

Guidance: Looking after ourselves and others in times of Covid 19

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We are all living and working in unprecedented times and under extreme pressure. The current circumstances may have led to sudden and perhaps dramatic changes in our external and work environment, and significant changes in our private lives and our working practices. This is inevitably very stressful for all, at both the professional and personal levels. For some staff there is the added strain of being away from loved ones, and worries about their safety and wellbeing as well as your own; and for some the strain of juggling family life and work demands, in confined spaces.

The Covid 19 pandemic is both a real physical danger and creates a significant psychological threat. Our normal, automatic ‘fight or flight’ response to help protect us from perceived threats and dangers may no longer be useful – the threats we perceive are ever-present, invisible, unpredictable but persistent. One normal fear response may be ‘flight’ – to escape the threats we perceive, except in the present circumstances, this is not an option. The second fear response may be ‘fight’ – to try to fight the threat or danger we perceive, except again, the threat is invisible and latent. The third fear response may be a ‘non-reaction’, or freeze – we may feel like we do not know what to do, where to turn, how to handle this persistent, unpredictable and frightening threat that we cannot see. We may feel like we have no control over this threat and feel trapped, or frozen.

These feelings can overwhelm us and they can create new and additional anxieties and lead to frustrations, irritations, anger and aggression, blame and finger-pointing or withdrawing from others. We may engage in various behaviours to manage our feelings of fear, insecurity, chronic uncertainty and sense of having no control and no idea how to protect ourselves and loved ones. We may engage in reckless behaviours, minimise or deny the enormity of the threat as a way of coping with feelings of being overwhelmed. We may become hypervigilant, engage in obsessive behaviours or escalate our messaging, emailing, posting and without realising that we are escalating everyone else’s and our own fear. Relationships and our connection to each other are also often under enormous strain when we are all struggling with anxiety and various stresses. In other words, fear can compromise our ability to draw on our human connections and supportive relationships, though sometimes, where the threats are experienced by all, our shared anxieties also can mobilise us into showing support, kindness, compassion and solidarity with others.

There is no right or wrong way to cope with fear, and we will all respond in our own ways. However, there are basic steps we can all take to manage our anxieties and fears, to stay as safe and as well as possible, and to stay connected in our relationships with each other, in the current situation.

This guidance is to help you look after yourself, loved ones and each other as colleagues.

Looking after yourself

1. **Safety steps:** Take note of reliable information from medical experts and take the key precautions and vigilance advised by the World Health Organisation (handwashing, social distance etc.) and guard against believing or spreading information from unreliable sources.
2. **Notice and acknowledge:** What is making you feel particularly anxious or irritable in this chronic uncertainty? Acknowledge it – it is important to accept the reality that you feel afraid, and

it is healthier to name it and talk with colleagues/families/friends than react with anger, irritation, blame, panic.

