable scenarios rather than the range of scenarios or outcomes that are possible. We may also have a tendency to jump to conclusions that support our own beliefs, rather than looking at the evidence and thinking things through with a clear head (this is incredibly difficult when we are feeling upset, anxious or low).

It is vital for us to take a flexible and evidence-led approach to interpreting what is happening, and arriving at a balanced and reasoned perspective on any aspect of the situation we are responding to. This is something we don't often do, because we often tend to think in habitual ways that can be inflexible, generalising and overly-negative. However, to help us manage our emotional response to the current COVID-19 public health crisis, having flexible and evidence-based thinking habits is important.



The 'best friend' approach:
Imagine describing your perceptions and beliefs to another person

The 'best friend' approach

One way of helping yourself develop flexible, evidence-based thinking is to imagine yourself describing your perceptions and beliefs to another person, who is an (imaginary) best friend. They don't agree with you, and always help you look at things in a different way by pointing out the other side of the story, highlighting other viewpoints and perceptions, challenging assumptions that you are making and so on.

Spend five minutes playing the role of your 'best friend', thinking through what they would say to someone with your viewpoints, and challenging them. Be creative and innovative – sometimes it may be helpful to write things down. The point of this process is to help you recognise that your way of thinking is not always right and there may be alternative perspectives. This helps you look at other ideas and develop a more flexible, evidence-led approach.

Other resources

There are a huge number of resources online to help you understand the different of thinking patterns that may be encouraging inflexible or unhelpful beliefs. Have a look online for cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) resources and find those which work for you.

Tool 3 – Cultivate predictability and routine

The COVID-19 public health crisis has ruptured so much of what we know as 'normal'. Many activities and habits we undertook on a daily basis are no longer possible, which adds very significantly to our experience of anxiety and distress. Predictability and routine are a fundamental part of what makes us feel safe and sound in the world. When this is disrupted, it can have a very significant impact in a range of ways. We have the ability to recognise this and adapt our circumstances to what we face at any given time. However this requires some thought and planning, recalibrating the present circumstances and situation to our needs as they stand at the moment. Creating a new 'normal' for ourselves is essential – even more so if we're used to a structured day involving mealtimes, travelling to and from work, bedtimes and so on.



DAILY LIFE

Some tips

Start off by identifying all the things you need to do and want to do in the day, and as far as possible develop an hour-by-hour plan as to when these will happen. Write this plan down, and put it in a prominent position so you can easily check what you had planned for a given time.

- Try and stick to the structure of your previous routine as far as possible – get up at the same time, go to bed at the same time, and replace specific activities you cannot do with those that you can.
- Use alternative and specified activities to replace things that aren't possible. For example, you may choose to watch a 30 minute TV programme instead of travelling to work.
- Don't drift into doing things you hadn't planned, as that can put you under pressure later.
- Stick to the same routine for all weekdays wherever possible. Consistency and predictability are the key things to have in place.
- Follow the routine you have set yourself even if you don't feel like it – your mood and feelings will eventually catch up if you provide a framework for your day-to-day life. This is a fundamental principle of much behavioural psychology, and it works!
- Create a routine for everyone in the household if necessary – it's impossible to stick to your routine if nobody else knows what they are doing.
- And finally, be realistic – inevitably things may crop up and you may need to juggle, however try to get back to your new routine as best you can, when you can.

Tool 4 – Sleep well

A common challenge in keeping ourselves mentally healthy is sleeping well. When we are anxious or worried about anything, our sleep may be disrupted and we can be awake for some or much of the night. This is often made worse by our use of coping strategies such as alcohol or social media late at night, with the effect of disrupting our sleep patterns still further. Becoming over-tired as a result of not sleeping has many difficulties, and can become a vicious circle as our wake/rest cycle is disrupted. This can result in range of difficulties such as problems concentrating during the day, a lack of energy, and feeling the need to take naps at unfamiliar times, all of which can disrupt our routine still further.

