



COPING IN CRISIS: CORONAVIRUS

In these unsettling times, protecting our physical health is important, but looking after our mental wellbeing is vital too.

We will all face psychological challenges, and the mental health impact of the pandemic will last longer than the physical health impact.

This guide is focused on how to manage our psychological response to the coronavirus pandemic, informed by crisis theory and clinical practice.

INTRODUCTION

The current situation uniquely affects us all and impacts every area of life – physically, emotionally, psychologically, socially and economically. What we're experiencing now is unprecedented, but there is a lot we know about crisis and how people react that is useful during these challenging times.

Typically, there are two states people experience during times of crisis, to varying degrees:



Threat State

Our thoughts and behaviours stay fixed on the problem or danger, and we experience threat-based emotions including anxiety, agitation, anger, disgust, feeling trapped.



Depressive State

To protect ourselves from being overwhelmed, we shut down and withdraw from life, feeling low, sad, lonely, numb, hopeless, helpless and defeated.

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We might experience one of these states followed by the other, we might remain mainly in one, or we may move between them.



Each state brings its own risks.

Too much emotion and we become overwhelmed and preoccupied with the problem at the expense of everything else.

Too little emotion and we fail to recognise the dangers or we shut down and feel numb and depressed.



Each state requires a particular set of coping skills

in order to move from an extreme position (too much or too little emotion) to a place of balance and safety. The goal is to get to the best possible place psychologically, so that we can respond effectively and get through challenging times safely.

First, we'll talk about how to **manage excessive threat activation, worry and fear**. Then, we'll cover **how to manage low mood and isolation**. Feel free to skip to the section that feels right for you in this moment.



MANAGING FEAR, ANXIETY AND STRONG FEELINGS

A normal reaction to a threatening situation

It's worth remembering that some level of anxiety and fear right now is **normal and needed**.

Coronavirus poses a threat to our safety, health and wellbeing, and it touches powerful, fundamental human fears about losing control, isolation, helplessness and mortality. The uncertainty and spread of the virus, and the measures that have been put in place, like social distancing and shielding, create an extreme situation, never experienced in modern times. **It's understandable to feel uneasy.**

Anxiety serves an important purpose.

In a crisis, our internal alarm bells ring, activating emotions and focusing our thinking on the danger, so that we put things in place to keep ourselves and others safe. If we don't feel and register our fear, we won't take steps towards safety and can end up putting ourselves and others at risk. In these early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, It's important to register the threat and put a plan in place to protect you and those around you.

While feeling anxious is expected, it's only useful up to a point.

As with any crisis, there are immediate dangers and legitimate threats that need to be addressed. But it's important to recognise that not all dangers are immediate, and some threats can be imagined. These need to be let go.

If you are feeling anxious all the time and neither you or people you know are seriously unwell or in any immediate danger, the anxiety isn't helpful. In fact, it can trigger psychological problems like overthinking, poor sleep, difficulty problem solving, and emotional distress.



Understand your threat system

When faced with an actual or perceived threat, we feel a range of uncomfortable threat-focused emotions, like fear, anger, sadness and disgust. These emotions activate our threat system, which focuses our thinking on the danger so that we quickly assess the situation and develop a plan to create safety. Our behaviours follow this plan, and we act in a way we hope will resolve the problem or take us far enough away from it so we feel less at risk. If we find safety, the uncomfortable emotions subside. If we can't resolve the problem, the uncomfortable emotions can remain and intensify.



This response is instinctual and immediate when faced with direct physical threats, like a dangerous animal attacking us. This 'fight or flight' response is triggered by a release of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which prepare our body to either stay and fight, or to run away.

For the less immediate threats which lie ahead, our threat system becomes more predictive. We try to imagine what might happen and attempt to prevent harm by putting measures in place.

But many threats are outside of our control and trying to manage them can lead to psychological problems like anxiety.

Combined with our mind's bias towards prioritising threats and seeing the worst first (catastrophising), we can feed our fears in ways that leads to anxiety more intense than it needs to be – about things that haven't happened yet or events that may never take place.

