



Psychosocial Response Group

Coping with the Coronavirus

Worry and Uncertainty

Introduction

This leaflet is one of a series about Coronavirus and mental health. The leaflets contain information about how the Coronavirus outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Coronavirus key facts:

- This is a widespread outbreak, not limited to one area
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in wintertime
- For some people who are older or have pre-existing physical health conditions It is likely to be more severe, and may even be fatal, whereas for others it may be a relatively mild condition.

Whilst all of us are familiar with challenges in life, the Coronavirus and its consequences is a particularly difficult and stressful experience for everyone. Some people may have to cope with being unwell, looking after family members or dealing with loss and bereavement. Coming to terms with the consequences that the Coronavirus has had for you and those close to you can take some time. This leaflet focuses on coping with worry and uncertainty; others cover bereavement, fatigue, recovering from trauma, and coping with depression.

Coping with worry

When we are faced with a possible threat, it is a natural reaction to worry about it. Many of us are probably worrying about the Coronavirus, and to a certain extent that is perfectly normal and understandable. However, some people may worry to such an extent that it disrupts their lives to a significant extent, and if that is happening for you then this leaflet may be of some help.

How can I tell if I am worrying too much?

Some common symptoms of excessive worry or anxiety are:

Emotions or feelings

- Feeling worried, anxious or fearful most of the time.
- Being more irritable than usual.

Physical and bodily signs

- Tense muscles.
- Trembling, shaking.
- Headaches, or other aches and pains.
- Feeling sick or having 'butterflies' in your stomach.
- Shortness of breath.
- Disturbed sleep.

Thoughts

- Thinking a lot about everything that might go wrong and especially the worst possible outcome.
- Not being able to stop worrying.

Cognitive functioning

- Finding it hard to concentrate.

Behavioural changes

- Being restless and unable to relax.

Some of these symptoms, such as feeling tired, aches and pains, or changes to sleep and appetite, may be like those caused by the Coronavirus or side effects of treatment. If you can talk through your feelings with a medical professional via NHS 111, they can help decide whether it is your physical illness or depression that is making you feel as you do.

How to tackle worry and anxiety

To reduce worries there are two main steps to consider:

1. Worrying may be useful up to a point, if it prompts us to take necessary action. So use worry constructively to (a) to think about whatever the real threats may be, and what you can do to reduce them; and (b) to what you can do to cope with any threat that does happen.
Then take whatever actions are sensible to reduce the risk to a minimum, or to prepare to cope with it.
2. Once you have done whatever you can in terms of action to reduce the risks, then further worrying cannot help. So set about trying to reduce your worrying.

Both these approaches are described further below.

What are the actual risks and how can I reduce them?

Make sure that you get accurate information from reliable sources such as www.nhs.uk. Some media or internet sources may exaggerate the dangers. Estimates suggest that many people will have a mild form of the illness and will not even require hospital treatment.

Those that are older or have an existing long term condition may be more at risk of developing a more severe illness. Most of those who get ill will recover. For the vast majority of us the Coronavirus is not likely to be more than a temporary illness.

There is a lot of useful information about how to reduce the chances of getting or passing on the Coronavirus on www.nhs.uk – see the 'Further information' sections below.

How can I reduce excessive worrying?

Recognise unhelpful worrying

If you are doing all that you can to reduce the risks (see above), then further worrying is pointless and unhelpful. It is not going to help you cope with the situation, but just make you feel bad. So use the techniques below to try to reduce worrying.

Distraction

- Focus your attention away from your worries and onto the outside world. What can you see, hear, smell, touch and so on? You might also try distracting yourself by counting something in your surroundings. For example, how many red things can you see around you? Or how many blue items you have in one room of your house?
- Try to take your mind off the worries by doing some activity that occupies your thoughts. If you are still at work, focus on an absorbing job. If you are at home, watch TV, listen to music, or read a book; or talk to family or friends about something not Coronavirus-related.
- Take some safe physical exercise such as going for a walk or a cycle ride.

Worry time

This strategy may sound odd, but works well for many people, so give it a try. The idea is that rather than worrying all the time, you try to set aside a specific time each day as 'worry time'. Perhaps half an hour or so should do and, importantly, it should not be close to bedtime.

