

Managing Anxiety in an Anxious World

Anxiety is a response to perceived threat. It can impact the way we function physically (e.g. rapid heart rate, restlessness), behaviourally (e.g. being irritable with others, difficulty sleeping) and cognitively (e.g. impairment in memory and concentration, ruminative thinking).

Given the threat to health posed by the Covid-19, it is not surprising that many people are experiencing a sense of anxiety and fear. The threat is real, not imaginary, and therefore we are hardwired to respond in a way designed to alert us to the danger and make us take action to increase our chances of safety and survival. Obviously, in the current crisis this can best be done by [following the Government guidelines and health advice](#).

Anxiety is therefore a protective mechanism designed to help us identify risk and take appropriate action. However, it is also possible that our response overshoots what is helpful and then anxiety can spiral to a level which is unproductive, and which negatively impacts our ability to function effectively. It is therefore important to [strike the balance](#) between the presence of anxiety and uncertainty as a normal response to these stressful times in which we live and becoming so entangled and dominated by anxiety that we disappear down a rabbit hole of fear.

To manage anxiety, follow the steps below:



1. Press the Pause Button

Stop. Remind yourself that experiencing some anxiety in the current circumstances is normal. The challenge is to keep this at a level which remains helpful and protective and not detrimental to your health and wellbeing



2. Be Kind to Yourself

The last thing which is going to be helpful in managing anxiety is you giving yourself a hard time for feeling anxious. Tune into your inner dialogue and [be compassionate and reassuring in the way you speak to yourself](#). If you are harsh and critical you will only increase the sense of threat and this will raise your anxiety further. For example, rather than saying “this is awful and scary but I am so stupid for getting myself all worked up”, change it to “things are uncertain and frightening at the moment so it’s no wonder I’m feeling anxious. However I’m doing all I can to stay safe.”



3. Bring your Attention to the Here and Now

Right Here, Right Now, Am I OK? This is an interesting question to ask ourselves because often our mind will quickly pull us away from an OK here and now, into the future which may be less certain and more anxiety provoking. There may be circumstances where you choose to extend this to others you care about too. The purpose of this step is to [rest in what currently is](#). Right now, am I well? Right now do I have the essentials I need? Right now are those I care about safe? Etc. This step therefore seeks to prevent us being pulled into “what if” thinking and scenarios which fuel anticipatory anxiety and distress.

Therefore, if feeling anxious, learn to recognize where your mind has taken you. Is it in the present or the future? The past can also create anxiety and distress e.g. mulling over the implications of a news story and then wondering if it will happen to you or someone you know. This is an example of how our mind can time travel very easily from the past to the future, bypassing the present and as a result, generating anxiety and other negative emotions.



4. Control the things you can and let go of the things you can't

Follow the Government and health guidelines to protect yourself and others but do not focus your attention on things which you cannot influence. For more information, see the handout – “Control vs Letting Go in Uncertain Times”.



5. Connect with the outside world

On a daily basis, get outside if you can (within the Government Guidelines which apply to you). Despite the spread of the virus, the seasons are changing and it is helpful to be reminded that normality still exists in the midst of chaos, change and uncertainty. **Engage with nature using all your senses.** Allow yourself to feel the sun or wind on your skin. Notice plants, trees, flowers, colours, etc. Listen to birdsong or the rustling of leaves. Breathe, and notice any fragrances of soil, vegetation or flowers. Track the air as it enters and leaves your body. Let yourself be soothed by the beauty around you. Even if you are self-isolating and not going outside at all, look outside your window and focus on the sky, a garden, or a window box of plants, for example.



6. Do a brain dump

Writing down recurrent worries can help us to realise that while it feels as though our head is full of rushing thoughts, actually it is often the same few things which are going round and round. It helps to be really specific about what it is that is worrying you, rather than being general e.g. rather than “Coronavirus”, **identify** what specific concerns you have. Then decide or **differentiate** whether this worry or stressor is something over which you can exert any influence or control. Finally, choose what **action** is then appropriate. With stressors where we cannot control or influence the outcome, we need to **let that worry go** because continuing to focus and ruminate is unlikely to lead to helpful problem solving, rather will just deplete our energy and resilience. In these circumstances the appropriate **action** is more likely to be self-care, nurture, distraction or turning towards those things we can do somethings about.

In summary use IDA

Identify (Be specific about the source of worry or stress)	Differentiate (Can I control or influence it?)	Act (What action is appropriate to take?)
	Yes / No	
	Yes / No	
	Yes / No	