



Gloucestershire Health and Care
NHS Foundation Trust

Working Well

Your Occupational Health Service

Coronavirus is dominating the news at the moment, and while it's completely normal to feel anxious about it, letting your fears run away with you is unlikely to help.

Anxiety has a useful function in helping to keep us safe, so we're wired up to be more scared of new threats: that way we notice them and take action to protect ourselves. Your anxiety about the new Coronavirus is therefore rational – none of us know what will happen – and helpful – you're more likely to follow precautions like frequent hand washing if you're anxious.

However, for some people, particularly those who already view the world as a dangerous place, this anxiety can easily tip over into panic. Panic makes us unable to think things through, unable to problem solve, unable to cope – and ultimately makes us ill. So if your reaction to the current situation is causing you more problems than the situation itself, what can you do?

Acknowledging your fears might be the first step. Sometimes we are so scared of our own thoughts that we try not to have them. But when we do this they rarely go away for long, often coming back when our resistance to them is lower, like at night. Instead, one way of making them more manageable is to write them down: an invisible enemy is more frightening than one we can look in the eye. When you read through your list, consider what you might be able to *do*. Taking control can make us feel less powerless. So following all the hand washing advice, making plans for homeworking, preparing for possible self-isolation are all potential actions that can make us feel more in control. You can't control the pandemic but you can control your response.

If you're getting very anxious and you're already doing all that you can, you might want to **consider how great a part this virus is playing in your life right now**. Sure, it's important. But it may not be helpful to immerse yourself in 24/7 news, get constant notifications on social media, or continue to fuel your fear by constantly talking to other panicky people about it. Better perhaps to check the news just once a day, and then only from a reputable source. Notice too the language that you are using to describe what's happening. Media moguls have newspapers to sell, so it serves their purpose to talk about 'a huge leap' in numbers. Just saying 'the numbers went up' wouldn't be nearly such a good headline! So try to keep it factual. Scaremongering is a bit like gossiping – it's tempting to do, it spreads fast, and it usually hurts people.

Next, **think about your self-care**. There has never been a more important time to prioritise your health; so exercising, eating well, not drinking too much, and getting enough sleep really will help. Spending time doing something you enjoy is vital, not selfish. Several

times a day, stop for a moment and just breathe. Take time to learn some breathing, relaxation, and grounding techniques, and use them – you might find this link useful <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress/>. All of these things will help reduce stress, and stress lowers our immune system, so is best avoided if you can. All of us are under pressure at the moment, but pressure turns to stress when we feel unable to cope.

Keeping a sense of perspective can be very difficult, but really will help. Remember that we all face uncertainty about our survival every day, and regularly take risks. If you find yourself constantly having ‘what if...’ thoughts, try to convert them to ‘then...’ thoughts. In other words, focus on the problem immediately in front of you, and do what you can about that. The ‘what if’s’ may not come to pass anyway, but if they do, ‘then’ they become the problem in front of you and that’s the time to try to deal with them. If you’re beset with ‘what if’s...’ at bedtime and they’re stopping you getting to sleep, it’s probably worth getting up again and writing them down, as you’re more likely to have the resilience to fight them in the morning than in the middle of the night.

Try to keep a sense of humour. It can be a great comfort to have a laugh when things feel particularly bleak. Gallows humour exists precisely because it helps us to cope, so it’s good not to take ourselves too seriously, even in a really serious situation. Don’t feel bad for laughing – but do remember to be kind.

One of the good things to have come out of this pandemic is the kindness that people are showing to one another, and the community groups that are coming together to help and protect the most vulnerable in our neighbourhoods. Yes, we have also seen selfishness, but probably the people fighting over hand sanitiser are just very very scared. Trying to understand, and be kind, will probably make you feel better than joining in the fight.

It might help to think of other positive outcomes from this new situation we find ourselves in. It is helping many of us to put lesser worries into perspective, and to feel grateful for a lot that we have in our lives. Ironically, in the long run it may save more lives than it takes, because of the reduction in air pollution – satellite pictures over China are already showing a huge reduction in nitrous dioxide. It might lead us to re-think the way we live, our patterns of work, the value we put on our most vulnerable – and the funding we give our NHS.

We cannot make everything alright. Our ability to tolerate uncertainty is going to be tested. But acceptance is a true measure of our resilience. Let’s wash our hands and take a big breath!

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