Too much feeling is not a good thing. It can be intolerable to feel all the time and it takes up a lot of energy. High levels of emotion can disrupt our capacity to think clearly, which can lead us to feel like we have no control. Feelings become so intense that the problem itself is no longer the issue – the intensity of emotion and the impact it has on our thinking becomes the source of distress.



In the case of coronavirus, we can't fight it or run from it, and we can't control the virus or what might happen down the line. Put simply, we can't remove the threat. Living with the presence of the danger is hard but necessary. We'll feel the uncomfortable emotions and we'll naturally want to think about it, but you need to find space not to be consumed, and to live despite the presence of coronavirus.

If you struggle with too much emotion or overthinking, you'd benefit from learning strategies to activate your inner safety system. More on this soon, but first...

1. Address any legitimate threats and find safety

The number one priority in any crisis is to make things as safe as they can be and to address any immediate dangers.

Doing a quick risk assessment on your situation can help you to:

- Identify any legitimate threats so that you can put a plan in place to establish relative safety.
- Help you see what you don't need to worry about in this moment.

Start by assessing your level of risk in relation to the virus (its worth considering that most people are not at risk of the disease itself), your financial situation, and your living situation. **What is a legitimate danger and what isn't right now?**

Remember, we can't know what will happen in the future.

If you're not unwell or aren't caring for someone who is, you don't need to spend time focusing on the virus. If you aren't facing financial problems, unemployment or the loss of a business, you don't need to worry about financial instability.

Once you've assessed your situation, create a plan. Follow advice from government advisors and the NHS and reach out for help if you need it. There are measures to help people access essential needs (food, water, safe shelter, essential resources, the ability to stay mobile, and contact with people). If you are one of the many who will find it difficult to meet these needs, reach out for support and advice. Make sure you contact any debtors, particularly about your housing and utilities (water, gas, electric, council tax).

Your plan doesn't mean that you won't get ill, it doesn't mean that you or the people you care about won't come to harm, and it doesn't mean that you will not lose. **It means that given the reality of the situation it is the strategy that keeps you as safe as possible.**

Once you've addressed any immediate dangers, your anxiety and fear has served its initial purpose.

Most people's threat-based emotions (fear, panic, anxiety, anger) will reduce naturally after putting a plan in place that establishes safety. You can review your plan as things change, but you only need to give this a little bit of your time.

The rest you can reinvest in doing things that don't require you to focus on the problem – time for all the other things that you value, and space not to feel scared and frightened.



This isn't distraction, but acceptance of the reality of what we face – living despite the presence of adversity.

If you do continue to feel highly anxious and focus on the virus, your emotions will stay running high. This isn't helpful. **When you feel yourself getting caught up in unhelpful thoughts and feelings, it's important to learn how to reduce your sense of threat and find a place of psychological safety.**

2. Learn how to signal safety and manage strong feelings

Remaining in threat mode means we are always alert to, anticipating, and preparing to react to danger. This can be exhausting, stressful, and damaging to our health.

When our threat system is activated our immune system switches on and this can have long term negative stress effects on the physical body. When our safety system is activated (the parasympathetic nervous system, the opposite of 'fight or flight'), our body enters rest and repair mode and we start to restore from within, right down to a cellular level.

Activating our safety system helps our bodies to heal.

The next part of this guide covers some techniques that are designed to help reduce your sense of threat and switch on your safety system.

The techniques we share are not designed to fix the source of the worry (we can't control coronavirus and its knock-on effects), but to **give you time and space** to direct attention to what's most important – looking after yourself and your loved ones.



Breathing exercises



Intense exercise

Simply focusing on your breathing – breathing slower and deeper – helps when you're feeling overwhelmed. Threat mode is often accompanied by rapid breathing, so consciously slowing down your breath signals to your body and mind that you're okay and activates your safety system.

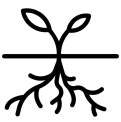
If practiced regularly, breathing exercises can help to create a sense of calm, regulate emotions and build a foundation for inner stability.