It is also important to recognise that having too much sleep is also a problem, and can result in the same symptoms that we would experience with too little sleep! It is therefore important to find the right amount of sleep for you (this will generally be between seven and nine hours, although people do vary).

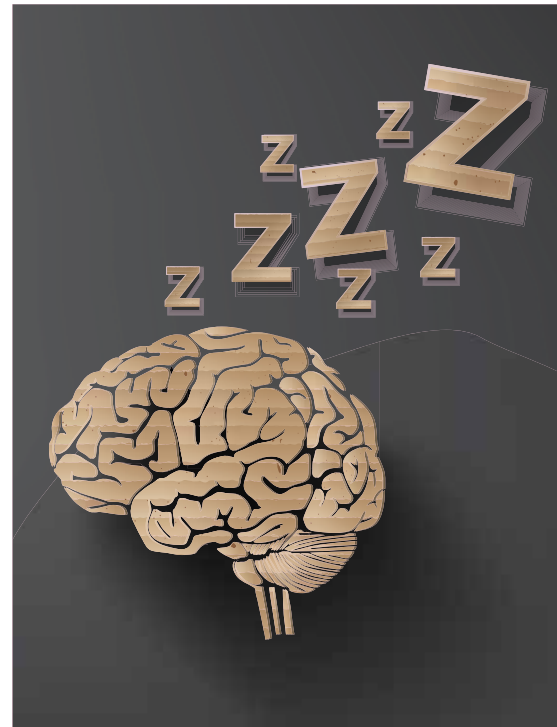
Normally, people fall into one of two categories: night owls (who tend to feel more energised in the evening but prefer sleeping later in the morning), or early birds (more energised in the morning but become tired earlier in the evening). The challenge with couples is that sometimes night owls and early birds can be combined, so one partner may prefer getting up early and the other going to bed later. This can cause a number of problems and can be at the root of sleep disturbance for both parties as they wake each other either going to bed later or getting up earlier than the other.

Psychologists often highlight the importance of good sleep 'hygiene' in promoting good mental health, and a key tool in managing ourselves during the current COVID-19 public health crisis is to ensure, as far as possible, that we are sleeping well.

How to sleep well

Be clear in your own mind how much sleep you should ideally have each night, you can identify this when you have felt well and alert in the past. Be clear in your own mind if you are a night owl or an early bird, and identify the ideal time for you to go to sleep each night (our biorhythms work as a cycle, so there will be periods in the night when you will naturally feel tired and others when you will feel more alert).

Identify a target time to go to sleep each night, which should be when you feel tired and ready to sleep. Structure your routine around this target time and discuss with your partner how you can achieve it - you may need to be creative if you both have very different target bedtimes!



Practise good sleep hygiene – have a clear wind down routine prior to going to bed. Ensure the bedroom is cool and your bed space is set up in a way that you can associate with sleep. Do not use phones or laptops or other electronic devices when in bed (some sleep professionals even advise against reading in bed). Cultivating a positive association between sleep and your bed space is vital. Ensure the bed space is dark enough for you to get to sleep.

Some people find external noise very distracting. If you are affected in this way, buy a white noise machine which you can turn on to produce low-level distraction. These can be very effective.

Do not worry about not sleeping – your body will get the rest it needs for your survival and at some point you will drop off. Often we are asleep and we don't realise it.

Do not lie in bed if you cannot sleep. Get up after 20 minutes or so of trying to get to sleep, and go elsewhere in the house to undertake a restful activity. When you begin to feel tired return to bed and repeat the above processes. This maintains the positive association between your bed and sleep, rather than supporting a mental link between sleeplessness and the bedroom. Wherever possible, try to stick to a consistent sleep routine – with getting up and going to bed times remaining fairly constant. Although practically it is not always easy to achieve, sleep professionals would generally advise the same bedtimes for weekends and weekdays.

