

Managing Your Mental Health During Covid-19



This booklet has been designed to try and help you understand and manage any difficulties that you may be experiencing following the outbreak of Covid-19.

If you find any of the contents of this booklet upsetting or distressing, please refer to pages 19 and 20 for information on support in your local area. You can also contact your GP, or call the SlaM 24 hour helpline on 0800 731 2864.

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What is Covid-19?

According to the World Health Organisation Covid—19 or the Coronavirus is a disease that affects the respiratory system i.e. your breathing. For the majority of people who catch Covid-19 symptoms will be mild to moderate; similar to the flu. The majority of people who have the disease will not need any additional medical treatment.

There are some people who are at risk of complications. These people normally have pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes, asthma, cardiovascular disease, or cancer. If you are in a high risk category your GP will likely have already contacted you to discuss the risk and advice you to self-isolate. If you are worried that you are in a high risk category but have not spoken to your GP you can either call them or call the NHS helpline on 111.

How Do I Stay Safe From Covid-19?

The British Government has put the country into “lockdown”. This means we are to only leave our homes to collect food, for health reasons, or for essential work. You can also leave the house for one form of exercise a day. We should also not be meeting socially with people we do not live with, and trying to maintain a 2-metre distance from others where possible when outside.

Beyond these instructions the best way to reduce our own risk of catching Covid-19 is to follow the same advice used to avoid catching the flu:

- 1) Wash hands after being outside or before eating.
- 2) Cough/sneeze into your elbow— not your hands
- 3) Dispose of used tissues as soon as possible and wash hands

For more information on what you can/cannot do go to www.gov.uk

You can also find more information about Covid-19 at www.who.int

Covid-19 has affected my mental health

During the current lockdown many people are struggling with their mental health. For some this means that their pre-existing mental health difficulties are getting worse; for others it is the first time they are experiencing mental health difficulties. No matter which category you may fall into, struggling with your mental health is a totally understandable and valid reaction to the current crisis. You are not alone.

For many people that already suffer from anxiety, a common characteristic is difficulty in tolerating uncertainty. So it's no surprise that the current situation of uncertainty around Covid-19 is causing even more difficulty for people to manage their pre-existing anxiety disorders, particularly health anxieties and generalised anxiety disorder.

Others with conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) may find the current focus on contamination and infection quite distressing and as a result may experience an increase in negative thoughts and compulsive behaviours. Furthermore, people with conditions such as claustrophobia or panic attacks may find the current government advice of staying at home increase the feelings and thoughts of being "trapped".

This booklet is aimed at helping you to understand and manage some of the feelings that may be coming up for you during lockdown. It also includes some useful contacts should you feel that your symptoms are deteriorating or you need support with a specific issue.

Thoughts and Feelings that can develop during the Pandemic

Thoughts:

- Why is this happening?
- If I was not so weak I would be able to cope better
- If only I had done things differently when this began
- It's all my fault that I can't cope
- The world is a dangerous place
- I can't trust anyone
- My life is over, I have no future



Feelings:

- Anxious
- Fearful
- Angry
- Empty
- Helpless
- Unsafe
- Ashamed
- Guilty
- Restless
- I feel like no one can understand me
- I feel detached or disconnected from others





Why do I feel like this?

It may seem strange but worry and anxiety are part of how our brain tries to protect us. It comes from a part of our brain we call the “**threat system**”.

Simply put, the **threat system** is designed to recognise and respond to danger. Danger in this case means anything that puts our safety or the safety of a loved one at risk. Every time we see/hear/think about the coronavirus our **threat system** picks up on it and begins to react. Worry/anxiety are the **threat system's** way of trying to understand the threat and prepare for every possible outcome. Physical feelings are your **threat system** getting your body ready to run from or fight the threat— like it would if it were a person or animal rather than a disease.