3. **Pause before you react:** We can react to perceived threats often with anxiety and fear and less reflection – this can escalate rapidly into panic for some people. It can also become ‘contagious’ – you can escalate other people’s anxieties and panic behaviours. Pause, take a few deep breaths and count to 10 - before reacting. Be open to hearing what others or close ones have to say about what you plan to do.
4. **Reflect:** The anxiety may be due to many worrying thoughts, realities facing you and loved ones – what is it that is making you feel particularly anxious right now, and why? Are you speeding ahead in your mind? Remember, not all thoughts are facts. Not everything we hear or read is true. Not everything we see is as we perceive it. Ask yourself: do I need to find out more, sift through what is reliable information and what is maybe not...?
5. **Focus on the present and connect with yourself:** What is going on for you right now? Close your eyes or lower your gaze and focus on your breath, making it slower (e.g. breathe in to the count of 3, pause, breathe out to the count of 6, or whatever breathing exercise works for you). Keeping your eyes closed or lowered, scan your whole body and ask yourself: What are my physical reactions/sensations? What can I touch, and feel? What can I hear, what can I smell?
6. **Stay calm:** Do not obsessively Google your symptoms - which may be anxiety-related not Covid 19. Instead, take steps first to do what helps you to stay calm and what can help build or maintain your immune system. For example, build into your day:
 - ✓ Breathing exercises
 - ✓ Relaxation and meditation exercises
 - ✓ Exercise and regular movement
 - ✓ Spending time with loved ones, where possible
 - ✓ Drawing, colouring, doodling, music, dance... whatever works for you!
7. **Control exposure to social media and news:** Limit the constant monitoring of social media and news feeds, turn off notifications and updates and check at specific times only, scrutinise sources – or limit to only trusted sources. Social media updates can inflame or spread unhelpful/incorrect information, and news items may reassure us momentarily, but can lead to information-overload and confusion with contradictory information – which can increase anxiety.
8. **Listen to your intuition** – but also remember that ‘intuition’ is fuelled by fear and distorts our ability to appraise the situation we are faced with. Take the time to really connect with yourself (see 5. above). Ask yourself: What is going on for me right now? Why am I so frightened? Am I really in danger right now, at this point in time? What is that danger or threat? What is the likelihood and imminence? What am I already doing to keep safe as possible under the circumstances?
9. **Connect with others:** Use whatever means you have available to stay connected and do not isolate yourself from others – we are social beings, and personal, supportive relationships are crucial in maintaining perspective, lifting our mood, laughing, helping us focus on everyday activities/issues and the ‘new normal’ issues.
10. **Structure your day:** Ensure predictability and structure in your time. This can help us to create a ‘new normal’ – for however long this period of isolation, quarantine or curfew lasts. Structure also means establishing new routines, or adjusting existing routines so they are workable in this ‘new normal’ times of significant strain, confinement and restrictions . We cannot be afraid 24 hours/day – we can structure our time so that we make specific times to check the news or

messages, for example, then connect with how you feel and what is worrying you. Make specific times to talk about Covid 19 (and your responses and worries) to colleagues, and specific times to talk and share your worries with family/friends. Structuring our day is not easy, especially under curfew and prolonged isolation. Review, reinvent and revise your structures and routines, adapting them so they work for the changing circumstances you are in.

Living alone, under the current circumstances, creates additional stresses. Days may feel very long and blend into each other. Structuring your time may feel very difficult, but it is essential to still develop a new structure and routines in your day that also allow you time to really and regularly connect with others – colleagues and loved ones.

11. **Support each other:** The current situation may bring out the best and the worst in us. For some, on top of all the stresses they are already experiencing, they may be subjected to threats, accusations, aggression and sometimes racist behaviour (e.g. being called “Corona” or “virus” or being told to “go back to where you came from”). Discrimination and racist, abusive behaviour is always unacceptable. If we hear of this or witness it, do what you can to name and challenge racism, and to support colleagues experiencing racism. If you are experiencing such racism, share with your colleagues and others you trust – and allow them to support you and to challenge this discrimination.

Remember:

- Allow yourself to be human. Because you are.
- Accept that you are human. We cannot all be positive all the time. We may not always feel like we are able to cope. We may make mistakes, get frustrated, irritable and angry with others, including our children and other loved ones. Recognise that these extreme circumstances can test us all, and our capacity to be human and compassionate with each other.

Supporting loved ones

1. **Make time to be together** –in person, if you are together or virtually. Make time to be together, eat together, laugh, play, read, watch something and share together.
2. **Connect to each other:** Talk and listen, take turns to really listen to each other – what loved ones say, what they don’t say but convey (worries, fears, irritations...). Set times to talk and listen to each other – without distractions, phones, television etc.

When communicating with loved ones virtually - help each other to really communicate, to talk, to share, to listen. When communicating by social media/messaging avoid superficial friendly exchanges which may look like communication but offer no real connection or support.

