**Managing Anxiety about the Corona Virus Pandemic**

You may struggling to sleep, or be feeling restless, teary, or overwhelmed; perhaps you have an upset tummy, palpitations or a headache; you might be struggling to make decisions, or be desperate for information. Don’t worry, this is completely normal.

**We are living in anxiety provoking times**

We’re in the middle of an unprecedented crisis that has showed up unexpectedly in our lives and which presents a serious threat to ourselves, our loved ones and our way of life. It’s frightening and it makes us feel out of control. And this is on top of anything else we have going on.

**The science**

When we are exposed to threats and need to deal with them, a tiny part of our brain called the amygdala (it’s the size and shape of an almond) springs into action. It’s an ancient part of our brain that came into being when threats such as being eaten by large scary animals existed. Unfortunately the amygdala responds to *all* perceived threats in the same way,- to prepare your body to either run or to fight.

 It’s called the Fight or Flight response (but there’s also ‘freeze’, meaning you just get paralysed). It does this by flooding your body with chemicals like cortisol, and adrenaline. Your heart rate goes up, you feel more alert, your breathing goes shallow, and your muscles are ready for action. These chemicals are also largely responsible for the huge range of other reactions described above

 In group fear situation like a pandemic, this tends to happen whether you think you're scared or not. Your body reacts even if your conscious mind doesn't.

This is great if you really are running away from a large scary animal, but we’re now in a situation where we’re being asked to do the opposite of running away- we are being told to sit tight, stay still, process large amounts of information, make complicated decisions, and stay calm. This isn’t easy if your amygdala is telling you to run! The result is an awful lot of stress and anxiety.

**What to do**

The good news is it is possible to calm down. You can turn the amygdala’s threat response off with some solid, scientifically proven things to do.

**Focus** **on what’s in your control.** It’s all too easy to get lost in worrying thoughts about all sorts of things that are out of your control. And while it’s completely natural for us to get lost in such worries, it’s not useful or helpful. Indeed, the more we focus on what’s not in our control, the more hopeless or anxious we’re likely to feel. So the single most useful thing anyone can do in any type of crisis is to focus on what’s in your control.

You can’t control what happens in the future. You can’t control Corona virus itself or the world economy. And you can’t magically control your feelings. But you can control what you *do*.

We all have far more control over our behaviour, than we do over our thoughts and feelings. So our number one aim is to take control of our behaviour to respond effectively to this crisis.

**Breathe**. It’s basic, but breathing exercises work in minutes and you can do them anywhere. They work because of all the physical reactions the amygdala triggers, rapid breathing is the only one over which we have conscious control. Control your breathing and you are basically telling your body: it’s okay, there is no threat. Your body will then start to dial down the adrenaline and cortisol and all the other reactions will slow to a halt.

How to control your breathing? It’s easy:

 -In through the nose, out through the mouth. Slowly.

-Make the out breath longer than the in breath – pretend you’re gently blowing a candle flame in front of you- but it mustn’t go out.

-Breathe from the tummy not chest – really make your tummy go out when breathing in.

-Do it for two minutes - time yourself; then see how you feel.

There are all sorts of other versions; have a look on-line and figure out what works for you.

**Pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness).** Paying more attention to the present moment can improve your mental wellbeing. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". For more resources take a look at [www.mindfulness.cornwall.uk](http://www.mindfulness.cornwall.uk)

It can be difficult to learn if you’re already anxious,but meditate if you can. If not do something instead with your hands, that you have to focus on to get right. Cook. Tidy. Knit. Draw. Bake. Garden. Mend things.

**Connect with other people.** Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing. They can give you an opportunity to share positive experiences, provide emotional support, and allow you to support others.

Arranging a fixed time to eat dinner together, and talk (about something other than Corona Virus). Try switching off the TV to talk or play a game.

Make the most of technology to stay in touch with friends and family. Video-chat apps like Skype and FaceTime are useful.

Don’t suffer alone. Call someone who’ll listen while you have a bit of a rant, or a cry.

 **Give to others.** Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness can help improve your mental wellbeing by creating positive feelings and a sense of reward.It could be small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.

You could try saying thank you to someone for something they have done for you; asking friends, family or colleagues how they are, and really listening to their answer; or volunteering, such as helping with the more isolated and vulnerable in your area.

**Remain as physically active as possible.** Being active is not only great for your physical health and fitness, evidence also shows it can also improve your mental wellbeing.

Try and do some gentle exercise every day, to a level of breathlessness where you can’t quite hold a conversation, for about 20 minutes. Jogging on the spot, skipping, press-ups, sit -ups…you can make up your own activities, or look on-line. If you’re not up to this then use your available time outside for a bike ride or a brisk walk.

**Get some fresh air.** If it’s safe for you to go outside do it, while of course observing social distancing and Government restrictions. Being outdoors and connecting to nature is hugely calming. If you can’t go outside, open the windows and feel it on your face and breathe it in.

**Step away from social media.** A lot of what you see and here will be exaggerated or even untrue. It will scare you more and make things worse. Turn off the T.V. for a while. Stick to sensible sources such as the BBC and the NHS, and limit yourself to short need-to-know bits a day. You’ll feel better immediately.

**Step away from harmful coping mechansims.** Don’t get drunk; don’t take drugs; and don’t stay up all night reading- especially not conspiracy theories on social media.

**Be kind to yourself**. Now is not the time to makeover your life, or go on a diet, or set big challenges for yourself. Only do something new if you’re going to enjoy it. Otherwise you'll probably struggle to concentrate, fail, and make yourself feel worse. Don’t make this more stressful than it already is.

The next few months will be challenging for all of us, some more than others; but remember, you are not alone!