Self-care and anxiety management

As our attention is drawn to the increasing number of coronavirus cases in Australia, and as ways of engaging with study, social events, work and support are also changing, there are increasing levels of stress and anxiety in the community. This information sheet covers what to expect or look out for in others, and what you can do to look after yourself and manage stress and anxiety associated with coronavirus.

Stress and anxiety - coronavirus

Coronavirus news and information, changing routines and ways of doing things, as well as changes in others’ behaviour can all increase stress and anxiety. The stress response associated with this prepares us for a physical, emotional and/or mental action and is essential for survival in the face of threat.

It is normal to experience more anxiety and stress in response to coronavirus. For most people the threat is still uncertain and there are a lot of “what if’s” going through our mind. We don’t know whether we will contract the virus or what will happen when we do, and in the absence of information our mind fills in the blanks with worst case scenarios.

Anxiety feeds on “what if”s making the most manageable, uncertain and unlikely scenarios seem unmanageable and likely. Anxiety can also lead us to feel overwhelmed, vulnerable, helpless and powerless. In turn this can also lead us to inaction.

The key to making anxiety feel more manageable is in taking action. The following sections cover things you can do to look after your physical and emotional self in a world of social distancing and changing routines.

Reducing physical exposure - precautions

There are simple hygiene measures that you can do that will drastically lower your risk of contracting coronavirus:

- Wash hands frequently with soap for 30 seconds, or if not available use alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Avoid touching your face, especially your nose, mouth and eyes.
- Avoid close contact with others, especially those who are experiencing symptoms of cold and flu.
- If you feel unwell stay at home until you fully recover.
- If you have fever or cough and are concerned you have coronavirus call the national (1800 020 222) or state hotline (Tas: 1800 671 738) or call ahead to your doctor and tell them about your symptoms.
- If you experience trouble breathing seek medical attention immediately by calling ‘000’. Make sure to let them know if you have had any other symptoms, especially fever and cough, as well as any known interactions with confirmed cases of coronavirus.

Reducing exposure - stress

Change can be stressful at the best of times. There are currently a lot of proactive and preventative changes happening as Australia moves towards social distancing measures as a way of reducing transmission of coronavirus.
There are also constant reminders and coverage of coronavirus in the media which can maintain a heightened state of stress. You might consider limiting your exposure to some of this information by taking time away from devices and social media, and instead seeking reliable sources of information such as the Australian Government’s health alert page or the University COVID-19 update page. Below are some self-care tips that can help you keep things in perspective and maintain wellbeing in a socially distanced world.

**Keeping things in perspective**

With all of the focus on the impact of coronavirus, it is easy to see things as worse than they really are. Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to shift your thinking from worst-case scenario to a healthier mind-frame:

- **What strategies have I used to cope with stress in the past?** We have all faced stress in our lives and we’ve successfully made it through which is why we are still here today. What coping strategies did you use then to get by or manage when you were stressed? The more coping strategies you have, the more manageable stress can feel.
- **What things can I control?** Thinking about some small things you can control and putting things into action can help you feel more resilient.
- **Am I overestimating how bad things are?** Be sure to check the Australian Government website, noting the relatively small number of Australians with coronavirus. The media is likely to focus on extreme cases or areas where the virus has had the greatest impact, so these are not the best source of information. Social distancing strategies, although disconcerting, are designed to lower the demand on medical services so that high quality support is available to those who need it, when they need it.
- **Am I only thinking about the worst-case scenario? What are other scenarios that are more likely to occur?** It is important to remind yourself that there are only a few cases of coronavirus in Australia compared to the total population of people in Australia. For a vast majority of those who might catch it, symptoms are likely to be minimal or even non-existent. There are groups of individuals that are more likely to experience more significant symptoms such as those in older age brackets (increasingly from 50+) and those with cardiovascular or immune system conditions. Even in these groups, our medical system is set up to support individuals, so most cases are expected to make full recovery.

