

Reacting to the COVID-19 crisis

When something happens that is distressing, unexpected or affects the people we are close to, most people will experience a reaction that can be unpleasant, disturbing and potentially overwhelming. When we feel we can't control the outcome, and our usual way of living is threatened or disrupted, then this is particularly hard. The current COVID-19 pandemic means that it is just as important to look after our mental health and wellbeing as it is our physical health.

Whilst there is a lot of information about how we can adapt and look after ourselves, there is much less information about how we may be feeling and thinking. Crisis events can cause a great deal of shock - then emotional disturbance that may take time to subside.

You may feel particularly vulnerable if you

- Fear for your livelihood or ability to meet your basic needs
- Are worried about your own health or that of your loved ones
- Are socially isolated
- Are physically exhausted - perhaps you are in work and responding to heavy demands and increased workload
- Were already depressed, anxious or stressed
- Have suffered losses or bereavement recently, or have unresolved ones in the past

Some people worry that they are not reacting the same as those around them. They may feel that they are being insensitive or uncaring. It is vital to remember that we are all affected by different things at different times in our lives. It doesn't mean we are less caring as human beings. If this concerns you, perhaps see it as an opportunity to offer support or practical help to those who need it while you are comparatively calm and objective.

Emotional distress is a natural reaction to what is a very abnormal event.

In the majority of cases, this emotional crisis reaction will subside over a few weeks as we gradually adjust to the changes in our world and the uncertainty of continued effects.

However, during this time we may experience unpleasant or worrying signs of emotional distress. Understanding this reaction and how we can help ourselves manage it at such a difficult time means that we are more likely to recover quickly and fully.

How a crisis affects our body and mind

Our body prepares us to deal with threats

When we believe we are threatened, our body and mind react in a very primitive way. Adrenalin and other stress hormones are released into the bloodstream making our body

ready to act. These changes are meant to help us to fight or run away from a threat such as a predator.

However, in a prolonged crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the body can continue to produce stress hormones. We can't fight or run away from the threat and we may experience chronic symptoms of stress.

Recognising and understanding these symptoms is the first step in dealing with them.

It's not unusual to notice	This is because
Our breathing is shallow and rapid and this can lead to dizziness	Our body is taking in more oxygen to power our muscles for action
A racing heart rate, tight chest or palpitations	Our heart rate rises to get blood to muscles quickly
Headaches, backache, muscle tension Tingling, trembling	Our major muscles are tensed ready for action
We become clumsy, dropping things	Priority is given to big muscle groups and "fine motor skills" such as using hands or smaller movements are less important
Craving fatty, sugary foods	Our liver releases stored sugar and fatty acids for quick energy, and we need to restock
Digestive problems, dry mouth, IBS, nausea or reduced appetite	Our digestive system slows down as it is not essential for fight or flight
Pale, grey or clammy skin Skin rashes, increased eczema Cold sweats	Blood is diverted away from surface skin and the body cools itself by sweating
Blurred vision	Our pupils dilate as part of the fight or flight response

Always check any new or intense physical symptoms with a health professional.

Reducing the fight or flight response

The changes to our body and mind are based on a subconscious survival process. This doesn't mean we can't do anything about them!

We can reverse or reduce the effects by these simple steps:

- Breathing exercises that calm our nervous system
- Burning off the stress hormones with exercise. There are lots of online videos that you can freely access if you need to exercise from home.
- Avoiding stimulants such as caffeine and alcohol that will increase the effects of stress
- Good nutrition - If you have no appetite, try regular, small meals that are easy to eat and digest such as soups, stews, milky puddings
- Taking short rest breaks

Our thinking may also change

The human response to threat also affects our thinking. The higher the level of stress, the less clearly our brains work. Our concentration, focus, decision making, and problem-solving skills deteriorate.

The brain automatically searches for survival information - what do I know about this threat? What do I know about ways to deal with it? In the case of COVID-19, there is a great deal of uncertainty about the virus itself as well as how we can deal with it. Our brain's need to search for answers can lead to us being unable to switch off from thoughts about it.

We might notice that we are

- Ruminating - compulsively thinking about it even when we don't want to
- Trying to predict the outcome as our mind tries to resolve the issue. We may find we go through constant "what ifs?"
- This can extend to our dreams and it's not unusual for these to become vivid and unsettling as our mind tries to process events.

How we can help settle our thoughts

It's impossible to just stop thinking about something. Our brains are hard wired to focus on threats. However, every time we do that, stress hormones increase so it's important to pay attention on where we are focusing.

Things we can do include

- Minimising news coverage that makes you feel anxious, upset or angry. It can be hard to escape unless you consciously and deliberately switch channels.
- Limit your news coverage to set times and trusted sources
- If social media is providing a constant source of upsetting stories or frightening rumours, then now may be a time to either take a break from it or ask your friends and family to ban or limit talk about COVID-19.
- Many of us are frightened about the future. This is an unfolding situation and it's important we don't try to think too far ahead. Focus on what you can do today to stay healthy - physically *and* mentally
- Look for positive stories and stories of recovery and compassion
- Helping others can make us feel empowered, whether it's practical support or phone contact. Reaching out to vulnerable neighbours can benefit you and them.

