COVID-19: Our top tips for looking after your wellbeing

The University of Leicester Counselling and Wellbeing service are aware that as a community we face challenging times ahead whilst we are dealing with the developing COVID-19 situation.

The current Government guidelines for social distancing and self-isolation will play an important part in our efforts to reduce the impact of this virus, but we understand that prolonged periods of time in self-isolation with limited face-to-face contact can create challenges for our mental health.

This COVID-19 mental health guide sets out the steps that you can take to safeguard and promote your own mental wellbeing and that of others around you.

This guide also contains links to accurate sources of information, useful exercises that you can practice, and practical support that is available to you. In this guide, we cover the following information:

- The impact that COVID-19, self-isolation and social distancing can have on your mental health

- Helpful steps you can take to protect your welllbeing

- The role that mindfulness can play in looking after your wellbeing

- Support services that are available to you if you are experiencing mental health issues during the COVID-19 outbreak

- Practical support that you can access to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on your finances and studies

How can COVID-19 have an impact on my mental health?

TheCOVID-19 outbreak is likely to impact on all individuals' mental health to some extent irrespective of any pre-existing mental health issues as this is an unprecedented and fast-moving situation.

It is perfectly normal for individuals to experience heightened anxiety. Particularly around things such as health and finance, social isolation, loss of motivation due to a change in routine, increased stress, challenges in dealing with negative or intrusive thoughts and overcoming avoidance of feared situations.

Some of these issues can also directly impact our physical wellbeing, negatively effecting sleep patterns, eating behaviours or exacerbating physical symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression. This means it is important to look after your physical and mental health together to promote your overall wellbeing.

How can I manage the impact of COVID-19 on my mental health?

The most challenging element of the COVID-19 outbreak, social distancing and self-isolation is its ever-changing unpredictable nature and our isolation from the things and people who would normally create a distraction from the anxiety and isolation this leads to.

Anxiety, isolation and low mood thrive on and are fostered by feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and not being in control of an overwhelming situation. However, there are some simple small steps that can be taken to help you to feel more in control, able to help yourself and others, and to promote optimism and resilience for the future.

Helpful steps you can take to protect your wellbeing
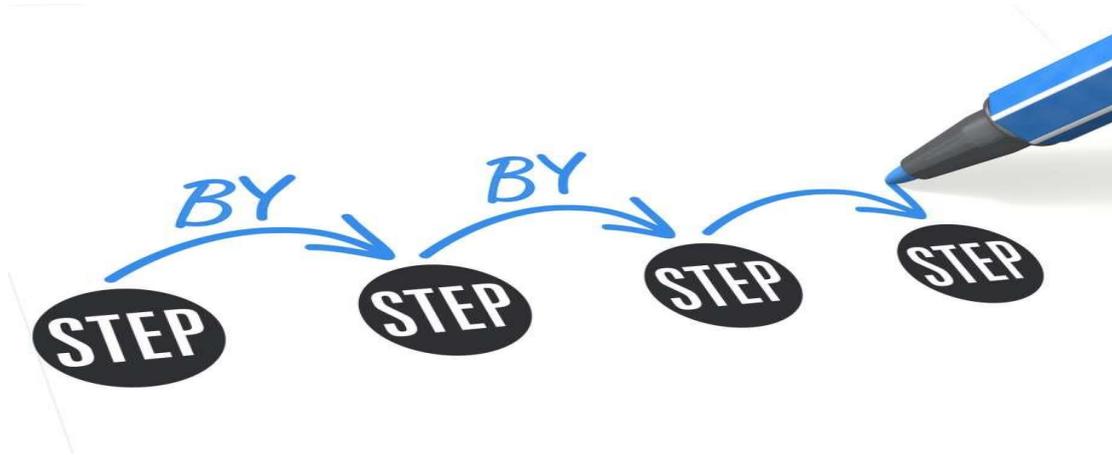
- **Look after your physical health. This can have a positive effect on your mental health. Please check the NHS guidance for updated advice on management of Coronavirus symptoms -** https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-advice/
- **Stick to a routine. This can help to provide a feeling of having structure and purpose, which will help to improve motivation and act as a buffer to mental health issues**
- **Try and incorporate variety to any routine. This will reduce boredom and keep you engaged, helping the day to pass more quickly**
- **Try something different or learn a new skill. The following link takes you to a linkedln post about an Instagram service offering videos on cooking, yoga and other activities which are great for dealing with feelings of isolation -** https://www.linkedin.com/posts/phil-bridges-57005087_the-mind-map-are-launching-a-series-of-instagram-activity-6646169212513587200-i3jv
- **Be kind to yourself. Prioritise self-care by committing to a specific amount of time for yourself each day, set yourself kind goals and expectations, and engage in things that you enjoy**
- **If you are working or studying from home, maintain a healthy balance between your work and relaxation, taking regular breaks, and rewarding yourself when you achieve your goals**
- **If ordinarily you find it challenging to go out, make sure you leave the house for a few minutes each day even if it is just to spend time in the garden if you are self-isolating**
- **Keep connected. Stay in touch with family and friends through messages, phone calls or videocalls**
- **Read a book. Maybe something that offers you some escapism could be a positive distraction**
- **Create a to do list and work through it, ticking off each item as you complete it to acknowledge your achievements.**