“Wherever possible, try to stick to a consistent sleep routine”

Tool 5 – Cultivate positive habits, minimise unhelpful habits

We all have good habits and bad habits, which we fall into to various degrees that often link to how we are feeling and the activities we are undertaking. Like so many things, the habits we have often form themselves into spirals or cycles, so that when we are feeling good we will tend to do the things that will maintain this.

Equally, when we are feeling anxious or low, we may well look after ourselves less well and do the things that ultimately may be less helpful to our well-being. Typical examples may include working too much, drinking too much alcohol, not doing exercise, staying up too late and of course many others. Doing less helpful things makes us feel less well, and often guilty and a little less in control of our lives, stimulating a lowered mood, heightened anxiety and so on. Once on a spiral such as this, it can be incredibly difficult to break, however there are things you can do to make big changes over time and cultivate a more positive, less unhelpful lifestyle to promote mental wellbeing.



Activity: Write a list of things that you do that you associate with feeling good, such as, exercise, eating healthily, reading books, etc. Try and get at least ten things on this list, not just one or two. Once you have written it, have a look and set yourself the objective of doing one different thing from the list once each day for the next week. So you might have one healthy meal one day, spend an hour reading a book the next, go for a 30 minute walk the next and so on. Don't try and do too much, or put yourself under pressure. It doesn't matter how big or small the activity, it's doing it that counts. Then do the same again the following week, and again the week after. You will find, quite quickly, that the things begin to build into a more positive routine and you will start wanting to do them because they will make you feel good. Keep a list of your accomplishments, and congratulate yourself on what you've accomplished each day. If you don't manage to do anything on one or more days, that's fine. Don't try catching up. Just start again the following day by doing one thing from your list.

Minimising unhelpful behaviours

We all do things that are unhelpful to our mental and physical health to a greater or lesser degree. We usually know what they are, but often feel unable to stop ourselves doing them. In times of uncertainty and anxiety, such as now, it's entirely normal for our unhelpful behaviours to become more difficult to resist. Indeed we often enter into a fight with

ourselves around these that can itself be quite destructive. Unless an unhelpful behaviour is something you know you should not be doing in any circumstances (and if it is, it is important to seek urgent and specialist help), it is often better to think about how to manage and minimise our bad habits rather than stop them. This is often easier to do, as you are more in control and can set smaller goals that are more realistically achieved. Even small successes will feel good and generate a sense of control and empowerment, which in turn helps you move into a more positive frame of mind.

“Small successes will feel good and generate a sense of control and empowerment”

Some common ways of managing unhelpful behaviours

- Set some rules for yourself around what you're prepared to accept and not accept – for instance, how many drinks you are prepared to allow yourself to have? Clarity is crucial, as is planning. Don't set yourself up to fail by opening a second bottle for half a glass.
- Set small goals to reduce the impact of unhelpful habits, such as reducing by five minutes each day the amount of time spent doing something that does not support your wellbeing.
- Ask for support from those around you – enlist friends and families in encouraging you to do unhealthy things less regularly.
- Identify the specific circumstances or 'triggers' that seem to coincide with unhelpful behaviours and avoid or amend these when you can. For example, change your evening routine to have a hot shower before cooking a meal, which is when you might normally have a drink.

Tool 6 – Get outside

There has been a huge amount of research to show that being outside, ideally doing some form of exercise, can offer a very significant boost to our mental and physical health.

Not only does sunlight (even if shielded by clouds) help our bodies keep well, it improves our mood and helps maintain our mental equilibrium. Being outside also has the added bonus of fresh air and movement through different environments, which can break up the day and help us feel invigorated.

Ideally, and if at all possible being outside in a more natural environment is best, as nature itself can prove an extremely positive influence in helping us feel connected and calm. This does not necessarily need to be far away, even a park or riverside offers us huge opportunities to feel more relaxed.

