

RESILIENCE DURING CORONAVIRUS – LOOKING AFTER OURSELVES AND OUR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

During these unprecedented times, we are being asked to make drastic changes to how we live our lives. Vigilance and practical precautions are essential. Becoming psychologically distressed is not, and only exacerbates our experience. Understandably, many of us have a strong emotional reaction to the changes ahead.

The cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) model offers pragmatic, evidence-based techniques which can help us to get through what lies ahead. Think about how your behaviour, routine and thought processes affect how you feel.

Managing Behaviours and Routines

Exercise and social contact are the best ways to lift and stabilise mood. That is why behavioural activation is a key, evidence-based component of CBT treatment. Yes, we are temporarily restricted in social contact and being in the outside world, including places like gyms, but we can still:

-) Plan our days and routine, aiming for some variety and incorporating mood-enhancing activities every day
-) Walk and exercise outside daily where possible. I suggest two to three times a day, even for brief spells if possible, to break up the working day and family commitments
-) Stay in regular contact with friends and family members by phone, FaceTime or Skype. Schedule calls where possible
-) If working, take regular breaks in the garden or local surroundings. Check the latest guidance on social distancing
-) Use exercise and yoga workout videos available on YouTube
-) Join online mindfulness/meditation groups and classes or take 10 minutes to meditate at points during the day. There are many guided meditations and podcasts prompted by Corona from excellent mindfulness authors and teachers such as Jack Kornfeld and Tara Brach
-) Consider joining a live class online – in the past week, I have heard of online guitar classes, Pilates classes and meditation classes. There are lots of interesting options.
-) Sort things out you normally don't have time for - books, files, photos
-) Exercise or stretch inside if it's raining
-) Limit exposure to media, perhaps to once a day. Over-exposure will increase anxiety, rumination and worry, and won't change the situation. Also, try to counterbalance negative news by proactively seeking out any more positive or encouraging news
-) Limit conversations with others about Corona if you find they are making you more anxious – it's ok to say "Can we talk about some more positive things? What might we do when the restrictions are lifted?"

Managing Thoughts and Emotions

Postpone/timetable worry and negative thoughts - capture and postpone worries and negative thoughts to one or two periods of time per day - outside those times, try to notice you are worrying (most obvious clue: you are feeling anxious), label it and postpone it to your worry and thinking time.

Have ways of reminding yourself to capture thoughts - worrying and rumination may escalate when we are inside a lot. Post-it notes reminding you to capture thoughts and reminder apps on your phone are good ways to switch out of auto-pilot.

In your thinking time, action plan the worries - Can I do anything about this worry? If so, what, when and how? If it's in the future, what would be the actions I might take if this worry materialises? Once you have your action plan, go back to postponing.

If you are concerned about specific people e.g. older parents or asthmatics - think through and schedule the practical actions you can take to help them now and in the future, should a difficult situation arise.

For negative thoughts rather than worries, try to challenge unhelpful and catastrophic thinking. Its only purpose is to make us highly anxious and deprive us of the ability to think clearly if difficult things do happen. Think of logical alternative perspectives: what would a friend or colleague say to me now? How could I think about this differently?

Try to reframe the time ahead and the temporary 'new normal'. Although challenging, it may also be an opportunity to take things more slowly, focus on things we neglect in our busy everyday lives, whether it's the garden, overflowing cupboards or writing. What might you do with the time you would have spent travelling to and from work? See each day as a day closer to this global problem being resolved.

Focus on existing freedoms and opportunities rather than on the activities we feel (temporarily) deprived of. We can still engage in enjoyable activity and have more freedom than some in other countries. Make a list of the things you enjoy that you can still do.

Practice acceptance. A lot of emotional energy can be misspent focusing on our disbelief that something difficult has happened or is happening. Instead, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) advocates **acceptance** of difficult situations - from a position of acceptance, we can feel calmer and less consumed by difficulty.

Be kind to yourself and others who may be struggling. We are human, and such a change to our daily lives is disrupting! It is understandable to struggle with that. When things feel intense, remind yourself that this will pass.

Take a mindful approach to noticing the simple pleasures and activities we often don't have time for or time to dwell on. At the end of each day, bring to mind three pleasant things which have happened during the day. Deliberately focus on them and how they make you feel. Use a mindfulness app for 10 minute breaks during the day or at bedtime.

Lastly, look after yourself and recognise if your mood is suffering. If you are having suicidal thoughts, please contact a medical or mental health professional immediately. Call 111 if you feel in danger of acting on the thoughts or of harming yourself in any way. You can also go to A&E or get an emergency GP appointment if you need to see someone urgently. Similarly if you are experiencing debilitating anxiety, sleeplessness, or other difficult symptoms, get help and support sooner rather than later. Talk to a friend, family member, colleague, or a professional.

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