

# How to look after your mental wellbeing in uncertain times

There are limits to what we can do to control the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), but there's a lot we can do to control our mental response to it. Brendan Street, Professional Head of Emotional Wellbeing at Nuffield Health explains why you may be feeling more anxious and provides some advice for managing your emotional wellbeing.

As a global society, we're facing an unprecedented time of change and uncertainty. Many of us are trying to work out how best to navigate our lives, while the rug seems to be constantly moving underneath our feet.

Daily news reports, government updates and pictures of deserted cities naturally illicit feelings of unease and worry. It's often difficult to keep up, and you may be left wondering: 'What is it I need to know?', 'What should I be thinking?' and 'What should I do?'.

However, by understanding anxiety and how it works, there are many things we can do to stay grounded and prevent panic.

## A small amount of stress can be helpful



Stress can trigger our 'fight-or-flight' survival response, which helps us act quickly when we're feeling under pressure. In this case, it means we're more likely to follow health and hygiene warnings.

But chronic stress – staying in this heightened state of stress for too long – can have a negative impact on our physical and mental wellbeing, and potentially lead to anxiety. That's why it's important to make your mental health a priority during this time.

## Anxiety is just as contagious as a virus



This also has a survival explanation. As social animals, we can pick up on how others are feeling. So, if one member of our group notices danger, the others will sense it too, which helps everyone stay vigilant and safe. This is aided by our mirror neurons, a collection of brain cells that can mimic any emotion we come across, automatically.

Given the contagious nature of anxiety, it's not surprising that fear is spreading rapidly. If we choose however to think and act in a way that is hopeful and helpful to others, we can try to balance this with calm and positivity.

# COVID-19 emotional care guide

Focusing on the following four areas can help you balance your emotions as well as manage any symptoms of anxiety.

Making small changes can make a big difference at times like these. But what might be beneficial for one person, might not be for another, so you should try a few things to see what works best for you:

## Work with your thoughts



- ♦ **Be kind to yourself:** Practice talking to yourself with understanding and compassion. Speak to yourself as you would to a friend to reassure them, or the way an encouraging coach would, rather than a critic.
- ♦ **Don't accept your thoughts as facts:** Just because something feels scary, it doesn't always mean something bad will happen. When you notice a change in your mood, ask yourself, "What was I thinking about just before that?". Was the thought helpful or unhelpful? It can help to imagine a friend saying your thought out loud – if it's unhelpful, what would you say to them to challenge their thinking?
- ♦ **Accept that there will be some uncertainty:** Letting go of worries about the future is easier said than done, but like any skill, it gets easier with practice. If you find yourself stuck in a cycle of anxious thoughts, you can use something called 'Worry Time'. Tell yourself 'I'll worry about this later' and then let yourself worry about it for half an hour in the evening, for example. Then, if there's something you can do about your worry, make a plan, and if not, try to let it go or talk to someone.

- ♦ **Put pen to paper:** Putting your emotions into words can also help you get through stressful events. Don't worry about crafting a literary masterpiece. Instead, try writing about your feelings for a few minutes nonstop. This can help you organise your thoughts and better cope with your emotions.



## Stay connected



- ♦ **Keep in touch and interact with others:** You should especially connect with those who help you to feel positive and energised. Use video calls if you're self-isolating – a smile can be much more reassuring than just a voice.
- ♦ **Form community groups:** Working together and sharing resources can help overcome a survivalist 'siege mentality'. Network and look after each other. Knowing you have each other's backs can be a huge comfort.
- ♦ **Talk to someone you trust:** Speaking to people who help you rationalise the situation, or have a calming influence, can help you to counterbalance the hype and scaremongering.

## Practice physical self-care



- ♦ **Exercise regularly:** Physical activity releases anxiety-reducing chemicals, while acting as a healthy distraction. There are many things you can do to keep exercising even if you're at home, click [here](#) for inspiration.
- ♦ **Eat healthily:** [Good nutrition has a positive impact on your mood](#), while boosting your energy and immunity.
- ♦ **Improve your bedtime routine:** Having a good [bedtime routine](#) will help you to switch off and rest easier. For more sleep advice, check out our [sleep articles](#).
- ♦ **Avoid stimulants and sedatives:** Caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol can make anxiety symptoms worse.

## Build your emotional resilience



- ♦ **Write down a list of all your strengths:** Remember times in your life when you have overcome difficulties and remind yourself of all your resources and positive coping strategies.
- ♦ **Limit your news updates:** Reading every news report on every site can feed anxious cycles. Try to stick to one or two sources, once or twice a day.
- ♦ **Access nature:** You will be spending a lot more time indoors in the coming weeks so make sure you get plenty of fresh air and light. Go for a walk when you can, and use your garden if you have one. While you're inside, sit near a window and open it every now and again. You may need to think creatively. What about birdwatching? Or planting some seed or cuttings on your window sill?
- ♦ **Remember to breathe:** When we experience stress, our breathing gets faster and shallower. When you feel yourself getting worked up, breathe slowly and deeply into your belly to override your stress response so that you feel calmer.
- ♦ **Find ways to relax:** [Relaxation techniques](#) such as [meditation](#) and [mindfulness](#) can help you become more aware and accepting of your thoughts, as well as teach you to direct your attention away from worry and rumination by focusing on one thing, such as your breathing. All this can help you unwind more easily.
- ♦ **Take part in activities that bring you into the present:** When you're reading, cooking, cleaning, or doing something creative, you're concentrating on the task at hand, so you won't be continually worrying about an unknown future.
- ♦ **Use wellbeing apps:** Here are [25 essential apps for a healthy mind and body](#).



## Let's look after ourselves and each other



It's so important to look after our mental wellbeing at times like these, not only so we can try our best to keep calm and try to stay positive, but so others around us can too. Ask for help if you need it, but also offer support to those that need it as well.

It's far more reassuring to consider how we will get through this. Working as a collective, we can draw on a wider pool of strengths and resources and ensure the most vulnerable among us can get the greatest help.

And remember that the situation is only temporary. Just like emotions, which can seem intense and long-lasting, all of this will eventually pass. Just take a step back and focus on what you can control. If you are self-isolating, you can get more practical tips and advice in our self-isolation guide.

To find out more about our emotional wellbeing services, visit [nuffieldhealth.com/emotionalwellbeing](https://nuffieldhealth.com/emotionalwellbeing) or speak to your Nuffield Health Client Director. For more advice and articles on how to stay healthy during self-isolation visit [nuffieldhealth.com/workplace-wellbeing](https://nuffieldhealth.com/workplace-wellbeing)