You can find a step-by-step guide to a breathing exercise [here](#).

When we experience strong and overwhelming emotions, energy can build up in our bodies. An effective way of releasing this stored energy is to do a short amount of intense exercise.

10-15 minutes is enough for a relieving effect. This could be going for a run around the block, jumping jacks in your living room, skipping, the list goes on.

As well as releasing tension, exercise tires you out and releases endorphins. All of which helps to combat overwhelming, uncomfortable emotions to bring you closer to a place of balance.



Ground yourself

Often, negative feelings emerge when our minds wander to things that have happened in the past (that we can't change), or to the future (that don't exist). Try to come back into your body and focus your attention on what is happening right here, right now.

An effective way to do this is to focus on your 5 senses – your vision, touch, hearing, smell and taste.

Name 5 things you can see
Touch 4 things around you
Acknowledge 3 things you can hear
Notice 2 things can you smell
What can you taste in your mouth?

Grounding isn't always easy. Be kind to yourself. If it's too hard to sit still, introduce movement and focus on how your body feels. Keep your eyes open so that you stay connected to your environment.



Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a deep relaxation technique that can effectively help with stress, anxiety, sleep issues, and other psychological problems.

It involves tensing one muscle group at a time followed by releasing the tension.

You can practice this lying down or seated, without distractions. It usually takes about 10-20 minutes and you can follow a step-by-step in this [video](#).



Meditation & Mindfulness

Mindfulness has become a bit of a buzz word, but it's simply about becoming more aware of the present moment. It can be a useful skill in crisis as a way of detaching from unhelpful ways of thinking, like focusing on problems, to becoming more comfortable living in the moment, without the need to change it. The idea is to simply observe your experience (thoughts, feelings, sensations), without judging them as good or bad.

Mindfulness can be practiced in traditional seated meditation, or during everyday activities, like cooking, eating, exercise, sex, walking – it is the art of being in the moment. It can be easier for some people to have an anchor to the present moment, like focusing on your breathing. For example, silently say to yourself as you breath in and out, **“breathing in, I know that I am breathing in; breathing out, I know that I am breathing out”**.

Practicing mindfulness has a range of benefits and can help you build awareness of your physical and emotional state, help you regulate your emotions and manage stress. You can learn more about the scientific understanding of meditation in [this](#) podcast episode.



Change your temperature

An effective way of reducing strong emotions is to physically cool yourself down. When we are emotionally overwhelmed, our heart rate quickens, and cooler temperatures help to slow our heart rate.

When things get too much, try washing your face with cold water, taking a cool shower, or hold an ice cube in your hand. The most effective way to reduce the strength of strong emotions is to submerge your head in a bowl of ice-cold water for 30 seconds (coming up for air when needed). This activates the mammalian dive reflex which reduces our physiological emotional arousal. You can watch [this](#) video which gives a demonstration on how to do it.

You can also apply this knowledge to when you're feeling low. Our instinct to want to curl up in a duvet, put on a big jumper, or have a cup of tea when we're down or worried can genuinely help – our heart rate slows down when we're feeling low and higher temperatures help to raise it.



Dropping Anchor

Russ Harris, a medical practitioner, psychotherapist and coach, talks about 'dropping anchor' to help manage overwhelming emotions. Like a ship in a storm putting down its anchor, the technique won't make the emotional storm you're experiencing go away, but it helps to hold you steady until it passes.

When you feel overwhelmed, in the midst of an 'emotional storm', this technique is designed to help you stay grounded and present. It involves:

- 1. Expanding your awareness** by acknowledging the presence of your difficult thoughts and feelings, whilst also noticing what you can see, hear, touch, taste, smell in that moment.
- 2. Exerting self-control** over physical action by moving around, changing your posture, drinking water, massaging yourself, etc.

You can find out more about this technique [here](#) and access free audio recordings for 'dropping anchor' [here](#).



Distraction

Distraction can be a useful skill during times of crisis. When things are tough and when nothing else is working, distraction can take the heat out of the moment and create some much-needed time and space.