Try and get outside every day, for a minimum of 30 minutes, ideally in the morning or before lunch. If you are able to exercise outdoors, that is even better, as the combination will support your wellbeing to the maximum extent.

Benefiting from the outdoors if you can't go outside

Even if it is not possible for you to get outside in itself, you can still get the positive effects from nature while staying indoors at home. You could try the following:

- Spend time with the windows open to let in fresh air.
- Have flowers or potted plants in your home.
- Listen to natural sounds, like recordings or apps that play birdsong, ocean waves or rainfall.
- Get as much natural light as you can.
- Spend time in your garden if you have one or open your front or back door and sit on the doorstep.



Benefit from nature: *Spend time in your garden, if you have one*

Tool 7 – Connect with others

Human beings are social animals, and contact with other people is often a fundamental part of feeling well and for maintaining positive mental health. In the current COVID-19 public health crisis, we are unable to maintain our face-to-face connections and contacts with others which has the potential to significantly impair our wellbeing.

Although it may feel very difficult, it is vital that you find ways to have contact with other people every day. You may have to be quite proactive to make this happen, and use technologies or other mechanisms that may feel uncomfortable, strange or new. However, there is a lot of support and guidance available, and ultimately there is always the telephone if you feel unable to get online.

Some tips to help you remain connected to others

- Make a list of all the colleagues at work that you feel comfortable with, and send an email to a different one every working day to see how they are getting on in the current circumstances. Just 'check in' to say hello – and see what happens!
- Have an online coffee break or drink with a friend, where you agree a set time and catch up using some form of online technology to see each other. Once you have done this a few times, it will feel very comfortable and normal.
- Set yourself a goal of making social contact with a friend or family member most days if you can – either through email, phone or online. This is particularly important if your living and/or working arrangements are quite isolated. Draw up a list and go through it systematically. If you have a small network, use it as best you can. Even contact once a week with a friend or family member will be uplifting and helpful.
- Take advantage of any connections/opportunities to meet online or by telephone with colleagues – such as remote meetings.
- Engage with others through discussion forums, online groups, webinars, training seminars and so on. Contact and connection with people you don't know but who have shared interests and viewpoints can feel very enjoyable and create an experience of community which can be incredibly important.

To some people, connection with other humans is incredibly difficult. Many of us like to withdraw when we feel emotionally distressed, anxious or low, and some of us simply have a small network of friends and family to make use of in times of difficulty. If you are someone who finds it easier to make contact and connect, it is important to use these skills during the COVID-19 public health crisis to help others by 'reaching out'. It can make the world of difference to someone to receive an email, call or message from someone else enquiring how they are!



Remain connected: *Have an online coffee break with a friend*

Tool 8 – Be kind to yourself

Unfortunately, human beings have a very strong tendency to be very unkind to themselves! We place huge demands and pressures on ourselves, have unreasonably high expectations for what we should be achieving, are very judgemental and self-denigrating of who we are and how we look, and think about ourselves in a way that we would never, in a million years, think about anybody else.

In times like these, with so many pressures and stresses arising from the COVID-19 public health crisis, it is vital that we develop a compassionate, kind approach to ourselves – appreciating who we are and what we do, and being forgiving and understanding of ourselves for doing the best we can in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

One way of helping ourselves develop self-compassion, is to recognise our ‘inner critic’ – the part of our personality that is constantly criticising us and what we do. It could be helpful to perhaps have a picture or words to associate with this critic, and begin to recognise the ways they influence us, the language they use, when they are critical and when not, and how they make us feel. In doing this we can begin to ‘talk back’, by consciously and deliberately using kinder, more supportive, appreciative, and gentle feedback in the situations that the critic has traditionally dominated.

Develop an ‘inner nurturer’ whose role it is to offer appreciative, kind, valuing, and supportive language. Cultivate this part of your personality to help you feel more positive and balanced in thinking about yourself.