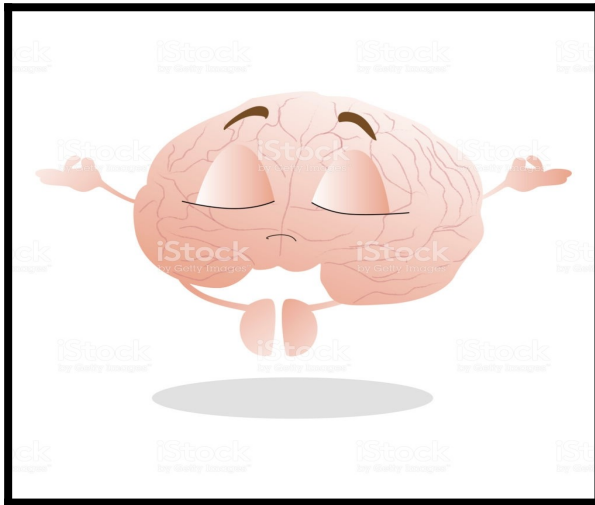
In response to our **threat system** we will change our behaviour. We may not go out at all, find ourselves cleaning excessively, or struggle to leave our beds in the morning. This is all part of your brain trying to keep you safe. Unfortunately it can make us feel worse. Not leaving the house at all confirms that it is dangerous outside, so our **threat system** will keep going, making us feel more anxious and worried.

Calming the Mind

We can do things to reduce the impact of the threat system. This may be through using techniques to activate our **soothing system**. This is a system that tells us we are safe and signals for us to feel calm. Activating the **soothing system** will reduce difficult feelings like anxiety or worry. Techniques include mindful breathing (p.), Progressive Muscle relaxation (p.), Social Connection etc.

We can also reduce the impact of the threat system by doing what we can to take care of our physical health needs e.g. getting the correct nutrition and enough sleep. This will make it easier to manage the feelings associated with the threat system.

We can also schedule some activity into our days e.g. walking, or art. This will help your brain to recognise that you are not in immediate danger, as well as taking your mind away from your worry.

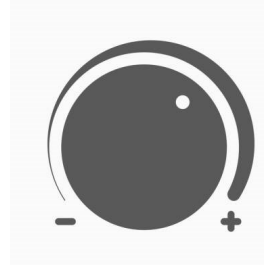


It feels like I'm struggling more than others?

Although everyone has a threat system some people will find it easier to activate their soothing system and engage in activity than others.

If you were already struggling with your mental health then you may be finding the current pandemic harder to manage. It is normal for Covid-19 to trigger difficulties with anxiety, depression, PTSD, OCD etc.

Imagine the threat system is like a dial on a radio. The more it is turned up the louder and harder to ignore it will be.



If you were already struggling with your mental health the dial would have already been turned up.

Our dial will also be more sensitive if we have experienced more trauma in our lives. This is because our threat system learns to react stronger and faster each time. So instead of going from 0-5 our dial has gone from 4-12.

The techniques in this book have been put together with this in mind. Doing a few minutes of mindful breathing, and making small gradual improvements to your diet will still help to turn down the dial.

Once the lockdown has lifted you can then seek professional support to build on these skills and develop a better understanding of your difficulties to reduce the dial down further.

Remember: You are doing the best you can and your threat system is just trying to keep you safe. It is ok to take time and practice to reduce the effect of your threat system.

If at any point you feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with your symptoms you can always contact the SLaM 24h helpline on 0800 731 2864 .

Covid-19 specific steps

(FACE COVID)

Focus on what's in your control

Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

Come back into your body

Engage in what you're doing

Committed action

Opening up

Values

Identify resources

Disinfect and distance

Focus on what is in your control

You can't control what happens in the future, therefore can't control the outcome of Covid-19. Focus on what is in your control i.e. following the government guidelines to keep you and your family safe.

Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

What thoughts and feelings are you identifying inside of you? Write them down, acknowledge them silently and kindly.

Come back into your body

Connect with your physical body. Notice any body sensations. Find your way of grounding yourself i.e. stretch your arms and neck, feel your feet on the ground, slowly straighten up your back, stretch your fingers etc.

Engage in what you're doing

Focus your attention on the activity that you are doing. Ground yourself using five senses (see page).

Committed Action

Committed action is action you take because it's truly important to you i.e. what are simple ways to look after yourself or your family; can you help someone else with a task or a chore etc.

