

Psychological resilience through the pandemic

This document aims to provide evidence-based, self-help information and tips for getting through the coronavirus pandemic, based on psychology, neuroscience, resilience research and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

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Developing psychological resilience

Research into resilience has established the following key factors for managing in difficult circumstances:

- Learning realistic optimism
 - Using our strengths
 - Developing gratitude
- Accepting what we can't change
- Facing fears
- Asking for support
- Taking responsibility for **looking after ourselves**

A meta-analysis assessing 60 studies found that those with higher levels of resilience had less depression; less anxiety; a more positive outlook and more life satisfaction.

The following sections apply resilience research, and other psychological approaches, to managing the challenges facing us as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Tolerating uncertainty and managing worry

It is normal to feel unsettled when big changes happen. We need to give ourselves time to adjust to the current, changing circumstances. There are lots of unknowns which may be troubling you, for example:

- Will I get coronavirus? will my family / friends?
- If I do get coronavirus, how badly ill will I get?
- How will the pandemic effect my job / income / finances?
- How will I manage home-schooling my kids? whilst working?

At this point, we don't know the answers to most of these questions. Unfortunately, no amount of worrying / questioning others / reading the news / hearing experts can give us answers now. We therefore need to tolerate the uncertainty. We just need to wait and see what happens. Uncertainty doesn't feel nice, but it will pass. When the time comes, we'll handle it as best we can.

However, it's understandable to get sucked into worrying about these issues. Thinking about them, going around in circles, is exhausting. Has worrying solved the problem yet? If not, maybe worrying isn't helping. Maybe worrying is triggering more anxiety.

It's normal to feel unsettled in uncertain times, but we can choose not to make it worse by worrying:

- Notice when you are worrying
- Remind yourself “worrying doesn’t help”
- Focus your attention on the present moment

The worries may be back soon, but each time you catch yourself worrying, gently (without self-criticism) refocus your attention on what you want to be doing NOW. There is a wealth of resources on mindfulness which can help train your mind to step back from the thought stream and be present.

Problem solving

It is useful to distinguish between worrying and problem solving. Ask yourself – is this a problem I can solve? If so, brainstorm solutions, pick the best idea and give it a try. If it doesn’t work, try Plan B.

If there is nothing you can do to solve the problem, then let it go and focus on something more useful instead.

Building resilience

Think about specific challenges you have been through in the past.

- How did you get through it?
- What did you do?
- What did you say to yourself?
- Who was supportive or helpful at the time?
- What resources did you use? Places, things, skills, organisations...
- What useful advice did you get from others?
- What did you learn about how to cope with challenges?
- **Which of these could be useful again now?**

Realistic optimism

Some people are more pessimistic and tend to focus on the worst-case scenario. This can be useful to prepare for the worst, particularly for lawyers! However, some find this escalates into worrying that can feel uncontrollable and anxiety provoking.

Fortunately, we can all learn to change our thinking and be more optimistic. Positive thinking does not mean ignoring the negatives and assuming everything is always going to be brilliant. Positive psychology suggests actively looking for the positives, to balance out the negatives and develop a more realistic, helpful perspective.

Notice when you are focusing on the worst possibilities and ask yourself:

- What would be so bad about that?

- How realistic is that outcome?
- What alternative outcomes might there be?
- What is the most likely outcome?
- What would I say to a friend?
- What could I do / say to myself which would help?

Use your strengths

Consider what your strengths are and how you could use them to make the most out of your current circumstances. Complete the VIA Survey of Character Strengths at www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu for help identifying your strengths.

Gratitude and kindness

There are evolutionary reasons for focusing on problems / danger / uncomfortable feelings: it helps to keep us safe. However, it is easy for that negative focus to escalate into worry / rumination / dwelling on things which doesn't solve the problem and makes us feel worse.

Research found completing a gratitude diary everyday resulted in a 20% long term improvement in wellbeing and better sleep. Try writing down 3 things that happened today that went well / made you feel good / gave you a sense of achievement.

There is also extensive research that helping others is good for everyone's mental health. Making others feel bad doesn't help us feel better, it makes everyone feel worse. Acts of kindness give everyone a boost of neurochemicals which make us feel happy! What could you do that would help your friends / family / neighbours / community / others who may be struggling?