- **Engage in physical exercise. Go for a walk somewhere quiet, practice exercise or yoga videos, or go for a jog. Also see NHS guidance to easy exercises you can practice at home** - https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/easy-low-impact-exercises/
- **Eat well. Maintain a healthy, balanced diet, with some treats in moderation as motivation**
- **Stay hydrated. This is important for both physical and mental health**
- **Keep a normal sleep routine. This will re-in force your routine and help your day to feel more structured**

- **Make sure you have medication for physical and mental ill health conditions. Remember that if you do run out of medication, many GP surgeries and pharmacies offer the option to order prescriptions over the phone or online.**

What to avoid!

- **Avoid watching, reading or listening to the news for periods of time if this is causing you to feel anxious or distressed**
- **Mute alerts for a period if updates are causing anxiety or distress**
- **Have periods of time away from social media**
- **Seek information updates at specific times**
- **Avoid updates from biased media sources or social media: Stick to government and NHS websites for reliable information which can be accessed at** https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response; and https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/
- **Mute wats app groups if these are causing distress**
- **Avoid over-exposure to negative content in films or TV such as topics relating to apocalypse**

How can I deal with anxiety related to COVID-19?

It is completely understandable that you might be feeling anxious amid the current COVID-19 outbreak and the rapidly changing guidelines for how we should respond to it. The following steps outline some guidance on how you can manage your anxiety during this challenging time.

- **Identify your triggers: Think about situations which might cause anxiety and how they affect you. Are you experiencing physical symptoms, negative or intrusive thoughts, or are you imagining the worst case scenario?**
- **Recognise how you deal with your anxiety: Reflect on how you deal with anxiety-provoking situations. Do you avoid, delay or escape them? Do you rely on safety behaviours such as fiddling with clothing, making an escape plan, avoiding eye contact or taking medication to cope with an anxiety-provoking situation.**
- **Make a hierarchy of your fears: Make a list of the things that make you anxious and rank them in terms of the anxiety they create. When working towards facing your fears, start with the things that make you feel the least anxious.**
- **Break things down: Take small steps towards facing your fears. Start with situations which make you feel less anxious, gradually reduce the situations that you avoid, and rate the importance of any safety behaviours, gradually dropping them in order of importance starting with the least important.**
- **Focus on the things that you can control: Anxiety thrives on a feeling of not being in control which can result in you feeling overwhelmed. Therefore, focus on the things that you can control, which is likely to include how you respond to an anxiety-provoking situation.**
- **Monitor your anxiety: Facing your fears is an important step in overcoming your anxiety, but this should be done gradually and you should avoid stepping beyond your comfort zone before you are ready. This can be achieved through monitoring your anxiety by rating it out of 100 as you are unlikely to cope well with an anxiety-provoking situation if you are overwhelmed by your anxiety.**
- **Take some time: If you feel overwhelmed by your anxiety, take a step back to stop and think so that you are not instantly reacting to the situation. It is OK to temporarily step away from the situation which is making you feeling anxious and then returning when you have calmed down.**
- **Visualise: Imagine yourself coping with the anxiety-provoking situation successfully.**
- **Deal with the physical symptoms:** Counteract the body's adrenaline response to anxiety by using that energy healthily through mindfulness, visualisation exercises or engaging in physical exercise.
- **Deal with your negative thoughts: use positive self-talk to challenge your negative thoughts and imagine what steps you could take if your feared worst case scenario came to fruition.**
- **Reward yourself: When you face your fears, reward yourself for your courage and acknowledge the important steps you are taking irrespective of how well you cope in the anxiety-provoking situation.**

