

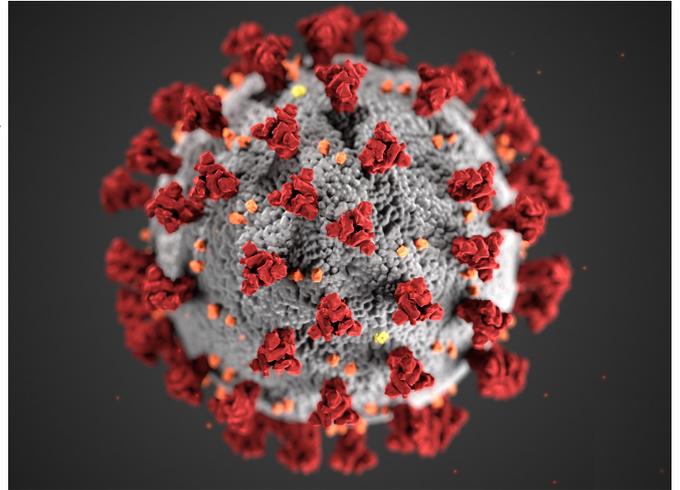
Staying Mentally Well During Uncertain Times

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As it becomes clear about the steps we need to take to manage our physical health, its time to start talking about steps to help manage our mental wellbeing. With the likely changes to work and social practices over the coming months, we will lose the scaffolding that maintains our mental wellbeing. Work provides a sense of purpose, a sense of achievement, a level of activity and social connection which enhances our mood and promotes a positive sense of self. As more of us are encouraged to work from home and reduce our socializing, we'll need to prioritize and plan for how to create that scaffolding during these uncertain times. Even if you have never experienced mental health issues in the past, the uncertainty and collective fear surrounding these unprecedented times can destabilize any of us. It's important to remember that you are not powerless when it comes to caring for your mental health and wellbeing.

Here's some evidence-based recommendations that you can add to your usual ways of coping to care for your mental health and wellbeing.



Be Informed but not Fixated

It's necessary to keep updated from reliable sources in order to take practical steps to protect yourself and loved ones. However too much information can increase anxiety and distress. Put a limit on how much time you expose yourself to media. Seek specific information updates at specific times during the day once or twice.¹ Find a credible source you can trust such as the World Health Authority or a local or state public health agency.

Remember that there are other things in you life to focus on.

Try "5 Things"

This exercise helps you shift your focus to experiences in the present moment and away from what is causing you to feel anxious. It can help interpret unhealthy thought patterns.²

5-4-3-2-1 Technique³

Using the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, you will purposefully take in the details of your surroundings using each of your senses. Strive to notice small details that your mind would usually tune out, such as distant sounds, or the texture of an ordinary object.

 **What are 5 things you can see?** Look for small details such as a pattern on the ceiling, the way light reflects off a surface, or an object you never noticed.

 **What are 4 things you can feel?** Notice the sensation of clothing on your body, the sun on your skin, or the feeling of the chair you are sitting in. Pick up an object and examine its weight, texture, and other physical qualities.

 **What are 3 things you can hear?** Pay special attention to the sounds your mind has tuned out, such as a ticking clock, distant traffic, or trees blowing in the wind.

 **What are 2 things you can smell?** Try to notice smells in the air around you, like an air freshener or freshly mowed grass. You may also look around for something that has a scent, such as a flower or an unlit candle.

 **What is 1 thing you can taste?** Carry gum, candy, or small snacks for this step. Pop one in your mouth and focus your attention closely on the flavors.

Practice Gratitude

Practice gratitude is a state of mind that arises when you affirm a good thing in your life. It isn't just an emotion that happens, but something we can cultivate. Gratitude begins by paying attention and listing the good things that you normally take for granted.⁴

Slowing down and appreciate some simple things around you – the warmth from a cup of tea, the feeling of a breeze or a wonderful song.

Writing a note to someone in your life who has done something helpful or special,

Connecting with nature - Feel the warmth of the sun on your face and be thankful for the fresh air, tiny creatures on a leaf, or clouds scudding across the sky.

Stay Rational

While this is an unprecedented world crisis, and anxiety is a normal response, it is important not to intensify your response by engaging in irrational thinking. When we catastrophize, the importance of a problem is exaggerated, the worst possible outcome is assumed to be true and our ability to cope is minimized. Keep reminding yourself of the facts, for example:

80% of infections are mild or asymptomatic.⁵

The expertise of the whole world is focusing on the management of this condition.

The timing of the outbreak in Australia means we can learn from the experiences of other countries. The Australian government is being advised by the World Health Organization and is enacting a response plan.

Australia has a well-functioning health system and good communication systems in place.

This is unprecedented but the Government and medical authorities have been planning for this after the outbreak of SARS in 2003.

Life will be disrupted for a while, but this will pass. We are all in this together.

For more information about managing your thinking:

<https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/do-something-about-it/keeping-well/helpful-thinking>

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/UnhelpfulThinkingHabitsWithAlternatives.pdf>

Stay Connected

Stay connected and maintain your social networks. If health authorities have recommended limiting your physical social contact to contain the outbreak, you can stay connected via e-mail, social media, face time and telephone^{1,6}.

Don't allow all your conversations to be about the virus or the shortage of toilet paper! Other topics of conversation could include shows you have been watching or books you have been reading, reminiscing about past shared experiences, and things you're grateful for or have found small moments of pleasure from. Share funny photos and memes.

Keep Moving and Doing

Develop a new "normal" routine which includes physical activity, connecting with others, achievable daily goals and finding pleasure in everyday experiences. Our brain gets a boost when we achieve things across a day. Achievement increases the neurotransmitter dopamine and purposeful activity increases serotonin.⁷ Goals could be tackling tasks at home you never have time to do. For example, tackling an over flowing cupboard, organizing your photos, creating a mood enhancing playlist, creating an online digital photo book or learn a new skill through youtube.

See for positive mental health routines: <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/BACES.pdf>

Structure opportunities for physical activity into your new daily routine. Don't become more sedentary if you are working from home or in self-quarantine. Moving more could include standing up and stretching or performing lunges during ad breaks while watching TV. Exercise can protect against poor mental health and improve the mental health of people living with mental illness.^{8,9}

Always work within your physical limits but maybe try something new.: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/get-involved/exercise-your-mood>

Calm Your Nervous System

While it is normal to feel anxious, you can lower your level of anxious arousal through regular practice of the following techniques. This is empowering to know you can work with your body to reduce your anxious physiological arousal. The more you practice, the more effective it becomes.

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/staying-well/relaxation-exercises>

<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/default-source/factsheets/relaxationtechniques.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

Don't forget to draw on coping skills that you have used in the past to cope with difficult life circumstances.

And don't hesitate to reach out if you need more support to these services below or your GP.



Beyond Blue
beyondblue.org.au
1300 22 4636



Lifeline
lifeline.org.au
13 11 14



headtohealth.gov.au

NOTES

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