Looking after ourselves

These are the things we all know we *should* be doing, but really need to be prioritised when life gets challenging:

- **Eat healthy:** lots of vegetables, protein and water. Minimise sugar, caffeine and alcohol to regulate your mood and energy level.
- **Exercise regularly:** there are lots of online tutorials to try fitness, yoga, pilates, different styles of dance... for different ages / abilities
- **Sleep** (see details below for help)
- **Stay connected** with others

Research into resilience found the fundamental factor that all participants had, was taking responsibility for looking after themselves. Now is the time to think about what you need and start putting those ideas into regular practice.

Connecting with others

It is important to stay in touch with friends / family / colleagues / communities. When we are not able to go out, or need to keep a physical distance, consider how else you could stay in contact e.g. by phone, messaging, social media, video calls, group calls, writing letters, notes through neighbours' doors, homemade presents / food delivered to friends doorsteps... You could arrange a time to have coffee / tea / a meal and video call.

Managing media influence

Whilst it is important to stay informed and connected, the rolling news coverage and social media streams can become overwhelming, time consuming and trigger anxiety. Consider which sources of news you find useful and factual. Set time limits on how often you want to check news / social media and for how long. Try and stick to it!

Consider which social groups you find supportive / informative / fun / encouraging and which trigger worry / anxiety / anger. You can chose to disengage from those you find unhelpful or draining, by muting notifications, only checking periodically or leaving the group.

Working from home

Set up a space for working, with all the things you need, ideally in a separate space from distractions / others / where you are going to relax. Get organised, in your own way!

Consider how working from home will affect your job:

- What are the challenges and how could you manage them?
- What is the best way of staying in contact with colleagues / sharing documents?

- What opportunities does working from home provide?
- How can you organise your day to make the most of being at home?

Routine and structure

We all need some level of routine and structure. They are particularly helpful for feeling more settled and being productive. Consider what works best for you:

- What is the best time to get up / eat meals / go to bed?
- What time of day are you most productive?
- When would be a good time to exercise?
- When would be a good time to rest?
- When is it easiest to get in touch with others?
- How do these answers work alongside those you are living with?
- Can you co-ordinate / negotiate what will work best for everyone at home?

Managing other issues

We all have the ability to overcome or manage mental health issues. There is a wealth of free resources which can help and unfortunately a range of misleading guidance too. I would recommend the following websites, which provide evidence-based self-help information and advice on an extensive range of problems:

- **NHS** <https://web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>
- **CBT self-help** www.get.gg
- www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself

It is also OK to **ask for help**. Rather than feeling burdened, others are often glad to support loved ones and to know specifically what they can do to help. How do you feel when friends and family come to you for advice or support? Could you give them the opportunity to feel the same way?

Managing a mental health crisis

If you are feeling overwhelmed or considering harming yourself or others, it is important to get help. The following services are available:

- **Samaritans** are available 24/7, Freephone 116 123 email jo@samaritans.org or text 07725 909090 www.samaritans.org
- **MIND** are open Monday to Friday 9am-6pm, call 0300 123 3393 email info@mind.org.uk or text 86463 www.mind.org.uk/need-urgent-help
- **Contact your GP** they may be able to refer you to local services

Managing anxiety

It is normal to feel anxious at stressful times. Anxiety can trigger lots of physical symptoms including palpitations; breathlessness; “butterflies” in the stomach; shaking and hypervigilance. These are all normal symptoms of anxiety; they are not dangerous, and they will pass. The physical symptoms are our body’s automatic response to danger: so that we are ready to fight / run / freeze. This is ideal if there is a physical danger, but not if the trigger is worries going around our head!

The following website has useful further information on this:
www.get.gg/anxiety.htm

Neuropsychological research has found that the prefrontal cortex, responsible for rational thinking and decision making, is inhibited when the amygdala is activated. This means when we are anxious, or angry, we can’t think clearly or make decisions.

Taking a few deep breaths can help calm the body down. Try to breathe slowly, in through your nose, right down to your stomach. If it helps, count to 7 breathing in and count to 11 breathing out.