Opening up

Opening up to your feelings and being kind to yourself. Acknowledging your feelings (or lack of feelings, you may feel detached from them) and recognising that this is a normal reaction.

Values

What are kind ways that you can look after yourself and others?

What are kind words you can say to yourself?

Identifying resources

Identifying resources for support and advice. For example, friends, family members, befriending services, health professionals, knowing where to access emergency numbers if in crisis etc.

Disinfect and Distance

You have heard this so many times by now - but here it comes again:

- Wash your hands regularly and practice social distancing when out and about. BUT, please remember social distancing means physical distancing from others not emotional distancing. We all need to stay connected to our social networks, family and friends.

A video outlining these steps can be found on Youtube: Face covid—how to respond correctly to the corona crisis by Dr Russ Harris

How else can I help myself?

There are a number of steps that you can take to help yourself to better manage your symptoms and improve your general wellbeing.

The first step towards recovery is to start taking small steps to enhance how you care for yourself by:

- Improving the quality of your sleep



- Improving your diet and levels of hydration



- Exercising



- Social Connection



- Media



The next few pages of this booklet will guide you through how you can work on improving the quality of your sleep, improving your diet and levels of exercise.

Sleep

Below are some strategies that are known to improve the quality of sleep. Sleep habits can often take a few weeks to shift, so we recommend that you try and practice these changes for at least 3-4 weeks.

- **Get** into a regular routine by waking up at the same time every morning (e.g. 7am).
- **Make** sure that you do not drink any coffee or tea after 5pm.
- **Make** your bedroom as dark as possible when you go to bed at night.
- **Make** your bed as comfortable as possible (e.g. covers/duvets to make sure you do not get either too hot or cold at night).
- **Make** sure that you eat your evening meal at least three hours before bedtime.
- **Develop** a nightly routine that you can follow every night (e.g. a warm shower/bath or listening to relaxing music at bedtime). This will also help you to go to bed at the same time every night.
- **Practice** mindful breathing or progressive muscle relaxation before you get in to bed.
- Once in bed, if you are not asleep within 30 minutes, try getting up and doing something relaxing for a few minutes (e.g. reading a magazine) before returning to bed.

Exercise

Regular gentle exercise is known to help improve both our physical and mental health

- Aim to do some exercise like walking, jogging, cycling or swimming every day. If you do not regularly exercise, start small and then build up (e.g. start with walking for 5-minutes a day and then gradually increase it to 30 minutes a day).

Nutrition

- Eating regular healthy and nutritious meals and staying hydrated is known to improve both our physical and mental health
- Try and eat regularly every day and include as many vegetables in your meals
- Try to drink plenty of water (e.g. 6-8 glasses)
- Try to avoid or limit the amount of alcohol that you consume

Social Connections

Spending time with family and friends is very important for our wellbeing. There are moments when we all need a bit of support, so try reaching out to someone you feel comfortable speaking to. This could be a family member, a friend or a health professional. You could also try to schedule contact with them in advance, like you would if you were meeting face to face. This contact could be by:

- Speaking on the phone
- Using a phone or computer to video call
- Writing letters or emails

Limit exposure to news

It is very tempting to constantly be checking different media outlets for the latest news on Covid-19. However, this can often lead to increase on anxiety levels. Make sure you have 'down time' from media and limit watching/reading the news to once or twice a day, preferably not just before you go to sleep.

Helpful techniques to manage difficulties that can arise during lockdown

The next few pages will guide you through a few specific techniques that have been designed to people better manage some of the difficulties that they may experience following during lockdown

The techniques included are:

- Mindful breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Mental distraction techniques
- Grounding techniques

We have included these specific techniques, as they tend to work well when used together.

We recommend that you try the ones that you feel may help you the best first before moving on to try the others. This will allow you to gradually build up a combination of techniques that works best for you.

Mindful breathing

Those who have experienced a traumatic event can often find themselves spending a lot of time thinking about the past or worrying about the future rather than being in the present. Mindful breathing is a technique that is designed to help develop our ability to focus more on the present and in doing so increase a person's ability to connect and enjoy the present moment more fully.

