
Thrive

Taking care of your mental health in response to COVID-19

by JASMINE HARDING

Feeling scared, anxious or worried in response to COVID-19? You are not alone.

As human beings we like structure and routine and COVID-19 is causing us disruption and uncertainty. There are a lot of us who are genuinely feeling anxious and worried and our mental health can be impacted.

Our brains are hardwired to gravitate to threatening information, it's what keeps us safe. Words like "global pandemic", "unprecedented", "physical distancing", "self-isolation" and "death" are therefore going to stick in our mind and activate our brain's biological stress response.

Right now, our brain isn't sending us a false alarm by itself – how alarmed we are might be heightened by what we do. For example, as we think about and focus more on COVID-19, our perception of threat increases (not the actual risk but our perception of it). What matters is how we respond to our stress response.

A panicked response is likely to kick any rational thoughts and behaviour out the window. This can then lead to people fighting over a pack of toilet paper in the middle of the supermarket!...and it can happen to the most sensible people among us.

In response to this virus, we need to focus on remaining resilient and, to do that, we need to be able to dial down that stress response when it ramps up and to look after our mental health as much as our physical health.

COMMON REACTIONS YOU OR PEOPLE YOU KNOW MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING:

- More on edge than usual
- Background anxiety or feeling unsettled
- Irritable, angry, helpless or sad
- Pessimistic outlook
- Less motivated to carry out daily activities
- Worst-case scenario thinking
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fears around health and money
- Wrestling with conflicting values – "Do I visit my grandmother?"

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT YOUR WELLBEING DURING THIS TIME:

1. Acknowledge your anxiety

Recognise that anxiety is a normal and valid response and that it makes sense in the context of what is happening globally. It can be helpful to frame anxiety as a range of thoughts, feelings, behaviour and physical reactions to remind yourself that these experiences will come and go and are not permanent.

2. Separate what is in your control from what is not

Recognise what is in your control and try to focus on that. There are many things you can do such as washing your hands, keeping physical distance from others, limiting your consumption of news, being kind and caring towards yourself and others.

On the other hand, there are things right now that you may have little to no control over. For example, how long this will last and how others will react. Focusing on these things can leave us feeling overwhelmed and helpless. When you notice your mind slipping to these concerns, it's helpful to refocus your energy back to the things that are within your control.

3. Ration your news intake

Limit reading/watching/listening to reputable sources, not scaremongering, fear-inducing pieces. Do you really need to know what is happening on a cruise ship you aren't on?

Try to limit how often you check updated news each day. Consider disabling alerts on your phone so that you only get updates when you want them or consider disconnecting from your phone for an hour or two. Set a regular time when you get updates to reduce constant checking behaviour.

This is the time more than ever to not feel guilty for watching that trashy reality television show if you are finding things a bit too much.

4. Foster a challenge mindset

As I wrote this article, I called my 92-year-old grandmother for some advice about what helped her stay strong during the war. She simply replied, "It's mind over matter." She's right – our state of mind empowers us to take a different perspective on our emotions instead of being led by them.

Stress promotes tunnel vision; focusing on the bad. Deliberately and mindfully reframing our thinking to seeing a situation as a challenge that is to be conquered, makes it easier to think more flexibly and to problem-solve. For example, being able to see the situation as an opportunity to explore new avenues of education and work and find out what truly matters to you.

Notice when your threat mindset is activated. What have you learned from past difficulties that could help you foster a challenge mindset now?

5. Set new rituals and maintain healthy habits

Adapt your routine according to what this crazy situation requires. At the same time, maintain some sense of structure. For example, create a schedule for physical or fun activities.

Look after your physical and mental health. Take deep breaths, eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.

6. Challenge yourself to stay in the present

During times of uncertainty, it's easy to slip into worrying about the future. When you notice your mind doing this, gently bring your focus back to the present moment. Notice what you can see, hear, smell, feel, taste in this moment and name them. Alternatively, engage in any tasks such as having a cup of tea, gardening, playing with your kids that brings you back to the present moment. Engaging in mindfulness exercises is a powerful tool to stay grounded when things feel out of control.

Some helpful mindfulness apps are "Calm" and "Headspace".

7. Keep your sense of humour

Keep sharing funny videos of swans surfing waves and dogs falling asleep in chairs in human-like poses. When we experience laughter and positive emotions we have a release of oxytocin which helps unwind our stress response.

8. Be kind

Be kind and compassionate to yourself and others. Be gentle. Reduce perfectionism. Take micro-pauses when needed.

Acts of kindness are lovely to be on the receiving end of and they also give the person who is being kind a boost of positive emotion and a sense of purpose and control.

9. Stay connected and reach out if you need more support

Check in with loved ones and stay socially connected. Talk with people you trust about what you are feeling. Practise active listening. Loneliness is a huge issue in today's society and we need connection with each other more than ever.

If you are feeling particularly anxious or if you are struggling with your mental health, it's OK to reach out to a mental health professional for support. You don't have to be alone with your worry and it can be comforting to share what you are experiencing with those trained to help.

Umbrella Wellbeing have a team of clinical psychologists available via Zoom if you would like a video session. Zoom is completely secure and confidential.

This is an anxiety-provoking time. The anxiety is there to make you take sensible precautions. Now is a great time to step up and support one another and use our collective resilience to move past this pandemic.

He Waka Eke Noa: We are all in this together.

Kiwis are a resilient bunch. Throughout history we have survived war, epidemics and other trauma and tragedy. As our prime minister has previously said, "Let's do this!"