

# Tips to manage anxiety during times of uncertainty



## What this fact sheet covers:

- Tips to manage anxiety
- Where to get help for anxiety

Feeling anxious, stressed or overwhelmed right now? As health care workers, we are all familiar with working under stress and pressure, but COVID-19 has added new challenges, changing the way we work, live, socialise, and care for our patients. Many of us are facing worries about our health and the health of loved ones, increased pressure and stress from higher workloads, financial stress, and fears about what the future holds.

Even if you're not typically an anxious person, it's common to feel some anxiety during periods of change or uncertainty like the current pandemic.

## Tips to manage anxiety right now

Here are some practical ways that you can keep feelings of anxiety at bay if you are feeling overwhelmed.

### 1. Recognise your anxiety, and acknowledge it is not a sign of weakness

Anxiety can look different, to different people. You may be consumed by thoughts and worrying about the 'what if's, or feeling nervous, panicky, overwhelmed or irritable.

Anxiety can affect you physically; you may notice a racing heart, tight chest, inability to focus, or feel mentally and physically exhausted.

It can also affect your behaviour – you may avoid certain situations, or engage in more subtle avoidance, procrastinate, avoiding thinking about upsetting things, or rely on alcohol, drugs, or other things (e.g., food) to keep the anxiety at bay.

Anxiety, stress, and uncertainty are not signs of weakness- they are understandable feelings in response to unpredictable, unprecedented and stressful situations. Research from past pandemics shows that for most people, anxiety is transient or temporary. Although it is high during the peak of the pandemic, it usually eases as the pandemic is controlled.

### 2. Stay connected with others to talk about your worries, and so you're not socially isolated or lonely

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we socialise, and many health care workers have stopped seeing their loved ones. While we need to physically distance, this doesn't mean we should isolate ourselves from our



social support systems. The extent to which we seek social support during times of stress is a powerful predictor of better mental health.

Even if you can't see loved ones in person at the moment, try to stay connected to supportive people in your life so that you feel less isolated and lonely, and so that you have someone to talk to about your worries. You might need to try new ways of connecting that you don't usually use – an online video platform like Zoom, a text, phone call, letter, or WhatsApp chat – even a brief chat for 5 minutes can help.

### **3. Stay focused on the here and now - and take each day step by step**

When we're faced with uncertainty, our minds frequently respond by 'thinking ahead' and thinking of the bad things that may happen, so that we can plan for and prevent future catastrophes. As health care workers, we are trained to be alert to danger and threat in order to provide the best care for our patients. Sometimes thinking ahead too far in the future can be unhelpful, however, as it leads us to focus on potential possibilities that may or may not happen. Try to focus on the here and now- and take one day at a time.

### **4. Channel your anxiety into action**

When we feel overwhelmed and mentally drained, the problems we are facing can seem too much to handle. We can end up worrying about things outside of our control, and feel as though we don't have the capacity, skills or ability to cope. It helps to recognise when worrying is helpful, versus when it's not helpful, and remember that worrying is not the same as planning, or problem solving.

Some worries are about things outside of our control, like worrying about whether there will be a huge influx of sick patients after the restrictions ease, worrying about how colleagues are coping overseas, a second 'peak' of the COVID-19 outbreak, or that your job or business will be severely affected after the pandemic passes.

However, some worries are about problems that are under our control, and we can do something about them. Ask yourself: Is this worry about a problem I can solve or change?

If the answer is Yes, think of what you can do to address them. By writing problems down, thinking through potential solutions, making a plan, and taking action can help problems feel a little more manageable.

#### **The steps of problem solving are:**

1. Identify the problem & define it (be specific, and focus on one at a time)
2. Brainstorm solutions
3. Weigh up the pros and cons of each solution
4. Decide which solution is likely to be most helpful
5. Make a plan, and put it into action
6. Reflect, review, and decide on your next steps

For some people, this kind of problem solving is something they like to do alone. For other people, brainstorming their problem-solving process with a trusted friend, mentor or colleague generates more ideas and energy. You need to work out what works best for you.

### **5. Take some time out**

As health care workers, we're acutely aware of other people's suffering, and we can't help but feel sadness, guilt, and anxiety when we hear of bad things happening to other people. When we're faced with bad news every day, and around people who are also stressed, anxious and upset, it is almost impossible not to take on this suffering ourselves. Emotions can be contagious.

If you're finding this is happening, try spending a bit of time each taking time out away from the stressful energy, if you can, try and limit conversations that are all excessively focused on COVID-19, and change the topic to something else. Spend a little time each



day doing something completely off the topic of COVID-19 to help you get some time out (e.g. watching TV or movies, reading a book, listening to music or a podcast).

## 6. Be aware of negative thoughts and don't give them too much power

Thoughts can have a huge influence on how we feel. Just because we're thinking something, doesn't always mean it's true. When you notice yourself worrying a lot, or your mind is focused on anxious or negative thoughts, here are some strategies to try.

- Write your thoughts down to see them from a different perspective.
- Do another activity that helps you focus on something else.
- Try thinking of the situation from a different perspective, by asking yourself: *is there a more helpful way of thinking about this? What would I say to a friend who was in the same situation? How likely is the scenario I'm imagining? What is the most likely thing to happen?*
- Take a step back, and try to let worries pass.

## 7. Look after your body - get enough sleep, exercise and eat well

Make sure you are getting enough sleep, exercising, eating well and avoiding unhealthy habits (like smoking and drinking too much). Even though they can be hard to fit into the day when you're feeling exhausted and overwhelmed or when you're working long or

unusual hours, prioritising your health will help you keep on top of your mental health (and your physical health too).

## 8. Remember to breathe - take slow, deep breaths to induce the calming response

When you feel overwhelmed take a few slow, deep breaths to help you calm down. If there are other things that help you relax (e.g. a walk outside, or listening to music) you could try these too.

## 9. If you feel like you are not coping, seek professional advice

After trying these tips, if you're still feeling really overwhelmed you might want to think about getting in touch with a mental health professional. It's okay to ask for help and there are a lot of options so you can choose what suits you best.

## Who can provide help for anxiety?

As well as your GP, there are other health professionals who can help with anxiety, including psychologists, counsellors and psychologists. A detailed list can be found [here](#).

There are also a number of free digital tools and available on the Black Dog website, such as:

- [THIS WAY UP](#) stress or anxiety course
- HeadGear [Google Play](#) | [App Store](#)

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