Things you can do to learn to be kinder to yourself

- **Keep a journal or write a list of things that you do well, or have accomplished** – even small things, like doing something you find difficult, overcoming challenges, etc. Contributing to and reading this regularly will help you feel more appreciative of yourself and who you are.
- **Be forgiving** – allow yourself to make mistakes, get things wrong, behave badly and forgive yourself for doing so. Accept that you are a fallible human being. Commit to working hard to ensure you do your best to be the person you want to be – that’s all you can ask of yourself.
- **Act in a kind way towards yourself** – treat yourself in the way that you would treat someone you care about. Help yourself do things you enjoy, don’t punish yourself in terms of unreasonable or exacting standards, be upbeat and encouraging, and give yourself a pat on the back.

Tool 9 – Develop a being at home/remote working plan

One of the key elements in tackling the COVID-19 health crisis is ensuring minimal contact between people. This has involved the closure of multiple workplaces, self-isolation of those who suspect they may be unwell and a general policy of social distancing. One consequence of this is a very significant increase in the amount of time we all spend at home. This has many pitfalls and challenges, as many of us are not accustomed to spending so much time where we live, and having so much contact with those with whom we live. It is vital to think through the logistics and challenges and develop a being at home/remote working plan to ensure as easy an adaption to this new way of living as possible. Every member of your household should be involved in such a plan, and you should work on this collaboratively to ensure you understand and meet each other's needs wherever possible. Your being at home/remote working plan should include the following:

- **Physical space** – it is essential to create sufficient physical space to do the things you need to while at home, particularly if you are remote working. Consider how you may best use the physical space in your house so that everyone has an appropriate personal space for their needs, particularly for work if necessary. This may be challenging and require some creativity but it will usually be possible to find a way that works for everyone, with some compromises involved.
- **Self-time** – everyone needs some time by themselves. Consider how much time you personally need each day by yourself (1 hour, hours?), and discuss this with your household to determine rules around when you are 'unavailable' – and in most circumstances should not be disturbed. Create specific systems around this if you need them.
- **Noise** – stipulate some quiet time and noisy time in your daily routine, so you can work together without disruption whenever possible.
- **Communication** – it is absolutely inevitable that being at home in a busy household, even with a plan, will require ongoing communication and discussion to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings. It may be worth developing a system around this, for example, each day spending 15 minutes with everyone reviewing how things are working in practice.
- **Coping** – there will inevitably be times when being at home more will create stresses and strains or highlight longer standing conflicts and challenges in the household. It is important to think through how you may cope with these and identify a way of managing things for yourself and ideally with those around you. Common strategies might include going out for a walk, agreeing a time to discuss things when emotions are less heated, using different physical spaces for calming things down, etc.
- If living by yourself, have a clear routine and structure involving connection with others, work, and relaxation every day. There are undoubtedly a different set of challenges in being at home by yourself. These are equally difficult to manage and require thought and planning.



Tool 10 – Seek support when you need it

The final tool in the toolkit relates to the important role of support, particularly for those who may be experiencing significant difficulty or distress during the COVID-19 public health crisis. Support is available in a whole range of ways to help you stay mentally healthy or manage your mental health in times of difficulty. It is vital that you make use of this, if you feel at any point that you are finding it difficult to cope in anyway. Seeking support can be difficult as it can feel that we are failing to manage things by ourselves. However, speaking to another person, by email, online, by telephone or face-to-face is often the turning point towards making things better, and in certain situations, is the most important tool of all. For those working in the psychology and mental health fields, seeking support is invariably regarded as an act of bravery and courage. So if the situation you are in at any point during this COVID-19 public health crisis feels overwhelming, unmanageable or hopeless, it is vital to be brave and seek help.

“Support is available in a whole range of ways to help you stay mentally healthy”

Some tips for those with ongoing mental health difficulties

The current COVID-19 public health crisis places huge pressure on people with existing mental health difficulties, which in themselves, are challenging enough. If at all possible, anyone in this situation should try to maintain any therapeutic or ongoing support, and to maintain progress wherever this is manageable. However, the following sections provide some brief tips for some common difficulties that may be impacted significantly at the current time.