3. **Share the support role:** Accept the support and love you are offered – you don’t always have to be the person giving support. Children also feel better when they feel included and that they are able to help in small ways.
4. **Structure and routine:** Help each other to establish and maintain a structure to each day with routines. Structure and routines help us to have some predictability, rhythm and normality in our ‘new normal’ situations and this can help us manage our anxieties and the constant uncertainties we may face around us. As circumstances change, help loved ones to review, reinvent and revise their daily structures and routines.
5. **Problem-solve together:** Discuss challenges or problems which arise, even if you are not necessarily together, share, problem-solve and plan together, wherever possible. Ask: what can we do, who can do what, how, when and when shall we review/re-think?

6. **Focus on the present:** The mantra of ‘one step/day at a time’ is sometimes very useful. Remind each other to take each day and step at a time. Speeding ahead in your mind, rushing and trying to do everything at the same time or at great speed may increase your stress and make you less effective.
7. **Be patient and kind to each other:** Acknowledge that everyone is under strain and we cannot all always be sensitive, calm, happy, jolly, positive or in control.

Supporting older adults

1. **Make time for older adults:** In person or virtually, set times for family members to talk, eat, laugh, play, read, watch something and share together – involve them where possible, even virtually if they are far away.
2. **Stay connected:** Help older adults in your lives to stay connected with others and family members. Use whatever technology is viable - and help them to use it if possible. Create rotas with family members to keep in contact with older adults. Make time to connect with older adults (virtually or in person with relevant, current restrictions), who may be particularly anxious, fearful, vulnerable, suffering from dementia, ill health etc.
3. **Share information:** Share information in an honest and simple way, which they can remember and which is understandable to them. Repeat as necessary, but try not to patronise them or become irritable or angry when they do not understand. Give details and explanations if they want to discuss to understand the situation. If they become unwell, communication and support may become extremely difficult – explain the situation to them, as best as possible.
4. **Safety:** Give practical advice on safety (handwashing, social distance etc.), movement, exercise, eating well and how to access medicines, food, essentials etc.. You may need to problem-solve with them, or with other family members, to work out who can do what and establish a rota to help them access basic food, medicine etc.
5. **Listen and support:** Listen to older adults, with compassion and patience – they too are worried sometimes, and need to be treated respectfully as adults, not patronised or excluded from discussions. They are often more used to giving support and advice, and may find it hard to accept support. They may be reluctant to engage with news or social media or technology, and they may be dismissive of the news. Explain calmly, even if you feel exasperated and irritated. Be patient, it may take them time to digest. Listen to their questions, anxieties and problem-solve with them to work out what they can do to stay calm, well and safe as possible.
6. **Structure and routines:** Help older adults to also establish a structure to each day and to maintain or develop new routines which include time to connect, to move or exercise etc.

Supporting children and young people

1. **Make structured time to be together:** to talk, play, relax, eat together etc.
2. **Make time to listen, to talk, to comfort:** Children will have questions, they will have heard and read things they don’t understand or are afraid about. They may be confused about what is right/wrong and what is going on right now. They will look to you for information, or reassurance, and they will watch how you manage stress too. Set aside a regular time each day to

spend with each child, even if it is 20-30 minutes. Encourage children and young people to ask for support if they're worried, or sad, or feeling anxious and fearful.

3. **Reassure and explain in age-appropriate ways:** Be truthful but answer their questions in age-appropriate ways. Be honest, give them factual information, simple explanations and adjust the detail according to their age. Repeat as necessary – they may not digest it all at once and may have additional worries and questions. Be honest about what we know, what we don't yet know (e.g. "we don't know yet but we think that...").

Children and young people may also have questions related to other aspects of their lives which are now impacted – school, exams, friendships, family life (e.g. where parents are separated or divorced). They may ask us about our feelings and worries, and what we think will happen. Younger children may not articulate easily what they perceive from adults but they may sense when their parent/caregiver is anxious, sad, distracted and withdrawn.

Be honest and explain in an age-appropriate way. Children can usually sense when adults are not being honest, and this may create more anxiety for them, or feel we are lying to them, or excluding them, and they may then feel isolated and less connected to others and adults, and hide their own feelings.

