

Looking after your Mental Health during the Coronavirus Outbreak

The past number of weeks have undoubtedly been the most challenging of our lifetime. Uncertainty and anxiety hangs in the air, and at times it seems like we can almost touch it. Coronavirus, or Covid-19, has dominated every aspect of our lives for a relatively short time, yet it feels as if our carefree existences, when we could go where we want, hug, shake hands and generally behave as we wished were a lifetime ago. Media and social media are full of doomsday revelations, cures and graphs and everything appears out of our control, unsure and uncertain. It is only to be expected that anxiety levels are raised for most people, but for some this can become a bigger problem. It can lead to trouble sleeping, irrational thoughts, increased physical symptoms or even panic attacks.

It is so important to be aware that, at the best of times, very little in our lives is directly within our control, except our own behaviours. How we react to a situation is something we can manage, or at least attempt to manage. Even in the midst of what seems like chaos and pandemonium, there are very concrete things we can do to safeguard both our physical and mental wellbeing, and these are where we can focus our energies in the coming weeks.

1. Physical Health

You should continue to make yourself familiar with and follow the guidelines as laid out and updated by the Public Health Agency. You will find these at:
<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/covid-19-coronavirus>.

Hand hygiene, coughing and sneezing into the crook of your arm or a tissue, using and immediately binning tissues, and social distancing are your key defences in protecting yourself and in preventing the spread of coronavirus. These are extremely powerful defences, so it is important they become, not only part of your physical routine, but also of your mental health routine. Whenever you feel you have no control over what is happening, remind yourself that you are following the advice of all the leading medical agencies worldwide, including the World Health Organisation.

2. Limit your Exposure to News

You may find yourself obsessively watching or listening to news channels, or constantly updating your social media apps. This is understandable, but ultimately feeds anxiety. It is certainly important to stay informed, but a constant stream of information is not only unnecessary, but leaves your body and mind in a state of high alert, always waiting for danger, never able to switch off. This can impact sleep, contribute to racing thoughts, increase stress and leave you irritable, and perhaps give rise to panic attacks.

In addition, the more news to which you are exposed, the more likely it is that at least some of it is fake. There are certain sources of information which should be trusted, such as the Public Health Agency above, the Health Services Executive in the Republic of Ireland (who also have an excellent set of resources for mental health), or the World Health Organisation (WHO). WHO actually have a Myth Busters site which is excellent if you are ever confused

about information you have read (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>).

You might also consider limiting your time online. Perhaps set particular times of day when you check in, or at the very least, take regular breaks.

3. Maintain your Routine

As the restrictions on where you can go and what you can do are changing day by day, it seems like normal routines are spiralling out of control. Even what you watch or listen to has been impacted with the cancellation of sporting and entertainment events. Routine can impact your mental wellbeing in a number of ways. It obviously brings a certain degree of predictability and certainty to your life— you know what to expect, what’s coming next, and that can make you feel safe. When there is apparent chaos, these further disruptions just add to feelings of uncertainty and lack of control. Also, evidence suggests, sleep is better when you have an active, fulfilling day, and stress and anxiety levels are better managed when a good routine is in place.

So, how do you manage a routine when the rug has been completely pulled from under your feet? There are still many aspects of your behaviour and life that you can manage, so you should try to keep some structure to your day.

- ***Sleep:*** when you are out of routine, this is often one of the first things to go by the wayside. What is the point in going to bed at your usual time if you don’t have to get up in the morning? While it is ok to apply this logic occasionally, if this becomes “the new routine”, it can have serious consequences for your mental wellbeing and anxiety levels. As far as possible, try to stick to regular bedtimes and get up at the same time each morning, even if worry may keep you awake at times. This also means, that once the crisis is past, which it will be eventually, it will be easier to slip back into normal routines again!
- ***Diet:*** Again, it would be easy to slip into bad habits, but try to maintain a healthy diet, and eat at regular times. Avoid overindulgence in alcohol and caffeine, as both can have a negative impact on physical and mental health.
- ***Exercise:*** Exercise is a natural anti-depressant and has been proven to relieve both anxiety and stress. Currently, walking outdoors is allowed, as long as social distancing guidelines are maintained. Get as creative as you like otherwise – lots of yoga studios, gyms etc. are free streaming their classes online, so why not take the opportunity to join from the privacy of your own home? Dancing with the kids, or even walking up and down the stairs, doing some gardening, any kind of movement on a regular basis will benefit you.

4. Stay socialised

This may seem like a particularly hard one, especially for those who live alone, but we are fortunate to live in an era when we have never been more connected. While it is obviously not, and never will be, the same as an in person connection, internet-based apps like WhatsApp, FaceTime and Skype mean we can interact with family and friends much more

easily than ever before. People are hosting virtual parties and concerts, coffee mornings and simple chats. Make sure you stay in touch with those you care about most.