Anxiety/health anxiety/OCD

The threat of COVID-19 is scary, but the panic buying of hand sanitiser and suspicion towards anyone with a cough can seem small in comparison to the effects of this current situation on those with anxiety-related difficulties.

The threat of COVID-19 affects people experiencing anxiety/health anxiety or OCD harder because it is an unknown threat which taps into some of our deepest anxieties about our health, wellbeing and overall safety. Similarly, extreme measures to contain the virus can create a climate of suspicion and hyper-vigilant behaviours which are already heightened in those of us with worries. The relentless coverage in the media is unlikely to help. However, if you are struggling during the COVID-19 public health crisis, there are some steps you can take.

Reduce your focus on health symptoms - let go of worrying about your health and get your attention back to the here and now. This can be done by sustaining attention when engaged in everyday tasks (such as doing the dishes) as this is often when our minds wander! or by practising mindfulness or relaxation skills.

“Look after yourself with a daily routine that involves good self-care”

Look at the evidence – People with anxiety tend to overestimate the likelihood that they have or will develop a serious health problem or become unwell; overestimate how bad things will be; ignore or discount other possible (and often less catastrophic) explanations for their symptoms; and underestimate their ability to treat, cope with, or manage a health problem. It can be helpful to re-evaluate unhelpful thoughts by considering other possible causes and explanations and trying to work out the most accurate and likely explanation in line with factual evidence from reliable sources

Minimise reassurance seeking – Try not to constantly seek reassurance about your health or wellbeing. This may involve reducing the amount of time spent Googling symptoms or watching news coverage of COVID-19, and spending more time engaging in positive or enjoyable behaviours, such as hobbies and relationships.

Avoid safety behaviours – When you feel anxious or expect to feel anxious, you may engage in avoidance or safety behaviours to try to control your anxiety, such as stopping going out completely. It is important amidst the Coronavirus outbreak to ensure that you do not become socially isolated and your daily activities do not become restricted. Talk to friends and contacts, and challenge yourself to maintain contact in a safe way wherever possible.

Maintain a daily routine – Look after yourself with a daily routine that involves good self-care (whether you are self-isolating or not). Engage in positive activities that promote relaxation, creativity, physical activity and connection with others.

Stick to a ‘cleaning routine’ – Regular household cleaning, disinfecting and hand washing is an essential part of preventing the spread of COVID-19. However for people experiencing obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) these behaviours are often associated with feeling safe and hence they may spiral out of control with the anxiety introduced by the current situation. Try not to let this happen. Set a basic safety routine in line with how you may previously have managed things and stick to it if at all possible. Anything beyond this is for your OCD, not for your wellbeing.

Seek help when you need it – it is an incredibly difficult time, so do seek help and support in managing your mental health if you need to.

Low mood/depression

For people struggling with low mood/depression it can be hard to see a positive and to find purpose in things at the best of times. The COVID-19 public health crisis presents many additional difficulties for those struggling to manage their mood. The many tragedies highlighted in the popular media can be difficult to manage, and the impact of social distancing and greater time at home can reduce contact and remove vital coping systems/support. If you struggle with low mood/depression, please consider the following suggestions to help you manage in the current situation.

“Try to maintain the activities you do to keep well.”

Don't give up! – it can be very tempting to withdraw and stop doing things that are important when you feel low and down, however wherever possible try to maintain the activities you do to keep well. This is particularly important for things that involve contact with other people. Although you may not be able to do these as normal, there is often an alternative – such as online contact. Make sure you use this, and don't give in to the temptation to just stop.

Exercise – maintaining an exercise regime is a vital part of combating low-mood/depression. Although this is more difficult at present, and your routine may be different, it is still possible to get out for exercise every day, so make sure you do so. If going out feels too much for the moment, try some exercise at home, such as indoor cycling, exercise sessions on YouTube, etc.

