Centre for
Mental Health

Supporting mental health during Covid-19: a brief guide

Coronavirus has been a shock to us all. It has disrupted our lives in ways we couldn't imagine before. It is making the basics of life, like getting food, exercising and earning a living, much harder.

It's natural to be anxious and worried, but the ongoing stress can affect our mental health and emotional wellbeing.

It's just as important to look after our mental health as it is our physical health. There are simple steps we can take to do this for ourselves and for other people. This short guide provides practical tips about mental health at this time.

Looking after your mental health

Stay connected – Talk to people. Whether you are home with family or flatmates, working with colleagues in person or remotely, or staying home alone, it's important to stay in touch. Talk face to face when you can, or pick up the phone. Video calls – with a group of friends or family or just chatting one to one – let you see faces and places outside your home. Pick up the phone to someone you haven't seen in a while, or drop them a message to say you are thinking of them. You could send a card or even write an old-fashioned letter!

Set up a routine – Whatever we normally do, lockdown has thrown our routine out. But having a routine gives us some control over our lives and really helps our mental health. From getting up and dressed, eating regular meals, making time to exercise or setting a slot for some 'me' time, putting a routine in place can help.

Keep healthy – Staying healthy doesn't just boost your body, it's important for your mind too.

- **Exercise,** but keep your expectations realistic. You can start with small bursts and build up, and if you have any mobility issues try seated exercises. Remember exercise can be as simple as a walk around the block, a bit of gardening or going up and down the stairs a few times.

- **Try to eat healthily** and avoid comfort eating. Sugary and salty treats can be especially tempting, so you may want to keep some healthier snacks like fruit and nuts handy. Planning your meals might help you keep on track and definitely helps with the shopping budget. Make the most of frozen and tinned fruit and veg if you can't get out to stock up on fresh produce regularly. Try new recipes.

- **Drink plenty of water,** but keep an eye on your caffeine and alcohol intake. Too much caffeine can add to anxiety and disrupt sleep. It's easy to lose track of how much alcohol you are drinking at home, but it can be a depressant (even when you're not hung over) so keep it in check.

Stay on top of finances – Money worries can be a major cause of stress, so keep track of your outgoings and get advice as soon as possible if you need it. If money is tight, make sure you budget and plan. Get advice on how to delay payments and help claiming the benefits that you are entitled to. It can be hard, but facing up to financial difficulties early and getting help can protect your mental health.

Distract yourself – If you are feeling anxious or tense, try to find something to do. It might be watching a tv show or film, starting a hobby or craft, weeding the garden, or baking. Play a game on your phone – puzzles and games that make you think can be particularly good. Write down how you are feeling or write a story.

Make time for yourself – Whether it's a quiet corner to read, a long bath or a few minutes of meditation, it's important to relax. Breathing exercises and relaxation can help. Learn or practice mindfulness – being in the moment can take away some of the stress of worrying about the future.

Be part of your community – Whether it's waving to a neighbour, checking in on an older friend or helping someone with the shopping, small acts of kindness help other people and make us feel better. You might want to volunteer to help at a local foodbank or charity, or telephone someone who is lonely.

Coping with mental health difficulties

Many of us are coping with difficult feelings and worries at this time. We are living through a worrying and for some of us traumatic time that affects everyone in some way or another. **It's ok not to be ok.**

If you need help for your mental health, **the NHS is there for you**. Contact your GP or use NHS 111 to find out how to get help.

We can also help each other through this difficult time. For example:

It's good to talk, and it's even better to listen – you don't need to have advice for someone, in fact it's often more helpful not to give advice unless asked. But let a friend or colleague know you're there if they'd like a chat. While we are generally more open to talking about mental health than we used to be, there's still a stigma and people may feel uncomfortable opening up. Let them know it's okay to talk, and that you aren't there to judge but to listen and support.

Help with the essentials – when you are feeling low, looking after yourself can be a real chore. If you live near someone and are able to get out and about, doing their shopping for them (even if it's just the bare essentials) or dropping off a meal can make life much easier, as well as letting them know you care.

Help in a crisis

In an emergency call 999; but if it is not life threatening, use the NHS 111 helpline or visit www.111.nhs.uk People with hearing problems can use the NHS 111 British Sign Language service: http://interpreternow.co.uk/nhs111

To talk to someone confidentially, call Samaritans free on 116 123 or visit www.samaritans.org

For confidential 24/7 crisis text support, text "SHOUT" to 85258 or visit www.giveusashout.org

For crisis support for young people (under 35), call Papyrus's Hopeline UK from 9am to 10pm weekdays and 2pm to 10pm on weekends on 0800 068 41 41, text 07786 209697, or visit www.papyrus-uk.org

CALM: the Campaign Against Living Miserably, is for people in the UK who are down or have hit a wall for any reason. Call 0800 58 58 58 (daily, 5pm to midnight), or access their free, anonymous webchat with trained staff through the CALM website: www.thecalmzone.net

Websites and apps

- The NHS apps library links to apps that can be helpful for numerous health conditions, including a lot of mental health and wellbeing apps. Go to ww.nhs.uk/apps-library/ and select the 'Mental health' filter.

- The NHS and Public Health England Every Mind Matters website provides practical advice and help on looking after your own mental health during Covid-19 www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/

- Money and finances:
    - Money Saving Expert has guides on all aspects of how Covid can affect your finances as well as great tips on how to save money: www.moneysavingexpert.com
    - Mental Health and Money Advice has tailored advice around money and mental health in the pandemic: www.mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org
    - If things are a bit more serious, Step Change helps people with debt problems take back control of their finances and their lives. For free advice visit www.stepchange.org or ring 0800 138 111 Monday-Friday 8AM-6PM.

- My possible self - a website and app to improve the mental health and wellbeing of people living with stress, anxiety and low mood: www.good-thinking.uk/resources/my-possible-self/

- Yoga with Adriene - Free online yoga for all abilities and conditions www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene

- The Free Mindfulness project links to numerous free mindfulness videos and resources tailored to Covid-19 www.freemindfulness.org/covid19

- There are numerous apps that help with mindfulness training and practice, relaxation and sleep. Two of the most popular which can be trialled for free are Calm, which includes sleep stories for helping you get off to sleep along with guided meditations and exercises, and Headspace, which has meditation courses tailored to all aspects of life and is free for a year for the unemployed.

- Self compassion.org is a site offering free exercises and guided meditations to help you to be kind to yourself www.self-compassion.org/category/exercises/ while Tiny Buddha has 45 tips for small steps you can take to look after yourself: visit www.tinybuddha.com and search '45 simple self care'

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