Lunchtime or early evening might be a good time. For the rest of the day, if you start to worry, you should stop yourself and put it aside until worry time. You might make a note of the worry, but do not think about it further until your worry time.

When worry time comes: sit down and try to spend half an hour going through all your worries, thinking about nothing else but worries.

What many people find is that postponing worries like this means that when it comes to worry time, the worries seem less intense and more manageable.

Accepting uncertainty

One major source of excessive worrying is aiming for a degree of certainty that is just not possible in the real world. Of course we would all like it if someone could tell us for sure that we or our loved ones will be 100 per cent safe. The reality is that no-one can do that, either about the Coronavirus or about many other worries.

Try to remember that you and everyone else actually lives with uncertainty all the time, because we have no choice. Every time we cross the road, start a new relationship, or move house, we cannot be certain about what will happen, but we cope anyway. In fact we can almost never be certain, either about good events or bad events.

Tomorrow, you might win the lottery – or a meteor could crash down on your house. Even such extreme events are not completely impossible.

They are just very unlikely. The fact that many things in life are uncertain does not mean that they are probable – you might win the lottery, but it would not be wise to assume that you will.

Similarly, the risks from the Coronavirus are not zero, but nevertheless it is likely that most people will be okay.

Relaxing

Learning a specific relaxation technique can be very helpful in coping with worries. There is not room in this leaflet to give detailed instructions, but books and/or CDs of relaxation instructions are widely available (see Further Reading section). The main technique is to work through your body, area by area, first of all trying to tense your muscles and then letting that tension go and relaxing the muscles.

When should you seek professional help?

If you continue to suffer from the symptoms described above for a period of several months after the outbreak, and they are at such a level that they are seriously interfering with your life, then you may want to consult your GP to see whether further help is needed:

- There is a difference between useful worrying, which drives you into taking necessary action, and unhelpful worrying.
- Once you have done what you can to avoid a problem, further worrying is unhelpful. Do what you can to reduce your worrying.
- Mental and physical activity can help keep your mind off worries.
- Try setting aside some 'worry time'.
- Learn a relaxation technique.
- Remember that we all have to live with uncertainty, but just because something might happen, does not mean it will happen.

Further reading

- Manage Your Mind (2018) by Gillian Butler, Nick Grey and Tony Hope.
- Overcoming Worry & Generalized Anxiety Disorder, 2nd edition (2015) by Kevin Meares and Mark Freeston.

Internet & other sources of information

About anxiety & worry:

- www.depressionalliance.org – provides information for people affected by depression.
- www.samaritans.org – offers support to people who are despairing or suicidal.
- www.mind.org.uk – provides information on all aspects of mental health.
- www.nhs.uk
- Self-help leaflets by Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust: <https://web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>
- TalkingSpace Plus at www.talkingspaceplus.org.uk with lots of useful information about services in Oxfordshire and access to self referral to services for people suffering from mild to moderate anxiety, depression and stress.
- Healthy Minds in Buckinghamshire: <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/healthyminds/>
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- Oxfordshire Mind <https://www.oxfordshiremind.org.uk/>
– provides information on all aspects of mental health.
- Buckinghamshire Mind <https://www.bucksmind.org.uk/>
– provides information on all aspects of mental health.

About Coronavirus:

- Go to www.nhs.uk or <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care/nhs-111/>
- Keep up to date through the TV or the radio.

Notes

Notes

If you would like to have information translated into a different language, please contact the Equality and Diversity Team at: EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk

Arabic يُرجى الاتصال بنا إذا كنتم ترغبون في الحصول على المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتسويق مختلف.

Bengali আপনি এই তথ্য অন্য ভাষায় বা আলাদা আকারে পেতে চাইলে অনুগ্রহ করে আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন।
Urdu اگر آپ یہ معلومات دیگر زبان یا مختلف فارمیٹ میں چاہتے ہیں تو برائے مہربانی ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

Chinese 若要以其他語言或格式提供這些資訊，請與我們聯繫

Polish Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku lub w innym formacie, skontaktuj się z nami.

Portuguese Queira contactar-nos se pretender as informações noutra idioma ou num formato diferente.

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