Seek perspective – Ensure that you remind yourself regularly of the positive and uplifting things going on as these provide a balance to some of the more negative, upsetting material we are seeing on the TV and via social media. There are many positive things to notice in how people are responding to the COVID-19 public health crisis: support groups are being formed; people are volunteering to help those less fortunate in a range of ways; there is a huge amount of care being taken by most people to maintain social distancing for their own and other people's health. Why not keep a note of these things to give yourself a boost when you need it.

Addictions and substance misuse

The current COVID-19 public health crisis presents a number of challenges for those struggling to manage addictions or substance misuse, mainly due to reduced access to the support that is a fundamental part of the recovery process. It can be incredibly anxiety invoking and difficult to manage when you are not able to attend your support group, or see other people who help you manage. Being isolated or at home with spare time and a lack of routine may also not help. However, with some thought and planning, there are things you can do to adapt to the present circumstances for the time being. These may include the following.

“Create a daily routine that protects you as far as possible.”

It's important to ensure that lack of person-to-person contact with your support group doesn't set you back. It is not easy, but if necessary, you may be able to find additional support systems online or by telephone. It is worth reaching out to find out what help may be available at the moment.

Using your understanding of triggers and traps (where you are in danger of relapsing), create a daily routine that protects you as far as possible – have activities to do to distract you and use exercise as a means of removing yourself from dangerous situations.

As always, seek help when you need it before things spiral out-of-control. Act quickly if you can, as the evidence shows this is the best way of getting back on track.

Other resources by First Psychology Scotland that you may find helpful at this time



The CBT Connection - Your Guide to CBT

This booklet discusses how our thoughts can affect our moods and behaviours. We explore how cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) can be used to change this process and bring about a transformation in how we think and feel. We also look at some of the different types of CBT available. Free to download at:

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/cbt-booklet.pdf>



Your Guide to Mindfulness

Ever wondered what all the fuss is about with mindfulness? This booklet explains where mindfulness came from, how and why it works and provides examples and exercises to help you start introducing mindfulness into your daily life. Free to download at:

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/mindfulness-booklet.pdf>



The Stress Factor - Your Guide to Stress

A look at the way stress works and how it affects our bodies and minds. We're not all the same, and this booklet explores how different people react to stress in different ways. The booklet provides tips to help you recognise and manage your own stress using a variety of techniques.

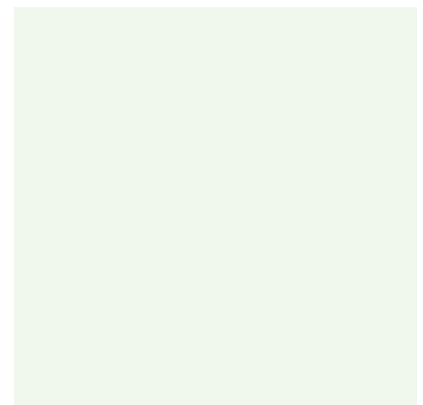
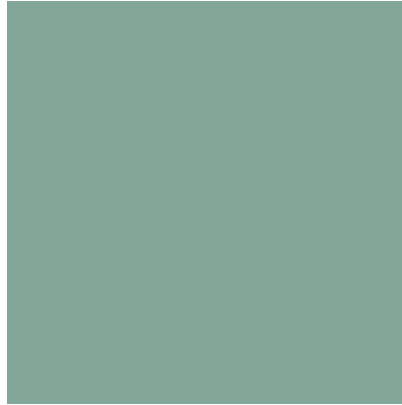
<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/stress-booklet.pdf>

We also have a range of resources on a number of different issues on our website at <https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/advice-and-resources>

As well as a blog at <https://firstpsychology.blogspot.com>

Visit our website and blog today and begin your journey to wellbeing!

www.firstpsychology.co.uk



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