- **Access help: Talk to people when you're experiencing anxiety so they can support you, access emotional support or counselling services, explore the self-help resources below.**

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https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/anxiety.htm
https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/anxiety-self-help-guide
http://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/tewv/leaflets/selfhelp/Anxiety.pdf
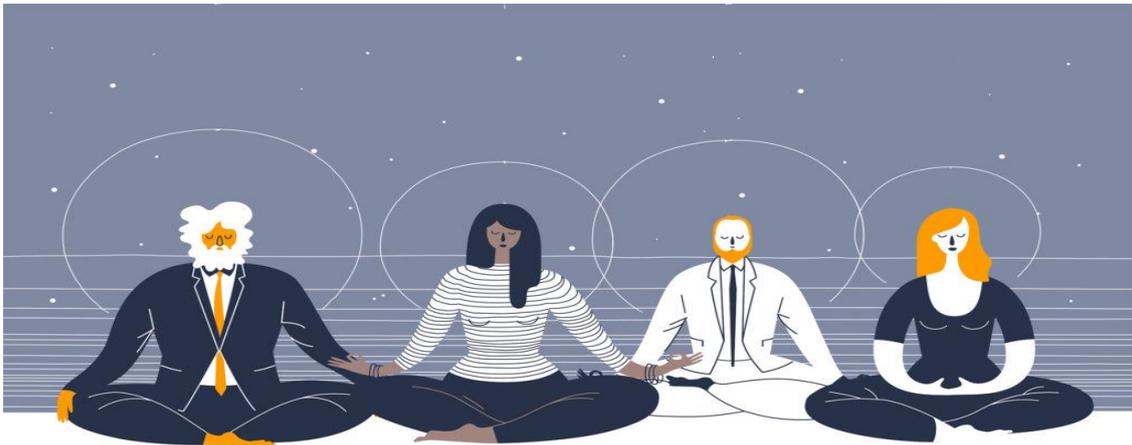https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Anxiety
https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~/media/CCI/Mental%20Health%20Professionals/Anxiety/Anxiety%20-%20Information%20Sheets/Anxiety%20Information%20Sheet%20-%2001%20-%20What%20is%20Anxiety.pdf
http://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/penninecare/leaflets/selfhelp/Anxiety.pdf
https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-mental-illness/learn-more-about-conditions/anxiety-disorders/

Can mindfulness be good for my wellbeing whilst I'm self-isolating or practicing social distancing?


When we spend a prolonged period at home without our usual levels of social contact or day-to-day structure, we can lose our sense of time and connection with the present moment.

Mindfulness can be a really positive way of addressing this issue, helping to increase our presence in the here and now, providing a means of reducing anxiety or enabling us to connect with a safe space when we are struggling to be present in our current environment.