If you find that you're worrying relentlessly or doing battle with powerful emotions too much or for too long, distraction can help you temporarily pull away from the distressing thoughts and feelings so that you don't get overwhelmed. By focusing on something else, we move our focus away from the problem.

You can find out more about distraction techniques [here](#).

COPING AT HOME & MANAGING SOCIAL DISTANCING / ISOLATION

Staying home, slowing down and being still...

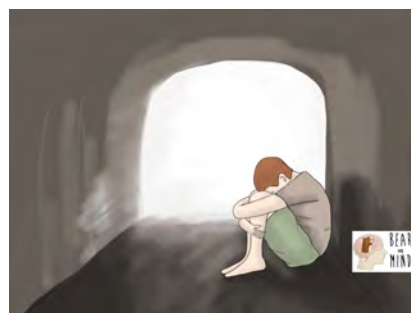
Many of us are staying home to protect ourselves and others, and to help stop the spread of coronavirus. This is the right thing to do.

For most people, now is not the time for doing, it's a time for stopping. We are being asked to stay away from the things we would normally be doing. We are being asked to withdraw and isolate.

Coming down from a 'doing' to a 'being' state presents a very real challenge for many people who are used to being productive, achieving goals, striving and driving. For energised, excitable or anxious people, being still, with less to fill the time, may be particularly difficult.

Many people fear being alone with feelings and thoughts and may not have ever been taught how to manage this experience. Being isolated without access to the outside world can be frustrating, lonely and even painful, particularly if people slip into behaviours that lower mood and create space for negative thinking.

Combined with a disruption to normal routine and a loss of usual activities or purpose, we can start to lose our sense of self and be at risk of developing psychological problems like depression.



It's hard to endure difficult times, and we should all be aware of how withdrawing and isolating can impact our mental health so we can take useful steps to protect our mind as well as our body. We may need to physically distance ourselves from others, but we can and should remain connected through experience.

Being alone can be a good thing for all of us if we use the time wisely. Learning to live without the usual structures to support us presents an opportunity to become comfortable with ourselves. To learn how to do this is psychologically healthy and our current situation presents a unique opportunity to develop these skills.



Some background: Crisis and depression

When we experience a crisis of any sort, our thoughts and behaviours can become focused on the problem to try to understand and resolve it.

As this happens, other things in life start to drop away, particularly if the problem is of great importance or is very threatening. Taking a step back from usual activities can provide a sense of relief when life gets tough, but it can make things worse if it happens too frequently and lasts for too long.

The more we withdraw, the more space and time our mind has and the more we think about the problems we face. We may also be presented with other uncomfortable thoughts or inner unresolved conflicts from the past.

Because thoughts directly influence feelings, the more time we spend thinking about the things that made us feel low or worried in the first place, the lower our mood can go.

If we are unable to resolve the situation, we can end up feeling hopeless, helpless and defeated – constantly looking for answers but never finding any.



As we start to do less, there are also fewer opportunities to feel pleasure, a sense of achievement, or connection with others – the things that make us feel better.



The news that coronavirus is a potential threat to our health and wellbeing means that many of us will be following the guidance to stay at home. If we are feeling worried, anxious, lonely or low, we may stop doing things we usually enjoy. We may also start to feel helpless and defeated by the current situation. This can happen suddenly or gradually over a long period of time.

Understanding that withdrawal and isolation can contribute to depression will help you remember the value of staying connected during this time. The small stuff matters and it is important that you maintain connections with activity, experience and people.

1. Get the basics right

The most important thing in any challenging time is to focus on getting the basic things in life right. Take a step back, focus on establishing a good routine and stick to it (but remember to be flexible). We don't need to be doing lots – getting comfortable with doing less is important – but we do need to maintain a minimum level of function.

At times of crisis our safety is compromised. Initially there may be lots of anxiety, but as things go on for longer, we may experience more depressive states. People may lose hope, feel defeated and want to give up, particularly if they lose something important, like a job or a loved one.