Focusing attention on worries or physical symptoms of anxiety makes us feel more anxious. Try to focus on the task at hand. If you are too overwhelmed to continue what you were doing, take some time out, take a break, distract yourself. When you are feeling calmer, return to the trigger and try doing practical problem solving, as described above.

Managing conflict

If you are living with others and self-isolating, you are likely to spend more time together, in close proximity, than you usually would. It is understandable that people might get frustrated with each other at times. If you have enough rooms available, try to take time out to be alone as often as you need to.

If you are getting cross with others, take a deep breath and if possible, take time out in another room. Try not to dwell on it or rant to others but try to calm yourself down or distract yourself. When you are feeling calmer, consider specifically what you found difficult and what you would like to be different. It can be useful to discuss relationship issues with someone else, but try to keep the conversation considerate, kind and constructive.

If others feel criticised, they are likely to get anxious / defensive / angry. There is neuroscientific evidence that fear / anger make it more difficult to listen and learn. Try to keep the conversation calm and constructive. Explain how you feel using "I" statements, rather than "you" accusations. For example, "when x happened, I felt y. I would really appreciate it if we could try to do z instead. What do you think?"

If you feel criticised by others, take a deep breath and try to calm yourself so that you don't get anxious / defensive / angry. Try to concentrate on listening to what is being said. Ask questions, try to understand what has upset the other person and what they would like to be different.

Try not to take criticism personally but clarify what would help resolve the situation. Check that you have understood correctly, by summarising back what you have heard. If you feel too overwhelmed to listen, ask to take time out and discuss it when you are both feeling calmer.

Once you have calmly discussed the problem and identified what you can both do to help, try to move on. Focus your attention on something else or do something nice together, to help rebuild your relationship.

Managing sleep problems

No screens in bed or an hour before bed! The blue light from phones, tablets... simulates daylight, which wakes us up. Often the content also keeps us awake by triggering excitement / anxiety / anger / adrenaline.

Establish a **bedtime routine**, to relax and get ready for bed. Bed should only be for sleep and sex! If possible, ensure your room is comfortable, quiet, dark and the right temperature for you.

If you can't get to sleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing somewhere else: read a book / magazine, colouring, listen to calm music... when you start feeling sleepy, go to bed and try to sleep again.

If you catch yourself worrying, **postpone worries** until after breakfast. The middle of the night is not the best time to solve anything! So, decide to deal with the worry in the morning. If it helps write it down, to get it out of your head. Then focus your attention on something, anything else:

- Focus on the breath, slow gentle breaths down towards your stomach
- 7/11 breathing: count to 7 as you breath in and count to 11 as you breath out
- Listen to the sounds you can hear in the room & outside
- **Focus on the details** of something relaxing:
 - Song lyrics / music
 - Route of a walk / cycle ride / journey
 - Activities on holiday...

Managing loss and low mood

Many of us have lost things as a result of coronavirus, from routine; future plans; final days at school; jobs and, most tragically, loved ones.

In these circumstances, it is normal to feel sad / tearful / angry / numb / lost. These emotions may come and go at different times. Try to give yourself permission to feel however you feel, safe in the knowledge that it will pass.

We can't stop these emotions from being there, but we can stop ourselves making it worse by dwelling / ruminating on the past. Focusing on what has gone wrong / been lost, is likely to make us feel worse. Try to focus on how best to adapt to the new circumstances. What opportunities does it bring? Try to focus on what you have to be grateful for: a home / room / garden / friends / family / job / savings / skills / hobbies / pet...

Being unable to get out and do the things we enjoy for a long period of time is likely to make many people feel low. Focus on what you can still do – other ways of staying in touch / keeping fit / active / productive and having fun.

Managing kids at home

The British Psychological Society (BPS) published the following advice for parents in dealing with school closures:

- Stress and anxiety in such an unusual and unpredictable situation is **normal**.
- Children can sometimes believe that they are responsible for events that are beyond their control – **reassure** them that it is the adults' job to keep them safe.
- **Friendships** are key to maintaining **resilience** for children, so help them to maintain these relationships through phone calls, online communication, and writing letters.
- Having a **routine and structure** helps children to feel secure in uncertain times.
- **Restrict** access to rolling **news** coverage.
- **Play** is fundamental to the wellbeing and development of children of all ages, and a great way to reduce stress in adults.