**Staying connected**

Feeling close to and valued by others, and strengthening relationships with the people in our lives such as friends, family, neighbours and work colleagues is important in boosting wellbeing. Social distancing changes the way we connect with and interact with others, but there are still things you can do to improve and nourish your connections:

- Instead of texting or emailing, call someone on the phone or over video using programs such as Zoom and Skype.
- Nourish relationships you already have by taking time to find out what is going on in the lives of those you care about.
- If you see neighbours in the street, ask how they are going or if they need anything.
- Connect to local interest, hobby or support groups in your community through social media. For example, the UTASlife Facebook page is a way to connect with the university community. BeyondBlue has online forums where you can chat with others and share ideas of self-care.
- Write a handwritten letter to a friend or relative and send it.
- If you live with others, ask them how they are going and spend 5 minutes focussed just on listening to them.

**Staying Active**

Being physically active improves physical health and can improve mood and wellbeing. When staying at home, it is still important to keep a routine and physical activity is vital to promote physical and mental health. Although you might not be able to go to the gym, there are other ways to get exercise. Here are some examples of things you can do to stay active:

- Go for a walk or run
- Increase your incidental exercise: Take the stairs rather than the elevator or escalator, park further away when heading out, get off the bus stop one stop earlier.
- Search YouTube videos to get ideas for at-home exercises and do exercise classes from home. Dance schools and exercise instructors are also making lessons freely available online
- Get up and move around. Try moving for every 30 minutes of sitting. Even if you are just walking to grab a glass of water, go to the bathroom or do a lap of the house.

> utas.edu.au/students
Give
Carrying out acts of kindness or altruistic behaviour has been linked to life satisfaction, a sense of purpose and meaning, and general sense of wellbeing. In times of stress, acts of kindness can be even more important for the mental health of ourselves and those around us.
- Identify small gestures you can make for friends and family
- Social media initiatives such as Adopt a Healthcare Worker or Southern Tasmania COVID-19 Community Support Group offer opportunities to connect and support others in the community

Keep learning
Being curious and seeking out new experiences and knowledge helps to stimulate the brain, keeping you mentally active. Although it is easy to think about all the activities we might not be able to do at the moment, it can be good to identify all the activities we still are able to do, and those we have even more opportunity to do if we are home more often.
- Focus on your studies, enrol in a free online short course, or watch a TED Talk
- Read a book (libraries have eBooks, eMagazines and audio books available for download) or listen to a podcast
- Try something new such as a new hobby or skill, e.g. cook a new recipe, play an instrument, learn a language, learn how to knit, develop your gardening skills

Take notice
We live in a fast-paced world. If we are feeling stressed and anxious we can also spend a lot of time in our head worrying about the future. Paying attention to the present moment, to the world around us as well as our internal world, such as thoughts and feelings can help boost wellbeing.
- Take 5 minutes just to sit and notice the sounds, smells, sights around you
- Join a virtual/online mindfulness session
- Do a virtual museum tour
- Draw what you can see around you

Useful mobile apps
There are lots of smartphone apps out there to help you manage stress and anxiety. We’ve picked a few to get you started.

Smiling Mind
Designed by psychologists and educators to bring mindfulness into your life.

Headspace
Sleep by Headspace can be found within the Headspace app. It includes everything from meditation, to nature sounds and even music for sleep.

Calm
This app has been designed for sleep, meditation and relaxation. This is a great mindfulness app for beginners through to advanced users.

Other helpful resources
The Desk: thedesk.org.au
The desk is an online resource aimed at improving wellbeing, designed specifically for University students. It includes online modules and resources to help you manage stress.

Information sheets
Check out our range of information sheets that can help you better manage stress such as Support from a Distance, Breathing and Relaxation, Time Management, Improving your Sleep and Controlling Procrastination.
For a full list visit utas.edu.au/students/resources

Help! Where can I find it?
University Counselling Service: utas.edu.au/counselling
Appointments (video, phone, instant chat and email) are available with experienced mental health clinicians between 8.30am and 5.00pm weekdays.
Phone: 1800 817 675
Online bookings: utas.edu.au/appointments

The University Counselling Service also includes after-hours crisis counselling support.
Phone 1300 511 709 or text 0488 884 168.

> utas.edu.au/students