4. **Give them practical guidance:** How to stay healthy, how to wash hands etc. (use games, drawings, cartoons, songs, whatever is age-appropriate).
5. **Help them develop self-awareness:** Support children and young people to connect with themselves and be aware of how they are feeling – and normalise the experience ("it's normal to feel like that"). Help them to explore self-care strategies – what works for them (e.g. exercise, drawing, games, reading for pleasure, talking to friends, cooking or making something or doing a creative activity or project with you etc.)?
6. **Help them communicate and connect with others:** Young people can be a great source of support to each other, but they can also create more anxieties in their friendship groups. Encourage them to communicate with their friends if they can, and remind them to be kind and listen to each other, and help them to be aware of when they are being irritable or alarmist with friends, and help them to understand why this can happen but what they can do to really support each other.
7. **Minimise information-overload:** Limit social media time (good luck!), limit checking news feed or social media feeds to specific times so they are not bombarded with messages and news which escalate their worries, and explain why you are doing/suggesting this. With young people, agree how you can make structured and specific family time to watch/listen to or read updates from reliable sources together - and then make time afterwards to explain any questions they have and discuss what you have heard or read.
8. **Structure and routines:** Help children to structure their day. Work with them to create a 'new normal' rhythm and routines which are realistic and age-appropriate for each child – be creative, use charts/visuals, time-tables etc. for each child or for the whole family. Help children differentiate 'work/school or learning time' from leisure and family times. Review and adapt the structures and routines as necessary – particularly if isolation is prolonged.
9. **Managing school work:** If they have school work and activities to do from home, try to structure this into their daily routine for the week (keeping weekends also for different activities and routines). If planning and sticking to a school work routine becomes a source of friction – listen to them, work out a different routine or be more 'free-flow' – so they work, but with some flexibility

about when/how. Remember, you cannot be a substitute teacher, but you can support them in their learning, without being pressured to teach as their teacher(s) would.

Avoid putting too much pressure on academic work – they don't have to do 6-7 hours of school work alone at home. A 'new normal' for them may mean school work at specific times with breaks, and time to also connect with their friends – as if they would be with them at school. Spending time together and helping them to maintain and build their friendships and relationships are essential life skills and may be more important and helpful to them in coming months and years.

Try to keep school work and projects in one place – not spread out so that they can be helped to create a school work/home or leisure space boundary – wherever possible in your living circumstances. For younger children, it may help to use a favourite song/whatever works to signal end to working time!

10. **Exercise and movement:** Daily physical activity, games, play or any movement is essential for children of all ages – encourage them and maybe join in with them!
11. **Relaxation:** All children need to relax. Work out what they like, what is do-able, and create games, find online resources for play/fun and other physical activities they can do with family members or with friends (virtually).

Where the period of isolation and enforced confinement is prolonged, every family member can feel the strain. Time alone, time to be however one feels, and time to be undisturbed, whatever is possible, is very important to acknowledge and to allow for each other. Prolonged confinement can lead to friction, aggression and social withdrawal – talk together, establish how to share but also give each other some time/ space to just be.

12. **Seeking professional support:** If a child develops psychological difficulties or any existing psychological difficulties worsen (e.g. anxiety and panic, obsessive compulsive issues, depression), seek professional advice.

Looking after each other and working remotely

Working from home/remotely brings various logistical and communication challenges and for some, additional stress. It is a huge change and not everyone is used to working from home and not everyone has ideal work conditions at home – there may be no suitable work space, unreliable internet, other family members/people, tensions at home etc. Working from home/remotely can be very isolating and work-leisure time boundaries blur and days can stretch longer, apathy and fatigue can increase and burnout becomes a risk.

1. **Structure your day and time:** Be aware of what works for you and your family in the present circumstances, and establish a routine, ensure time-limited breaks and start and end times for your work which is feasible and agreed with your manager.

Ensure your working structure and times are transparent to your team and clear that it is agreed with the manager. That may mean that not everyone will check and respond to all their emails and messages immediately (unless urgent) or at the same time.

