

Self-care during times of uncertainty

If there's one thing that the global outbreak of COVID-19 is teaching us, it's that we live in an unpredictable world. And as the situation continues, we may be feeling increased uncertainty.

Most of us never countenanced that we'd experience a pandemic in our lifetimes. For many people, pandemics are something we associate with the past, before modern medical and scientific advances existed, or something confined to the world of science fiction.

The evolving COVID-19 situation and the impact that it's having on our lives has taken many of us by surprise and is causing many of us to experience heightened feelings of stress and anxiety. These feelings can come in waves or may be a constant part of our daily life.

How do our minds and bodies react to uncertainty and fear?

During times of change or uncertainty, it is natural for us to imagine the worst possible outcome. From an evolutionary sense, our brains don't like uncertainty – anything uncertain is seen as a potential threat, and our reaction can be to respond accordingly, as our instincts steer us towards one of the following "gut reactions":

- ◆ **Fight:** when we're in fight mode, we are in self-preservation mode. However, we often tend to exaggerate the size of the threat and adopt a defensive or offensive mindset. Our aim, when in fight mode, is to confront the threat head-on, but in doing so, we're prone to unreasonable behaviour, making unrealistic demands on other people and/or misunderstanding information during this period of heightened emotion
- ◆ **Flight:** when we're in flight mode, we're trying to avoid the threat by escaping the negative emotions it is evoking. This can manifest in behaviours such as micro-managing, over-worrying, obsessive over-thinking, rushing around, or being unable to sit down and relax
- ◆ **Freeze:** some people may experience an intense, paralysing fear that causes them to retreat within themselves. There is often a sense of feeling spaced out, as our brain shuts down and we struggle to make rational decisions
- ◆ **Appease:** We can move into appeasing when the threat is coming from another person. We may try to manage our discomfort by pacifying or placating the person who is the origin of the threat, bending to their whims and giving them what they want.

The importance of self-care

Practicing self-care is particularly important during times of uncertainty. When we feel healthy and strong in our bodies, our minds are more likely to reflect a healthy and strong state as well. This is especially important for those of us who have children or elderly or infirmed family and/or friends who rely on us for care. It also helps to galvanise us if we fall sick, leaving us more equipped to handle illness and make a speedy recovery.

Self-care tips

- ◆ Stay connected with friends, family and colleagues – social connectedness is extremely important for wellness especially during times of uncertainty. Use the technology that is available to you if you are unable to catch up with loved ones face-to-face
- ◆ Work on your sleep hygiene – aim for between 7 and 9 hours of sleep each night and set yourself a goal to go to bed and rise at the same time each day. Make sure your sleeping environment is a comfortable temperature and suitably dark to help induce quality sleep
- ◆ Practice self-compassion – change and uncertainty are challenging for most people, and it can take time to build your reserves to be tolerant and accepting of all the adjustments that you're being forced to make. So, practice being compassionate and patient with yourself, just as you would with a child or a loved one
- ◆ Exercise regularly – research tells us that exercise helps to reduce the effects of stress and depression, as well as releasing our feel-good hormones and boosting our mood. Social distancing is an important element of our approach to fighting COVID-19, but there are myriad ways that you can exercise alone – use exercise apps and YouTube tutorials to do anything from Pilates and yoga to aerobics and stretching
- ◆ Trying to control or avoid negative thoughts and feelings can actually make them stronger. Mindfulness meditation is a skill that helps you to focus on the present, accepting all your thoughts and feelings – the unpleasant ones as well as the pleasant ones. Use guided meditation apps or YouTube tutorials to get started and aim to practice mindfulness for at least ten minutes each day
- ◆ Practice gratitude – research shows that the act of being thankful releases dopamine and serotonin in our brains. Each night at bedtime, write down 3-5 things you are especially grateful for. This will help you to focus on all the good around you, rather than seeing only the less good
- ◆ Reach out for help – if you're concerned or notice a significant shift in your mood

Limit the effect

We may find ourselves in the current situation for some time to come. The following tips will help to limit the effects of the situation on your mood and help you to avoid feeling fatigued:

- ◆ Manage your exposure to news coverage – easy access to rolling news leaves many of us inclined to constantly look for new updates. But it's important to take a break from the news and our social media feeds. Limit yourself to certain windows in the day to check for updates, and leave it at that
- ◆ Get your information from reputable sources only – and be conscious of the information you let in. Avoid believing – and sharing – messages that contain unnamed or unqualified sources
- ◆ Ground yourself with routine – creating routines in our daily life provides stability when we are feeling uncertain. It may be as simple as a fixed bedtime routine, making the bed each morning or doing house chores at fixed times – whatever can help you feel anchored