

Coronavirus – managing your own anxiety as young people or adults

Don't panic! Keeping calm and carrying on

Anxiety is a normal, healthy response to the unprecedented situation we find ourselves in – try not to panic about feeling anxious. The problem is that we are experiencing not only the coronavirus pandemic itself but a veritable pandemic of panic fuelled by 24/7 news coverage and social media. Over the past few weeks, the world has had to come to terms to something very new and very frightening. Not everyone is affected by the virus, but **everybody** will be experiencing some form of anxiety and stress. Let's unpack what 'anxiety' is, learn how to spot it and, above all, develop strategies for keeping calm and carrying on.

Let's start with understanding more about feelings. Anxiety stems from fear, and fear is a universal mechanism which enables our systems to respond to danger and adopt behaviours to protect ourselves. Fear and anxiety are not dangerous in themselves but are pretty unpleasant at the time. Fear is an automatic response in which a central part of our brains, the amygdala, hijacks our frontal brains causing us to act without thinking about it first. When you think about it, there would be no point in spotting a bear in a forest and debating with yourself whether to engage it in conversation – one must simply flee; act first, think later.

When we experience fear, we respond instinctively without rational thought. Fear and anxiety mimic many of the symptoms of the virus itself which tends to breed further anxiety and panic. Anxiety can manifest itself as headaches, tension, dry mouth, dizziness and light-headedness, muscular aches and pains, tummy upset, nausea, tiredness, loss of concentration and motivation, poor sleep, wobbly muscles...

To become rational again, we have to recognise our fear and engage with it. Think of yourself as having a rational brain (the frontal part of your brain) and an emotional brain (in the middle brain) – you need to get the two communicating with each other. Once you have recognised signs of fear or anxiety, the rational brain needs to find words to explain what the emotional brain is feeling. Simply saying out loud, "I am feeling anxious" or "I am feeling stressed" can really help. This linking up of rational and emotional brain is known as 'mindsight'. It integrates the two parts of the brain so that they can begin to work together again.

Neuroscience research has taught us that there are four main triggers of stress. They are situations which are **N**ovel, **U**npredictable, **T**hreatening to the ego (we fear we are going to look foolish) or lead to a **S**ense of loss of control – literally "**NUTS**"). So the current pandemic presses all these buttons – no surprise then if we feel a sense of stress, anxiety and panic. These feelings are all entirely **normal responses to an abnormal situation**.

You can tackle the novel and unpredictable nature of the situation by focusing on those things in your life which are the same rather than those which are different. Keep to a routine. Have a structure. Plan your day around familiar things. Try to develop your own system for self-care. Don't listen to the news more than twice a day. Avoid social media if it is whipping up panic and negativity (not difficult for those of us who never mastered IT!) Use distraction to prevent yourself worrying – and try to worry only about those things you can actually control in your life. In that way, you

can change each worry in to “today’s little problem” and make a plan for solving it. Plan how to stay safe with your regular handwashing and cleaning routines – having a ‘job to do’ stops you worrying.

Do your best to ensure a good night’s sleep – use a wind-down routine if you need to with a bath, audio book, no screens in the bedroom, no caffeine in the evening, etc. Our general fatigue and need for sleep increases when we are stressed and anxious – even if we have done very little during the day. Exercise and being outdoors helps enormously with a good night’s sleep. Unfortunately, alcohol provides only short-term euphoria, actually increases anxiety and depression and has an adverse affect on quality sleep.

One of the most effective ways of calming the system and avoiding panic (in other words, taking back control) is to develop mindfulness techniques. These take practice but there is proven evidence that they can change brain structure. There are various Apps for developing the techniques and people have found ‘Calm’ and ‘Headspace’ helpful. The key is to steady your breathing, slow everything down and ‘be in the moment’. Of course, prayer and meditation are powerful vehicles for achieving this.

Try to see the current pandemic as a real opportunity for staying in touch - social distancing should not mean social isolation. For the IT-friendly, there are video calls and face-time, social platforms, Skyped coffee times, virtual meetings and game times, on-line teaching and learning. For the rest of us, there are telephone calls, waving to each other in the supermarket queue, and good old fashioned letter writing. Volunteering and giving something back to the community is also excellent for your mental wellbeing. One of the most helpful pieces of advice a friend gave to me was this – take each day a day at a time – we will get through this. Stay safe, stay mindful, stay well.