When this happens, doing the small stuff can feel pointless and people can stop doing even the basics. Their sleep cycle get disrupted, people stop getting up, leaving the home, taking care of themselves, they may stop eating and often don't want to see or speak to anyone. This can open the door to problems like depression and at this point a basic routine becomes even more important to keep hold of.


Establishing a good baseline routine now will help protect you in the future. By laying strong foundations, you'll be in a better position to endure whatever lies ahead.


A good baseline routine highlights the importance of caring for our fundamental physiological needs like food, movement, connection and establishing safety. Once we get this right, we'll feel more able to connect with others and better about ourselves. **If we don't get the basics right everything else becomes harder.**





A psychologist called Abraham Maslow developed a 'hierarchy of needs' that we've adapted to visualize this point.


▶  In practice, this means getting the right amount of sleep (not too little or too much),


▶  maintaining good self-care (getting washed and dressed),


▶  eating healthily and drinking water, structuring your day with achievable work and activities,


▶  maintaining bodily movement and keeping contact with the outside world.

▶  These may sound simple, but in our experience many people stop doing them when things get tough and tend to minimise their importance.

▶  Prioritise your sleep. It's easy to forget that we need to actively work to protect good quality sleep, especially when we're feeling unsettled or stressed. You can find more about sleep problems and good sleep practices [here](#) and [here](#).

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2. Remain activated

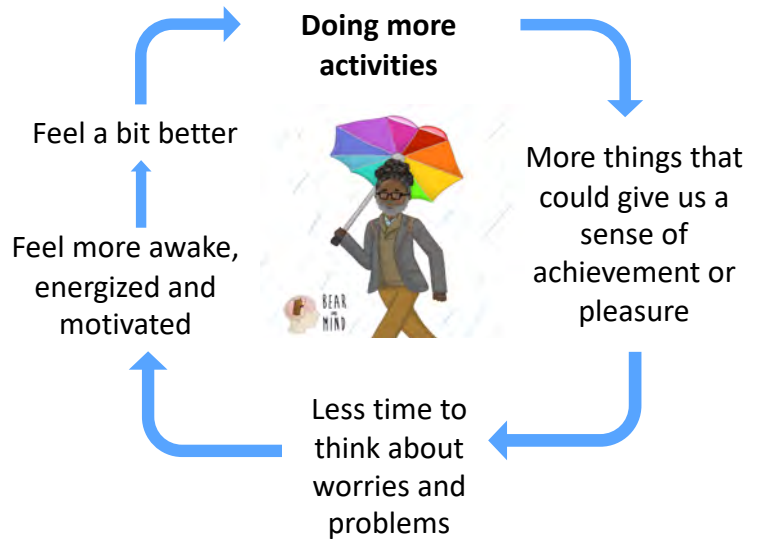
Getting up and doing even the basics can be tough if you're feeling low. But **remaining active will address the withdrawal and isolation linked to a depressed mood.**

Our minds will naturally fill the quiet, particularly if we hold positive beliefs about the value of thinking (daydreamers, planners, go-getters, intellects), so **engaging in activities will help to reduce problem-focused thought.**

Staying indoors during the current pandemic is a big change for many people and a disruption to your routine can present many challenges. You might feel lost, unsure of how to spend your time, and unhelpful ways of coping might creep in, like alcohol or drugs, which can provide short-term relief but long-term problems.

The key is to find things to do that, although small, are meaningful in some way. Activities can be a distraction from the negative things happening in our life, but they also keep us connected with meaning and purpose, bring us enjoyment and pleasure, and help us feel a sense of satisfaction and achievement.

Doing more also increases our energy and motivation, which in turn helps us to feel better and more motivated to do things that may have lost their meaning. This creates a positive cycle.



Identifying things to do...

We are presented with the opportunity to stop and evaluate how we spend our time. We can explore activities we might enjoy but don't usually have time for, or we can connect with hobbies old and new, or learn and develop skills.