Below is a description of a mindful breathing exercise that can be practised at least twice a day:

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position in a quiet place
- Slowly breathe in through your nose keeping your mouth closed while counting slowly to 3
- At the count of 3, pause for a moment and then start to exhale slowly through your mouth while counting slowly to 5. Then pause for a moment and then begin to breathe in, as before,
- Repeat this process about 8- 10 times
- It is normal for thoughts to pop into your mind, when this happens, this is completely normal. Simply notice any thoughts and gently return to focussing on your breathing.
- At the end of the exercise briefly reflect on how you found this exercise before returning to your day

(you can find similar exercises on the Headspace and Calm apps— see page 24 for more details)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This relaxation exercise can be helpful to increase your sense of relaxation and in doing so decrease anxiety levels.

Below is a description of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise that can be practised, as needed.

For each area of your body, tense for 5 seconds and then release.




After each segment notice as the tension leaves your body.

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position in a quiet place with your eyes closed.
- Start by curling your toes, hold and release
- Next, arch your feet, hold and release
- Tense your calf muscles, hold and release
- Tense and release your upper legs, hold and release
- Tense your stomach muscles, hold and release
- Tense the muscles in your chest and upper back, hold and release
- Tense your hands, hold and release
- Tense your shoulders, hold and release
- Tense the muscles in your face, hold and release
- Finally, tense your whole body for 5 seconds and then allow your body to go completely limp.
- When you feel comfortable and ready, open your eyes.

Mental distraction techniques

Mental distraction techniques can be a helpful strategy to use in moments when you notice that your anxiety is beginning to increase.

Examples of in the moment distraction techniques:

- Call a friend or family member 
- Count backwards from 100 – 0 in increments of 7 (e.g. 100, 93 etc.)
- Pick a letter from the alphabet and name as many animals as you can that start with that letter (e.g. letter A – antelope, alligator etc)
- Complete a crossword, puzzle, or sudoku 
- Engage in a hobby (e.g. crafting, knitting, or gardening)
- Teach yourself a new skill (e.g. a dance routine from a music video, how to draw or paint) 

After you have tried some of these you can experiment with other types of activities. When doing this, try and focus on activities that require you to concentrate fully, as such activities are likely to be the most effective.

Once you have a few activities you can create your own list of activities, which you can use whenever you need to.

Grounding

A common difficulty that people who have experienced traumatic events is to sometimes feel extremely anxious and disconnected from everything that is happening around them and get pulled back into a memory of a traumatic situation. If you experience this, grounding techniques are a helpful strategy to bring you back to the present in order to connect to what is happening around you. You can do this by using any of your senses to help bring you back to the present:

Smell

- Sniff a strong mint smell
- Sniff a nasal decongestant (e.g. Vicks or Olbas oil)



Sight

- Notice and name any colours you can see around you
- Count the number of a particular object (e.g. trees/cars) that you can see



Taste

- Bite into a lemon or lime or other sour fruit
- Suck or chew on a mint or other strong flavoured sweet



Touch

- Hold an ice cube in your hand until it melts
- Feel how a soft jumper feels against your skin



Sound

- Notice and name the sounds you can hear
- Listen to some upbeat music that you like



Plan of action

Once you have read the tips and techniques that we have provided, it may be helpful for you to take some time to make a personal plan of action for yourself.

To help with this process, it is useful to ask yourself, *‘what strategies do I think will be most helpful for me?’* and *“which strategies would I like to try out?”*

We recommend that you select one or two strategies to start with. Once you have picked the strategies to try out, you can use the monitoring table on the next page to note down your progress. You can also write notes to yourself about how you found practicing the chosen strategy. At the end of the first week, you can review what you have done and identify which strategy you would like to continue to develop.

At this stage we recommend that you also try a different strategy from the list to try out.

Please be aware that it may be a few weeks before you notice changes, so we recommend that you practice the strategies that you have chosen daily for a few weeks before you stop using them. However, in the unlikely event that one of these strategies makes you feel worse, please do not continue to use it.