If living alone, the working day may expand and it is important that managers and colleagues do not unintentionally exploit this with an assumption or expectation that the colleague can work longer hours or has more flexibility. They are also entitled to rest and may have other familial or other obligations not known to others. Structure is very important and every person and household

will have different circumstances and obligations, and each colleague will have to work out what is manageable, and negotiate this with their manager and ensure that this is communicated to their team.

2. **Connect with colleagues** – in whatever ways work. Social distancing and working from home need not mean not connecting with each other. Schedule virtual team meetings and other meetings/discussions, agree regular check-in times – for example at particular times in the day, or at beginning and just before end of working day. Discuss, plan and prioritise your work with manager/team members together. Schedule in short breaks to share tea/coffee/lunch if feasible, where it is time to connect as people, not talk work!
3. **Meetings:** Start meetings with a check-in with others - with simple round, ask how is everyone? Listen to each other. It is a time for support and to connect as human beings – not just colleagues with a shared task.
4. **Breaks from emails and news updates:** Take proper breaks from emails, social media etc. which may make you feel bombarded and overwhelmed with information and volumes to read. Mute devices which distract and trigger anxiety – and maybe check at specific times and be disciplined.
5. **Discipline regarding communications to colleagues:** Support and remind colleagues to take breaks and to respect each other's breaks/leisure times and do not engage in a constant flurry of emails and messages, all day and night. If there is an urgent email or an emergency, establish with your manager what constitutes an emergency and only disturb your colleagues in their private time in case of a genuine emergency.

Avoid sending emails at every waking hour, and expecting colleagues to reply immediately. Be mindful of the number of emails and messages you send – and ask if they are necessary, if they are urgent, if they can be grouped together, if they really need to be copied to a large group of people, if it can wait for a virtual team meeting?

6. **Boundaries:** Ensure boundaries between work and private/leisure/family time. It is easy to extend your day and hours but not necessarily your productivity or the quality of your work. Find what works for you, and find ways to signal the end of your work time and the beginning of your private time. Everybody needs rest and a break from work or work-related communication. Support each other as colleagues to maintain boundaries, and respect each other's boundaries.
7. **Daylight:** Make time for daylight, sunlight and fresh air everyday – even by a window if you have no access to outside space. Working at home need not be working in a dark space for hours at a time.
8. **Movement and exercise:** Make time for/schedule into your day physical movement/exercise. In between work, move regularly, for example, stretching, walking in your space, but ensure that you are not sitting sedentary in one place for more than a maximum 60 mins at a time.
9. **Eat a balanced diet as possible**, but notice new unhelpful habits or reliance on food, alcohol, smoking or other substances to cope
10. **Sleep:** Sleep is a normal phenomenon, and essential to your health and well-being. Whilst sleep cannot be forced, especially when under stress, it is helpful to practise self-care in ensuring you sleep as well as possible:
 - ✓ Establish/try to maintain same bedtime rituals

- ✓ Avoid television immediately before bedtime and ensure you close down devices an hour before bedtime and don't check work emails and messages (unless you are 'on call')
- ✓ Ensure your sleep environment is calm as possible
- ✓ Try going to bed and waking up same time – as if you are going to work
- ✓ If you develop persistent sleeping problems (e.g. insomnia -not being able to fall asleep, nightmares, frequent waking and not being able to stay asleep etc.) seek professional advice

10. **Support each other** – as colleagues, and as people and human beings.

When to seek further professional support

You may wish to seek professional support if you are experiencing and struggling to cope with:

- constant worrying
- anxiety and fear
- panic attacks
- headaches
- obsessive thoughts or behaviours
- sleeping problems (insomnia, nightmares, frequent waking etc.)
- feeling low, sad and hopeless
- relationship difficulties
- family life or family separations
- excessive worries about your health
- bereavement and grief
- working remotely
- isolation
- other difficulties

If you would like to speak to a professional psychologist or counsellor, please use the contact details provided to staff by your manager.