For those who are living alone, and whose family connections are limited, our sense of community is strong. Thankfully, now that the initial panic that swept through the nation in the earlier days of March has eased somewhat, the kindness and good-natured qualities of the vast majority individuals are coming to the fore. Groups of volunteers are banding together across Ireland, North and South, to provide whatever is needed to those most vulnerable in our society. Deliveries of groceries, prescriptions and other necessities are being organised through local groups, including GAA clubs and community forums, and listening ear services are available. See our website and Facebook page at CALMS for useful details on some of these groups. This list will be updated regularly.

5. Make some plans

Whether you are young or old, have children, live alone or with others, one of your biggest enemies over the coming weeks is likely to be boredom. But what if you were to see every day as an opportunity to do something we've put off, or a chance to do something you've never done before, instead of looming large and empty ahead of you? I'm not saying that this will always be easy, or even possible every day, but maybe on most days? This changes your perspective. Personally, my hot press will be tackled, having promised myself I will do it for over two years now!

These days might provide you with the chance to spend time with your children or partner, to sort out your family photographs or videos, to clear out a wardrobe, or paint a room. Maybe you could take up a new skill and finally use the paints you bought a number of years ago or pick up the guitar you promised you'd learn? You could teach your children how to cook – restaurants and chefs are sharing all kinds of recipes for exactly this purpose. You might even see the bottom of your ironing basket, who knows?

6. Manage your emotions

In the face of such difficult and challenging situations, it is understandable and normal that we might feel afraid, anxious or overwhelmed. The problem is that when we feel like this, we can focus on thoughts of powerlessness and uncertainty. These, along with other factors like obsessive news watching, disruptions to routine, social isolation etc., trigger physical reactions within our body, as it prepares itself to protect us from what it believes is a real and imminent physical threat. These symptoms can include, amongst others, palpitations, difficulty breathing, nausea, sweating, dizziness, and pins and needles.

This cycle can continue indefinitely unless it is interrupted. Again, this is where you can control your reaction. You can change where you focus your attention – you can challenge your thoughts as you did earlier, by reminding yourself that you are not actually powerless, but by heeding the public health guidelines you are in fact exerting a significant degree of control over the situation.

You can also disrupt your thinking by using some basic grounding techniques:

- 5-4-3-2-1: Name 5 red things you can see, 4 yellow, 3 blue, 2 green and 1 white (you can pick any colours, in any order). Alternatively, 5 things I can see, 4 things I can touch, 3 things I can hear, 2 things I can smell and 1 thing I can taste.
- Count backwards from 100 in 4's.
- Animal Alphabet – A is for aardvark, b is for bear etc.
- Recite a favourite poem or sing the words to a song.
- Listen to music – have a playlist on your phone that helps to calm or soothe.
- Watch a podcast or a youtube clip – maybe a scene from a favourite movie or tv show.
- Describe everything you are wearing in the smallest of detail.
- Download Calm or Headspace apps and do one of their guided meditations.

7. Breathe

Remember, your body is reacting to what it thinks is a very real and immediate physical danger. It is therefore ready to either run from or stay and fight that threat – the so-called fight or flight response. One of the consequences of the fight or flight response can be *respiratory alkalosis*, which is an imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the bloodstream caused by hyperventilating. It often results in dizziness, light-headedness, dry mouth, tightness in the chest and tingling or pins and needles in arms and/or legs. Breathing exercises are a proven and effective method of restoring balance to the body and lessening the effects of heightened anxiety and panic. In addition, practised regularly, they can reduce stress and anxiety long term. Even just breathing in a focussed manner for thirty seconds, three times a day has been shown to have hugely beneficial effects on stress, blood pressure, sleep, improving concentration and focus and reducing depressive thoughts. The Calm and Headspace apps mentioned earlier have great breathing exercises, but try this simple 16 second box breath for a start. Trace the side of a square in the air, on the palm of your hand or on your knee with your finger for each step.

1. Breathe in for 4 seconds (side 1)
2. Hold for 4 seconds (side 2)
3. Breathe out for 4 seconds (side 3)
4. Hold for 4 seconds (side 4, complete the square)

Doing this twice should immediately start to reduce your anxiety levels. And please remember, practise makes better! Breathing is a skill, and like any skill it needs to be learned.

To sum up....

Even if you do all of the above, there will be times in the coming weeks when you may feel out of control and that's ok. Remember, this will be behind us at some point. All we can do is manage our own reactions to this challenging situation as best as we can, and remember that we are not in this alone. If it all becomes too much, please do reach out. Even in the middle of a crisis, there will always be someone to listen. We are all finding different ways to work and function, but those of us to work to help and support will continue to find a way to do just that. We will be here.