The following grounded breathing and controlled muscle relaxation exercise is useful for providing a connection with the present moment when you are feeling anxious :https://stresscontrolaudio.com/home

5 Senses grounding exercise
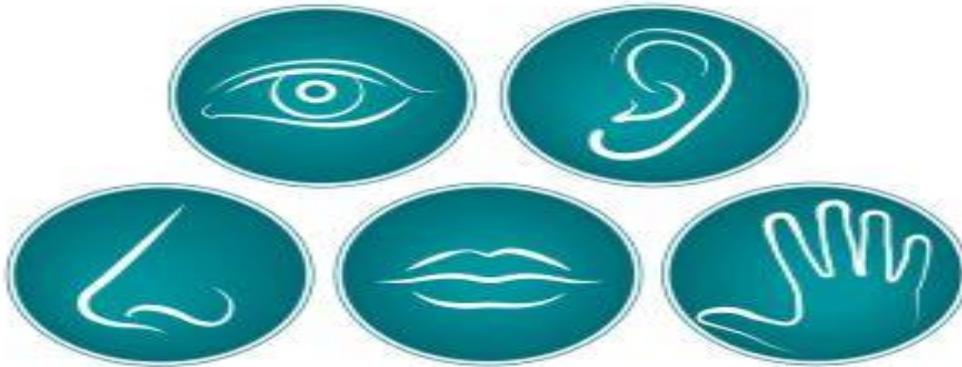
This exercise can help you to connect back to the present when feeling anxious:

- ☺ **Take 3 belly breathes**
- ☺ **5 things you can see**
- ☺ **4 things you can feel**
- ☺ **3 things you can hear**
- ☺ **2 things you can smell**
- ☺ **1 thing you can taste**
- ☺ **Take 3 belly breathes**

Safe space guided imagery

If you are self-isolating in a place that doesn't always feel safe for you, or you are feeling overwhelmed by your emotions, this safe space guided meditation can be a useful exercise to practice: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33EjDvMlW0k

Mindful thinking exercise

This "leaves on a stream" guided imagery exercise is helpful for learning to notice your thoughts rather than being drawn in or overwhelmed by them. It is particularly helpful when you are experiencing negative thought patterns, intrusive thoughts or you are feeling overwhelmed by your thoughts. You can access this exercise at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1C8hwj5LXw

Headspace

To access more mindfulness exercises download the Headspace APP:
https://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

What support can I access if I'm struggling with my mental health during self-isolation and social distancing?

- **The Help Hub are offering free 20 minute skype, Facetime or telephone sessions for individuals who are experiencing isolation or anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak which are accessible from 23/03/2020:** https://www.thehelphub.co.uk/

- **Access self-help resources: The NHS has some good short self-help videos on low mood, anxiety, unhelpful thinking, low self-esteem and sleep difficulties:** https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/moodzone-mental-wellbeing-audio-guides/

- **Turn2Me are offering online peer support, online support groups and online counselling. For more information access:** https://www.turn2me.ie/

- **My Mind are providing online counselling and psychotherapy nationwide. For more information please email:** hq@mymind.org**; or access:** https://mymind.org/

- **Relate are offering increased access to their live chat, webcam and telephone counselling services. You can find more information on:** https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/talk-someone

- **Whilst Samaritans have suspended their face-to-face counselling service, they are still offering support via telephone and email. If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, please contact Samaritans by calling 116 123 or emailing:** jo@samaritans.org

What practical support is available to me?

During this challenging time the government and service providers have issued several support measures they will be putting in place to reduce the pressure on households due to coronavirus.

Government and service providers support measures:

- **Mortgage holidays for 3 months - contact your mortgage provider directly to seek support on what they can do to help you**
- **Statutory sick pay from the first day of isolation**
- **Energy companies are looking at ways they can support customers with pre-paid meters. Contact your provider to see if they are posting cards to people who are self-isolating**

- **You can also access financial guidance regarding Coronavirus from the Citizens Advice Bureau:** https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/health/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you/

If you are worried about the impact of Coronavirus on your studies, access the University's webpages regarding our response to COVID-19 at: https://le.ac.uk/coronavirus