

How to look after your (and others) mental health during Covid-19

All these ideas are to help you bring order out of chaos. The world might feel unsafe or chaotic right now, but with a few simple tools, we can create **internal order and safety** which can help us get through the next few weeks or months.

It's okay to feel, and move through the stages of grief. Everything has changed, and it's important to recognise that – **it will be different for everyone**. If you were already grieving prior to lockdown, your feelings could feel heightened at this time. Reach out to your Life Group, or a trusted friend or family member. If you are already receiving counselling, share this with your therapist. It is normal to feel like this, and talking about it helps.

You don't need to be busy to feel valued. There are lots of people out there helping others and if we are in a vulnerable category, this can make us feel a bit helpless! The things you can do are still very valuable – **Pray** for NHS staff, for farmers, food delivery drivers, post office workers, supermarket workers, Foodbank, NHS volunteers. If you know anyone who is working on the 'frontline' you could **text or email** them to let them know you're thinking about them. They might not be able to reply straight away, but just receiving a message that you are thinking and praying about them will be an encouragement!

Self Care is not Selfish. Especially during this pandemic, it is important to look after yourself, including what therapists call 'Boring Self Care' – brushing your hair and teeth every day, keep clean, dressing in comfortable clothing, practising good sleep hygiene (going to bed and waking at the same time every day), doing some form of gentle exercise and eating regularly. The purpose is to limit stress on the mind and body. If this is all you manage to do in the day, that's fine!

Gentle Nutrition and Exercise. Now is probably not the best time to start a restrictive food regime, or punishing exercise plan. **Treat yourself kindly**, remembering that sometimes you might want to eat lots because it helps you feel calmer – similarly you might have lost your appetite completely. This is normal and it's good to remind yourselves that that **this will pass** and you will get through it. Eating intuitively and eating what you want will help reduce anxiety. **Be kind and gentle to yourself** (just as you are kind to everyone else!).

If you already suffer from depression or anxiety, it is especially important to look after yourself! Limit time on your phone (and definitely 2 hours before bed). Limit news coverage (and social media if you don't feel it helps). Arrange to check in with a friend or family member once a day, **but also think about checking in on someone else** who might be struggling. **Know your limits (boundaries)**, you don't need to speak to 5 people for an hour each, a quick 10-15 minute chat will help you both. Alternatively if you have a laptop/tablet and are happy to, offer to 'Zoom' a friend for a quick chat. It is amazing how seeing another person's face on the screen can help you feel less isolated.

Journaling is proven to help to manage anxiety, depression and reduce stress. It helps you control your symptoms and improve your mood by prioritising problems, fears and concerns. Track your mood so you can recognise any triggers and learn how to process and manage them. The Bible says 'Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you' (1 Peter 5:7). Pour out your heart to God. You don't have to share your journaling with anyone, try to write something every day, perhaps after reading your Bible or praying. As well as pouring out your

worries, also note what you're grateful for – food in the cupboard, friends or family, clean clothes – anything!

Breathing – set aside time to practise deep breathing, it lowers stress and reduces tension. Some experts believe it is as important as taking your daily medication. If you become practised at this, when you feel anxious or stressed, you are able to 'fall back' on to the deep breathing you have learned. ***Christian Meditation and Mindfulness*** – Have a look at www.christianmindfulness.co.uk, The Abide App, Soultime App or Calming Christian (on Youtube). Meditating on a particular bible verse when anxious can help. One of my favourite ones is (*Breathing in*) 'When my anxiety was great within me' (*Breathing out*) 'Your consolation brought joy to my soul'. (Psalm 94:19).

Self Holding/Soothing – particularly helpful if you live alone and are missing human contact. Place your right hand under your armpit near your heart, and place your left hand over on top of your right arm. This helps us become aware of our bodies (the container of all our sensations and feelings). Another self-holding technique is placing your hand on your forehead and the other hand on your upper chest(heart area), with eyes open or closed – whilst meditating on a verse of scripture or praying, it helps us connect with our bodies. Notice how your hand feels, warm, or cool and breathe slowly. Then place the hand from your forehead onto your tummy and continue to breathe slowly. Other physical items such as a pillow, cuddly toy (we are never too old to cuddle a teddy!) or blanket are also useful.

Acknowledging the hard things. Feeling impatient is normal, feeling angry is normal, frustrated with how other people are handling this crisis? Normal. This crisis will bring up a whole host of emotions and being able to name the emotion, let yourself feel it (knowing it will pass) and then processing it in your journal or in prayer to God will help you move through your feelings **without suppressing them**. Trying to suppress, ignore or 'get rid of' emotions doesn't work, and they only come back stronger. It's also important to realise everyone processes their emotions differently, and we might need to give and receive an extra helping of love, grace and compassion towards our family members at this time.

Hopefully these tips will help you. We are still seeing our clients via Zoom video, so if something has come up which you'd like to talk to someone about, please get in touch with us.

With love from the Hope Centre Counselling Team.