- Accept that your concentration and focus will be reduced. You may notice your speech is muddled or you can't find words. Write lists, don't make big decisions and slow down.
- Mindfulness and meditating can really help our thoughts to slow down and re-engage our calm thinking. There are lots of free Apps and YouTube videos that teach these skills.

Changes in how we feel

As we adjust to the changes in our world, we can feel as though we are on an emotional roller coaster. Our feelings may change throughout the day and many people worry that they are losing control or going mad.

- We may feel tearful and have frequent periods of crying. This sadness may be for ourselves or for people we hear about. Other peoples' losses may leave us feeling guilty and helpless
- We may feel generally anxious, unable to settle and ready for "something" to happen. This can include panicky feelings or extreme anxiety about loved ones. This can show up as being jumpy, easily startled and finding it hard to tolerate loud noises and busy surroundings
- We can feel irritable or angry particularly when we see other people being selfish or irresponsible.
- We may have a low mood or feel helpless
- Sometimes the stress hormones can leave us feeling numb, unable to have loving feelings or find enjoyment. The mind has ways to protect us from overwhelm such as denial or disbelief - everything can feel surreal. This denial can also lead us to play down the threat and try to keep things as usual.

Helping our emotions settle

The first step is actually to acknowledge and accept how you are feeling. You are a human being and humans have emotions. It's not a weakness. Anger and anxiety are related to unresolved urges to fight or flee from the threat.

- Keeping a diary of your thoughts and feelings can help you to safely express them. Often when we have written them down we feel a little more distanced from them.
- Take time out when you can to be in a quiet place. Finding some private space may be difficult if more people are at home so it's a good idea to find an area for everyone that they can retreat to when they need to be alone.
- Talking things through with a good listener often helps us to vent our emotions. Accessing social support may be harder and we may need to do this differently. A phone call, Facetime call or Skype may not be the same as sitting together but we can quickly learn how to use this media to support each other.

Emotions can change quickly and come in waves. Be kind to yourself and accept it will take time to process what is happening.

We may behave differently

The fight and flight reaction can mean we feel an urge to act - to *do something*. This can mean that we and the people around us behave differently to usual.

- When we feel out of control, we often react by becoming overly controlling in other areas. Small things become important and can cause friction in households. Clutter and mess can feel overwhelming
- On the other hand, when we feel unable to influence what is happening in our world, we may feel passive and find it hard to motivate ourselves. Some people who are on shutdown will throw themselves into that job list whilst others will feel unable to get dressed - “what’s the point?”
- The stress hormones will generally mean our sleep is disturbed. This may mean problems getting to sleep, waking in the night or waking early
- We might deal with the effects of prolonged emotional crisis through increased alcohol / drug or cigarettes.
- An emotional crisis can put people into survival mode where they act in ways that they wouldn’t normally do. A fear of not being able to meet basic needs drives many to behave in ways that seem selfish to others.

Choosing healthy behaviours

When we can’t control the bigger picture, we can still make good choices in how we manage our mental health and wellbeing.

New routines need to replace the old ones. Whereas old ways of working, socialising and exercising may not be accessible at the moment, we can create new ones. Newspaper, TV and news programmes are increasingly offering ideas for action we can take. Once we understand and accept our emotional responses, we are far more likely to be able to take steps that will help.

Whatever action you take, set yourself small, realistic goals. For example, you may not learn a new language during shut down but you can take 30 minute to learn a few phrases. Whilst you do this you are distracting negative thoughts and reducing stress hormones.

Keeping your body active through simple, daily exercises can reduce boredom and add structure to the day.

All of the reactions we have set out here are normal human responses to a crisis and, if managed sensibly in the short term, will not cause lasting harm. It is important to give yourself time to recover and accept that you may not be as efficient and effective as normal.

When to seek professional support

If the symptoms of emotional distress do not begin to subside within a few weeks, or if they intensify, consider seeking further assistance.

Seek professional help, if ...

You are finding it difficult to manage any aspect of your reaction

You do not have someone to share your thoughts, feelings and experience with and you think this would be helpful.

You feel despair or have thoughts of harming yourself.

Please Remember! Professional help is usually available from your doctor, health professional or through your employer. Don't suffer in silence!

Things will change

An emotional crisis tends to follow a 3-phase pattern with a beginning, a middle and an end. At first, we try to keep things as they were. We use denial and disbelief and struggle to maintain our routines and usual coping. We want things to stay the same and resist changes to how we cope.

In the middle stage, as we accept that we must adapt, we find it easier to look for new coping strategies. We become more creative and motivated to make choices. Until we acknowledge the emotional impact of the crisis, this middle phase can be postponed. We all go through these crisis phases in our own time and it's important to acknowledge that some people will take longer to adjust.

We will adjust. In the final phase we will come out stronger together. We will have learned more ways to support each other and ourselves. As has been said many times elsewhere, this is a marathon not a sprint. Crises bring loss - in many forms.

Take your time and accept that small steps are the quickest way to a full recovery. You are not on your own.