I would also add that kids tend to pick up on the mood of adults around them. Try to manage your own moods when the kids are around. Limit the conversations and news coverage the kids overhear, so that they don't feel confused or anxious.

Dr Dan Siegel writes that for children to thrive, they need to feel:



- **Seen**: feeling noticed and understood
- **Safe**: avoid frightening or hurting children, even unintentionally. See other sections in this guide or www.get.gg for help managing your own emotions, so they don't impact on your children.
- **Soothed**: helping children to notice, label and manage their emotions e.g. "I can see you are feeling quite cross / sad / worried at the moment. Can you explain what the problem is? What can we do to help you feel better?"
- **Secure**: providing a secure base and attachment to others, to enable children to feel safe to explore the world around them



Extensive psychological research has found that kids respond to reinforcement. This means you can encourage good behaviour with attention / praise / treats / star charts / affection / encouragement. Naughty behaviour can be discouraged with less attention / time out / withdrawing treats or privileges. If kids are generally not allowed something, but this changes if they hassle / have a tantrum / are in a different context, then this encourages kids to repeat that behaviour to get what they want.

Clear, consistent boundaries are important in clarifying what behaviour is acceptable and providing security. If the rules change unpredictably, then

kids will keep pushing boundaries to see if they can get away with it this time.

When telling kids off, try to label the behaviour, rather than the child. For example, rather than “you are naughty / mean...”, “that was a naughty / mean thing to do / say”. If possible, discuss the consequences of that behaviour: why it is unacceptable. Calmly explain what you would like them to do differently next time.

No one is perfect; all parents have moments when things go wrong, or they lose their temper. When this happens, if possible leave the room, calm yourself down and clarify what the problem is. Show how to take responsibility for your actions, by returning to say “sorry” and calmly explain why you got cross and what you would like to be different next time. Then move on. Provide reassurance, affection and cuddles to help the child feel safe and secure again.

Home schooling kids

As stated by the BPS, routine and structure are important for kids and they are used to a high level of structure at school. In establishing a timetable for home schooling, ask your child what happens during their school day and consider how to adapt it to suit your family. For example, sticking to the primary school timetable of English then Maths in the morning, followed by more creative projects in the afternoon.

It may help to establish a clear structure and rules early on, and then adjust them as you learn what works for your family. It is much easier to start “strict” and become more flexible once order is established, than trying to bring order when the kids are used to chaos!

You could get kids buy in by negotiating deals e.g. “school needs you to complete x, but once that is done, that you can do y afterwards”. Consider how you could incorporate your children’s skills and interests into educational activities e.g. cooking tea; illustrating stories; puzzles; board games; sewing; outdoor learning where possible... What are your strengths / skills / interests which could develop as shared activities, to make it more fun for you?!

Research suggests that helping others is good for everyone’s’ mental health. Is there a project the kids could do to help your community? E.g.

- phone older relatives to learn about family history: where your family have lived and what it was like then / there
- write stories / draw pictures for siblings / neighbours’ kids
- decorate windows for others to see when they walk past (see www.windowwanderland.com for ideas)
- put a note through neighbours’ doors to see if anyone needs help / groceries / errands

Making the most of the situation

Focus on what you can do, despite the current restrictions:

- What can you do that:
 - you enjoy?
 - you find relaxing?
 - gives you a sense of achievement?
 - helps you feel connected to others?
- What have you been meaning to do, at home, but haven't got around to doing?
- What did you enjoy doing, that you haven't had a chance to do for ages?

Do something creative, musical, practical, educational, vocational, political, environmental, sporty, relaxing... or get comfy and read a book.

Set SMART goals:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Realistic
Time limited

Keep an eye out for unrealistic expectations and perfectionistic tendencies! Break goals into manageable chunks, try doing just the first step and see how it goes.

If you have a tendency to procrastinate, see the following website for ideas to overcome this: www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Procrastination

Final thoughts

This is not intended to be the answer to everything! Different people will find different things work for them. This document provides a range of evidence-based information, techniques and ideas which I hope you find useful at this challenging time.

A positive consequence of this pandemic might be encouraging society to become more resilient, kinder and more deeply connected with others and the environment we live in.

Please feel free to share this document with anyone may find it helpful.

With kind regards,

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