

## Coping with anxiety associated with coronavirus

A handful of countries, including China, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand have managed to flatten the curve on the spread of coronavirus. This is certainly very good news, but there is still a long way to go. Many of us feel a mix of relief and anxiety. We feel relief because the rate of new infections is lower than it could have been, but anxiety because we still don't have a cure for Covid-19 and we don't know what the future holds for us and our loved ones. Understandably we are wondering when life will return to 'normal' and what life may look like after the lockdown. When can we visit friends and family? When will schools reopen? When can we hold and embrace our loved ones? Not having answers to these questions can cause us to feel anxious. It is important to keep in mind that feeling anxious is normal. It is an emotional response to a threat and coronavirus is a threat to our lives and way of life. However, we should try to manage the anxiety so it does not get out of hand. Here are a few tips for managing our anxiety.

## Understand your feelings

There is so much information about coronavirus that it is easy to become overwhelmed. Sometimes it is hard to tell facts from fiction. So, the first step in managing your anxiety, is to go to a reliable source to get the facts. Here are sites that can help you.

- a. Australian Government Department of Health: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert>
- b. World Health Organisation: [https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1)
- c. Reliable authorities in your country – here are a few suggestions:
  - Malaysia: <http://www.moh.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/2019-ncov-wuhan>
  - Singapore: <https://www.gov.sg/features/covid-19>
  - USA: <https://www.coronavirus.gov/>
  - New Zealand: [https://covid19.govt.nz/?gclid=CjwKCAjwkPX0BRBKEiwA7THxiH\\_O-K9JEv6Z88Y8mUvyke1dpplzhFxdf7iikCgmEB54RKTa0VQ4RhoC6PMQAvD\\_BwE](https://covid19.govt.nz/?gclid=CjwKCAjwkPX0BRBKEiwA7THxiH_O-K9JEv6Z88Y8mUvyke1dpplzhFxdf7iikCgmEB54RKTa0VQ4RhoC6PMQAvD_BwE)
  - United Kingdom: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

## Look for balance

It is human nature to become confused and anxious during times of great uncertainty. The Covid-19 world is no exception. Every day the world is changing so rapidly that we find it difficult to keep up. Our head is spinning with thoughts about risks to our lives and our loved ones, eg *I coughed this morning, have I got the virus? Are my children and family going to be okay? How can I work from home, look after my children and my parents?* If you are asking these questions and feeling anxious, try to press the 'pause button' and take a moment to calm down: here are five different strategies to help you do that.

- **Normalize your experience:** These are very unusual times so it is **normal** for you to feel like this. You could try to say this to yourself audibly. Then slowly repeat the phrase a few times: you will notice your anxiety levels dropping. Usually anxiety is expressed through different parts of your body. How anxiety is expressed is different from one individual to the next. Where do **you** hold your anxiety? In your stomach, chest, neck, shoulders or some other part of your body? Notice where you feel your anxiety and take long, slow and deep breaths. You can close your eyes if that is comfortable for you. Every time you breathe out, relax the part of the body that is holding your anxiety. Repeat this several times and notice anxiety draining from you and a sense of calm. Do this several times during the day to effectively reduce anxiety.

- **Conversation with yourself.** Ask yourself: Am I in a high-risk group? Am I following instructions from health authorities to stay healthy? Have I had any symptoms? Am I prepared to see a doctor if I have any symptoms? Have this conversation with yourself calmly. Alternatively, you can have the same conversation with someone else who is a good listener. They should simply listen to you without interrupting. They should especially refrain from talking about themselves or giving advice. Sometimes we tend to exaggerate risks in our minds, so talking to someone else about the risks will help.
- **Focus on my coping skills.** Often, we underestimate our strengths and capabilities. A simple exercise we can do is to write down a list of the coping skills we have. If you are part of a family group or living with a group of others, have a discussion about your strengths. Write down the list of strengths on an A4 sheet (or an A3 sheet if you prefer) and place it in a prominent place where everyone can see it. You may want to draw and colour the poster so it looks attractive. As a group, reflect on the list at least once or twice a week. If you discover new strengths, add them to the list.
- **Have fun.** Don't forget to have fun! We all have our own ways of having fun and many do not involve money. For example, you could go for a walk, sing to each other or sing together, play a board game etc. Doing fun activities together releases endorphins in the brain which can make you feel safe, happy and connected to each other. *'We don't laugh because we are happy, we are happy because we laugh.'* (William James 1842 – 1910).

### Some practical tips

We don't know how long it will take for Covid-19 to be defeated. So, it is best to be prepared for a marathon rather than a short run. To run a marathon, we have to take one step at a time. Here are things you can do to help you stay on course and come out on the other side healthy and strong:

- *Stay physically isolated but socially connected.* We may have to be isolated, but for our well-being we need to stay socially connected. Use whatever methods you prefer to stay connected – phone, WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, mail, or wave to friends from a distance.
- *Maintain a healthy lifestyle.* Structure your day so you have a mix of different activities. Keep up or increase regular exercise, strive for quality sleep and maintain a healthy diet. Also, it's a good idea to minimise alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.
- *Practice relaxation.* Vigorous exercise, relaxation exercise and mindfulness are ways of letting your mind and body rest and rejuvenate.