

Recognising and managing worry during this time of uncertainty

Understanding worry and uncertainty

- Worry is a normal mental process. We all worry from time to time.
- Worry increases during times of uncertainty.
- Indicators that you are worrying include; Muscle tension, restlessness or feeling on edge, feeling fatigued, irritability, sleep disturbance and difficulties concentrating. I find that my shoulders and jaw become tense and I struggle to fully focus and sleep.
- Covid -19 puts us in an unprecedented time where uncertainty is the new normal and the status quo changes every day generating more uncertainty.
- When we worry excessively we can start to feel anxious.
- Anxious thoughts can cause us to overestimate threat and underestimate our ability to cope.
- We can become over focused on threat thoughts (about bad things happening) and we can start to catastrophize (imagining worst case scenarios).

Hypothetical worry versus real problem worry

If you are feeling anxious it is helpful to ask yourself the question; “Am I worrying?”

Worry will often start with “What if” questions: *What if I am carrying Covid 19? What if I get ill?*

Worries can be either **hypothetical**: Imagined (negative or future) predictions and are not generally based on any evidence in that moment. *e.g. What if we run out of food? What if I pass on Covid 19 to my family? What if my family get ill? What if I get seriously ill?*

Or **real event**: You have a problem and could do something about it. *e.g. Having symptoms of Covid 19, Self-isolating, Having no food in your house*

Feeling worried during this pandemic is normal and all of us will worry more.

How we might respond to worry?

When things are uncertain rather than recognising and managing our worry we may attempt to generate more certainty by trying to feel informed and planning for every possibility.

We may change our behaviour to cope with the uncertainty but our new behaviours can become unhelpful to us and actually make us feel more anxious.

Some unhelpful behaviours might include (I have engaged in all of these at some point over the last two weeks);

- Scanning your body regularly for symptoms of possible illness.
- *E.g. you notice you have a sore throat or stomach ache or other symptoms that may be unrelated to Covid 19 and you worry more*

Developed by Leander Nield (RMN and Cognitive Behavioural Therapist BABCP) I have written this based on CBT thinking and recent personal experience of hypothetical worry/unhelpful behaviours.

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The NHS website currently advises to stay at home only if you have either:

- a high temperature – you feel hot to touch on your chest or back
- a new, continuous cough – this means you've started coughing repeatedly
- Seeking out information through social media
 - E.g. you spend excessive amounts of time each day seeking/reading information from non-verified sources where people offer opinion and not fact so speculation and scare mongering is rife **and you worry more**
- Avidly watching the news or listening to the radio
 - E.g. you are bombarded with information and conflicting opinions from various sources and you feel overwhelmed **and you worry more**
- Seeking excessive reassurance from others
 - E.g. your majority focus of conversation becomes about Covid 19. Opportunities for non-threat focused or enjoyable conversations that may help to distract from your worry reduce **and you worry more.**
- Trying to think of every eventuality and over preparing
 - E.g. you make daily trips to the shop to stock up on items you have used only to find that the shelves are limited so you buy other items that you don't need at this time **and you worry more.**
- We may go way above and beyond the government recommendations
 - E.g. you start to wash your hands excessively and in quick succession, you excessively sanitize surfaces in your home which causes you to become more threat focused **and you worry more.**

We cannot control uncertainty but we can try to recognise and better manage our worry. This can support us as we try to accustom to and better tolerate uncertainty during this time.

Strategies for managing hypothetical worry

Because worry is a mental process it occurs within our head and can dominate our thoughts. It can help to take your focus of attention away from your thoughts and into a task, activity or non Covid 19 related conversation. When you are feeling overwhelmed by "What if" worries the following strategies can be helpful;

- Practise self-care <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/>
- Use distraction: Listen to music rather than the radio, watch a boxset, knit, do a crossword, write a letter, decorate, play a game with your family, play a game online with a friend etc. Where possible keep doing the things you and your family enjoy doing together.
- Introduce calm moments or meditation into your every day. Most apps have sleep casts or meditation which can support you to distract your mind at night. (After using it for a while I find the Headspace night time SOS supports me to get to sleep or back to sleep).
<https://www.calm.com/calmhealthtrial> -A free 30 day trial for everyone
<https://www.calm.com/blog/health> - Health staff can claim a free annual subscription
<https://www.headspace.com/educators> - School staff can claim a free annual subscription
- Limit your social media use or step away from it completely. On Twitter you can block key words which can help limit your exposure to opinions or unverified information.

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- Limit news coverage and watch bulletins which convey the latest factual information rather than debating programmes. The Government are providing a daily update to ensure regular communication and planning during this time of uncertainty. Consider disabling news alerts on your phone or smart watch if they are causing you to worry more.
- Set worry time aside each day for you or your partner, friends or family to check in with each other, talk about how you are feeling, update each other on new factual information and what this means to you to support problem solving as required. If possible put a sensible time limit on this dedicated conversation to promote balance in your conversations. At other times try to support each other to have normalising and distracting conversations.
- Consider planning ahead and try to limit food shopping to once a week. Avoid seeking or sharing images of empty shelves. If seeing empty shelves causes you worry or anxiety consider who else might get your shopping for the time being or move to online shopping e.g. Morrison's are currently looking to extend its home delivery service.
- Stay connected: Facetime, Skype or phone people who are self-isolating and friends who you would usually meet up with.
- Exercise, dance or garden if you are self-isolating to relive stress and release endorphins.
- Recognise when you and your partner/family/friends trigger "What if" worries for each other. Acknowledge that you are both worrying and agree to use some of the suggested coping strategies.
- If possible try decatastrophising. What is the catastrophe you are worried about? *Getting Covid 19*. Has anything similar happened to you before? *Yes, I have been ill before*. How awful will it be if this does happen? *I will be ill and I don't like being ill*. What is the worst and best case scenario *I would be ill for 5 – 7 days, some people have only mild symptoms*. If the worst case happens could you cope? *Yes*. What can you start to tell yourself that might help? *I have been ill before and I have coped. I would be able to cope with being ill for 5 – 7 days*.
- Calm breathing can also help. Breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of four, hold for four, breathe out slowly through your mouth for a count of four, pause for four. Smiling mind is a useful free app to support with relaxed breathing exercises.

Coping with real problem worry

Where possible plan ahead and use problem solving strategies to consider your options. It can help to write down any problems you identify and answer the following questions;

1. Write down the problem
2. Write down all of options to you have
3. Write down the advantages of each option
4. Write down the disadvantages of each option
5. Rate your options from best to worst
6. Develop an action plan for your preferred option

If worry or anxiety is impacting negatively on your mood or mental health further self-help information can be found here;

<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Worry-and-Rumination>

<https://www.penninecare.nhs.uk/selfhelp>

Keep following government guidelines <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/> and look after yourselves and your family as best as you can during this time.

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