Activity	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Self-Care e.g. daily walk							
Mindful breathing							
Relaxation							
Distraction							
Grounding							

List of activities to complete

Goals

Setting goals for yourself is helpful because it can help you to identify what changes are most important to you. It will also help you to identify what steps you would need to take to achieve your goals, and the strategies that you could use. Some goals may be achieved quickly, and some others may take more time, so it is helpful to break your goals in to short-term goals, medium-term goals and long-term goals.

Take some time to think about what is most important to you. You can also speak to family and friends to identify specific goals that you would like to work towards.

Examples of goals could be:

- *I would like to spend more time with family and friends (e.g. weekly video chat)*
- *I would like to increase the amount of exercise I do (e.g. starting with a 5-minute walk)*

Once you have identified your specific goals, you can use the next page to write these down to help you stay on track.

My personal goals

I would like to _____

I would like to _____

I would like to _____

I would like to _____

I would like to _____

Additional resources

There are a number of apps that you can download to your mobile phone to help you build on what you have completed on so far.

Apps for mindfulness:

App	Android	iOS	Price
Smiling Mind	Yes	Yes	Free
Meditation timer and log	Yes	Yes	Free
CALM	Yes	Yes	Free (until October)
Headspace	Yes	Yes	Free (until October)
Insight Timer	Yes	Yes	Free

Apps for self-care:

App	Android	iOS	Price
My fitness pal	Yes	Yes	Free
Sleepbot	Yes	Yes	Free
Gratitude	Yes	Yes	Free
Pocket Yoga	Yes	Yes	Free

What if I need help whilst waiting for services to return to normal?

If your symptoms deteriorate further whilst you are waiting for services to return to normal:

- Contact your GP in the first instance and ask for an emergency appointment.
- Call the NHS non-emergency number: **111** (24 hours a day)

If you are in more extreme distress, or feel like you may hurt yourself or someone else:

- Call the SLaM 24 hour support line: **0800 731 2864**

If you are in need of urgent medical attention:

- Go to your nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E). The nearest A&E in Croydon is at:

Croydon University Hospital
530 London Road
Croydon
CR7 7YE

- Call 999 if you are unable or too unwell to travel alone

If you would like to talk to someone about how you feel you can contact the Samaritans on: **116 123** (24 hours a day/7 days a week). We have included a list of other useful contacts on the next page.

Useful organisations

AnxietyUK

Online support for people struggling with anxiety, included COVID19 related anxiety.

Call 03444 775 774

Text Service: 07537 416 905

Or for online chat go to www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Croydon MIND

Support for those experiencing mental health difficulties. Visit the website for a directory of mental health services, advice and resources for managing Covid-19. They also have an online support community called Elefriends.

www.mindincroydon.org.uk

www.elefriends.org.uk

Call for general enquiries and advice: 020 8668 2210

Carers Information Service Croydon:

For information and advice on providing care call or email:

0208 649 9339

info@carersinfo.org.uk

Visit the website for specific contact details for carers assessments, bereavement support , and financial advice.

www.carersinfo.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement :

Support with managing bereavement whilst in isolation, as well as bereavement due to Covid-19.

Call 0808 808 1677

FJC (Family Justice Centre)

Support for those experiencing domestic violence, people who don't feel safe at home, and people who are being criticised/insulted by their family or partner.

To speak to someone or make an appointment call 0208 688 0100 (Mon-Fri: 9am-5pm, Sat-Sun: 10am –4pm) or email fjc@croydon.gov.uk

Croydon Law Centre:

Specialist legal advice on debt, housing, employment, benefits, and immigration. Leave a name and number when calling or emailing and they will call back.

0208 767 2777

enquiries@swlcc.org

Family Lives

Resources such as worksheets, videos and discussion forums for managing Covid-19 as a family, as well as general support for families and children can be found at: www.familylives.org.uk

Helpline 0808 800 2222 (Mon-Fri 9am-9pm, Sat-Sun: 10am-3pm)

Croydon Adult Learning and Training (CALAT)

Register online for summer term courses in Arts and Crafts, Business, Bookkeeping, Customer service, ICT, Computing, Early Years Care, English and Maths, ESOL, and Languages.

All courses will be conducted via Zoom

www.calat.ac.uk

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