However, we should also lower our expectations of ourselves. **The reality is that we're experiencing a global crisis,** and this may make it difficult to concentrate on even simple tasks.

Focus on attending to your basic needs first (see the previous section) then fill the rest of your time with simple activities that bring some sense of pleasure or satisfaction – however small.

The next part of this guide may help you to identify activities.

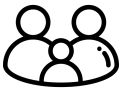
Identifying things to do, continued...

One way of generating ideas of how to spend your time is to understand your values – what’s important to you and how you want to be living your life. **Values act like a compass, helping to guide our actions.** You can find more information about identifying your values [here](#).

Activities can span different areas, including:



Work and learning, e.g. paid work, voluntary work, taking an online course



Family/social activities, e.g. calling a family member, having a group video call with friends, playing with your children



Home activities/hobbies, e.g. reading, puzzles, cooking, gardening, drawing, games



Chores, e.g. laundry, paying utility bills, tidy or reorganise a room, DIY, gardening



Self-care and exercise, e.g. washing/grooming, an exercise class, stretching/yoga, dancing, walking/running

Make a list and try planning your days ahead...

It can also be helpful to create goals involving activities you have identified:

- What do you want to have tried/done by the end of this week, next week, next month?
- What steps do you need to take to get there?
- What things might get in the way of you completing these goals?
- What plan could you put in place to overcome these things?

On the next page is a list of different online resources and things to try during the coronavirus pandemic – all free, all from the comfort of your own home. Enjoy!

Exercise	Art, Craft & Culture	Social & Games	Learning & Education	Mental health
Try a home workout with Joe Wicks (The Body Coach) – he is also running live P.E. lessons every morning.	A huge collection of virtual museums, galleries, theatre concerts and activities on Google Arts and Culture	House Party is a group video chat app where you can also play games together	Learn a language with Duolingo	Try a meditation app - Headspace and Calm app both offer free trials.
Free yoga videos and online yoga classes from Yoga with Adriene	The Royal Opera House are showing free opera and ballet .	Watch films and TV shows with friends by hosting a Netflix Party	Learn a new skill and take an online course on FutureLearn , Coursera , or browse The Open University's free online courses.	Portal mobile app transports you to different places around the world to relax you.
Simple, useful yoga routines and advice on form and specific movements from Cole Chance Yoga	Find out how to watch different theatre from around the world , and plays from The National Theatre here .	Play free sudoku online	Learn to code with free interactive lessons and daily practice with Codecademy or Khan Academy .	If you are struggling with your mental health, here is a list of mental health services, both in and outside of the NHS.
Get a free week of a strength and mobility programme with Gold Medal Bodies	Enjoy classical music concerts from London Symphony Orchestra .	Make your own music using Garageband – on your phone or mac .	Educational award-winning videos to help you stay curious, from TEDEd	Take the time to explore what self-help apps are available – here is a list.
A reddit community about bodyweight exercises , sharing tips and exercises	Explore NASA and Space Center Houston via virtual or interactive tours.	Play card games online for free here .	A huge range of influential videos from expert speakers on TED	If you fancy reading about mental health and self-help, here is a list of books to try.
Choose a workout from the NHS Fitness Studio's range of online exercise videos here .	Live webcams from Georgia Aquarium and Monterey Bay aquarium	Like Cards Against Humanity? Here's an online version to try.	Free virtual online cooking classes from Michelin-starred chef Massimo Bottura .	
Free app for 7 minute HIIT workouts at home	Visit World Heritage Site Machu Picchu , or explore Japanese tradition, modernity and nature in this 360° VR movie	Have a go at some drawing and guessing game online here , and here .	Online cooking classes for beginners to learn key skills in the kitchen	
A selection of different home workout videos from fitness instructors	Try some Origami with these free tutorials , or learning modern calligraphy techniques , or even Crochet for beginners .			
Peleton mobile app offers a free trial with yoga, strength, HIIT, cycling and stretching classes.	Try Crafts using: Easy Read Craft Ideas , or DIY craft tutorials for adults and kids , or more Craft Tutorials .			