

COVID-19 and dealing with anxiety

The appearance of this virus with its burgeoning consequences, along with the various responses to its management, have for many of us brought about reactions akin to receiving unwanted news of tragedy or loss; prompting a grief-like or an acute stress reaction.

As with any unwanted information and rapid change, it is usual to look for and hold on to what is lost, seek more information, blame, get angry or avoidant of the impositions of the change and try to protect ourselves and loved ones from the consequences.

Anxiety, especially when we become anxious about being anxious, confuses and can itself be the cause of distress.

Anxiety manifests physically through heightened awareness of body sensations, in how we think and through emotions, that are a combination of thoughts and sensations. The sensations are usually noticed through a slightly nauseous or pressured experience of our chest or abdomen, heavier feelings in limbs, the feeling of a band around our head or we feel hot and sweat more. These are normal reactions in this case, for most an unprecedented situation.

SLEEPING

You may experience sleeplessness, unusual dreams, indigestion, lowered frustration tolerance and irritability, and foggy thinking. In acute or chronic anxiety states finer social perception, abstract thinking, elegant use of language, short term memory, close-up visual focus, awareness of time elapsed and self-awareness become suppressed. Consequently, we are more prone to become irritable, subject to black and white thinking without shades of grey, tend to more direct language, feel detached with a sense of unreality and have a distorted sense of time elapsed; either longer or shorter. Be aware that revisiting dormant or historical issues may be triggered by the current uncertainties.

Recommendations: sensibly increase your exercise levels, don't increase your alcohol consumption, write down issues that concern you rather than over-thinking them [worrying makes you better at worrying, it is not the same as problem solving] and make to-do lists, learn a winding down technique such as meditation, mindfulness practices [see resources below], yoga or relaxation, or get a massage. Manage your reactivity and frustration levels by monitoring 'changes of state'; the sensory shifts that take place within us when we become frustrated or annoyed. Encourage yourself to not 'act out' the feelings.



BALANCING

Other things that impact on us in this state of affairs include a shift in the balance of how we use time, the spaces we move between and the patterns of relationships to people we regularly mix with. Most of us are creatures of habit, adapting to routines and literally, feeling uncomfortable when they are disrupted. Similarly, our task environment and all that it represents including the sense of who we are, can be threatened by the disruption we are experiencing. Change tends to produce change. It is also true that change is inevitable but progress is not. So, for some of us there seems to be a cascading effect of one thing leading to another either overwhelming or underwhelming.

Recommendations: Try and maintain some routines even if in a different place; coffee or tea breaks with work-mates on-line or WhatsApp groups. Plan your day and put some structure in it; don't encourage a shift other's expectations to that you have become available 24/7 to meet their needs but do offer increased support. In your regular work, you are likely to have moved about between tasks; even in the trip to and from work. Keep moving, even if just to stretch periodically or go for a walk or sit somewhere with a view. The diffused attention that natural scenes [waves, trees, clouds] offer have been shown to have significant health benefits. Perhaps this period offers us a time to contemplate how we wish to move forward, to reset priorities.

INFORMATION

Be careful of information overload. When we are anxious, unless we have a 'skills, knowledge and rules' set for specific contexts instilled to manage the unexpected [eg emergency services workers, pilots, health service workers], we become confused by too much language based information. This is because in fight, flight or freeze mode, we are driven more by our senses and 'survival mode' than rational thinking and problem solving.

Recommendations: Select a reliable source of information and access it once or twice a day for as short a period as possible – turn off news streams. Have an agreed game-plan for what is fundamentally important in managing this situation and amend it only with decisions based on new and reliable information. Get agreement within your group that "this is what we are doing and not doing". Continue with healthy established routines and/or add some new ones that move you away or distract you from the likely ever present feeling that something is not right.

ANXIETY ADDITIVE

Most of us will have had issues of concern and frustrations in our lives before the advent of Covid. Anxiety likes to attach itself to definable targets. Covid is an elusive target but the energy that it stimulates in us can easily be attached to existing or simmering issues that as a result suddenly become resurgent or amplified and can be a trigger for conflict.

Recommendations: Accept that during this period of uncertainty most people are more vulnerable to reactivity and anchoring their generalised anxiety in an issue. Remind yourself every few hours that you may need to manage your own reactivity to what you will deem irrational behaviour.

FEELING ABNORMAL IS NORMAL

We all have different ways of expressing anxiety despite some significant physiological commonalities. Some of us will be angry or frightened, some avoidant, some as we have seen go into survival or Hamster mode. These are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Children are particularly prone to picking up indirect communication from their surroundings.

Recommendations: This is an opportunity to practice active or reflective listening and demonstrating empathy as well as learning to manage our own reactivity. Children will benefit from modelling of tolerance and simple explanations of how occasionally there are viruses that mean we must be extra careful and practice good hygiene, and eventually the problem passes.

BETTER WORRYING

Remember, worrying makes us better at worrying – it is not the same as problem solving. The more we worry, the stronger the neural circuits that promote worrying become. In the mind-space of unstructured thoughts, there is no automatic apportioning of past, present and future; all the untoward things that have ever happened or might happen inhabit the same space.

Recommendations: The aim is to focus on the here and now and what can be done. Contingency planning should be a specific task with set aside resources of time and relevant information. It is better when dealing with important issues to write it out or talk it out with a good listener.

Externalising [putting it out on the table and walking around it] rather than internalising [tuning into the largely anxiety driven 'chatter channel' in our heads] is a sign of healthy cognitive style. Write it out and then leave the issue alone reviewing only at reasonable intervals or if there is reliable new information – then focus on things you can constructively engage with now.

WE'LL PULL THROUGH

We are all in this situation together but with some of us experiencing actual or possible financial hardship, let alone illness. Plans and actions are being developed and put in place to create financial moratoriums for mortgage holders, rent suspension and other help with various kinds of credit commitments. Any defaulting or loss is on such a scale not due to personal carelessness, that softening strategies will have to be put in place. Creative ways will be found to ease the burden across the community and clearly there is already evidence that people are developing and acting on a new or heightened sense of caring for each other. Some of us will recall through our parents and grandparents' narratives that people survived two world wars where depending on where you were, property title and academic qualifications became meaningless; others survived 'the great depression'. If we view old goldfields cemetery's, we can see whole families died during the diphtheria epidemics. We pulled through, made the most of it and learned from it [sort of].

RESOURCES:

CALM – an APP for mindfulness or, Jon Kabat-Zinn – Mindfulness body scan on You Tube

PAN panaircrew.org to access resources,

Anxiety Release – APP by Mark Grant using a bi-lateral [headphones required] brain stimulation technique to reduce anxiety.

Cognitive Behavioural Techniques [CBT] – CBT Explained on You Tube
[helpful to challenge worrisome and anxiety producing thoughts]

CBT – www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/thoughtrecordsheet.pdf [work sheet for CBT exercises]

Google: Psychological First Aid Guidelines Red Cross

ABC Podcasts: The Health Report EG; 23 March 2020 – psychological impacts of C-19 and review of an on-line therapy – Mindfulness Based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

The Black Dog and Beyond Blue websites have on-line programs available