

Coronavirus Crisis Mental Health Survival Kit

As a Solution Focused Hypnotherapist & Coach, I help people resolve anxiety and traumas. That's a challenge at the best of times. When there's an 'enemy at the gate', it's daunting.

Are you arguing with the cat? Obsessing over the news? Just feeling overwhelmed, tearful and want to stay in bed?

You are not going mad.

Deep inside our brains, there's an almond-shaped part called the amygdala. It has evolved to sound the alarm, telling us to fight, run or hide when we face wild animals, warring tribes or indeed, pandemics. The alarm triggers a flood of chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol. Our heart rate goes up, our breathing becomes shallow, we feel shaky and sick. When we finally calm down, we feel mentally and physically drained.

Once immediate danger is past, your active imagination can keep activating your amygdala, making you feel worse and worse, or it can help you adapt and survive.

Here are ten ideas to help you stay calm and in control during the coronavirus crisis.

- 1. Keep to a routine:** Don't hang around all day in your pyjamas. Create a routine of work, mealtimes, rest, exercise and, above all, sleep. Aim to wake and go to bed at the same time. Get dressed every morning. Make your bed. The more of a routine you have, the more you stay calm, relaxed and in control.
- 2. Accept what you can't control and take control of small things:** Tidy a cupboard, sort your sock drawer, scrub your kitchen floor; wear your favourite dress, cook a good meal, call a friend. Small positive actions bring back a sense of being in control, gives us focus and purpose, and move us gently into the problem-solving part of the mind.
- 3. Develop a good sleep routine:** A regular 8 hours sleep positively impacts our hearts, immune systems and mental health; but sleep can elude us when we are anxious. Avoid coffee and tea in the afternoons, or switch to decaffeinated. Avoid horror films, disturbing thrillers, and social media in the evenings. If you have been comfort eating, start cutting down on sugar and refined carbs which also cause insomnia. Several studies indicate that chamomile tea really does help you get to sleep.
- 4. Focus on what's good now:** Most of us have a roof over our head, a phone or computer, hot water and even the luxury of pasta and toilet rolls! Focusing on what is good or working well will help you move out of your anxious primitive mind. You might jot down things you are grateful for every day and add them to a Gratitude Jar. When you or your family feel overly anxious, the contents can help you shift in to a positive frame of mind.
- 5. Breathe:** Breathing into the diaphragm calms the central nervous system. Simple daily breathing exercises can help you stay calm and in control. Here's a simple exercise to add to your daily routine.

Sit in a chair upright. Make sure you are warm and comfortable. Let your arms be loose or rest on the chair arms. Place your feet hip width apart. Aim to breathe through your nose and out through your mouth.

- Observe your breathing, letting it flow into your stomach naturally.
- Breathe in gently, counting steadily from 1 to 5. You may not be able to reach 5 at first.
- Don't pause or hold your breath, let it flow out gently through your mouth, counting to 5 again.
- Keep doing this for 3 to 5 minutes.

- 6. Stay in the moment:** Being in a crisis increases our awareness. We wash our hands with focus; we are mindful of others in new ways. Mindful awareness can also calm the mind. This simple exercise will help you stay focused and calm in the moment.

Sit quietly at home or in the garden. What can you see, hear, feel, smell, touch? Aim to notice five things. In the spring there is so much to appreciate: the warmth of the sun, nodding yellow daffodils or the soft touch of a breeze. Notice how your heart and breathing slow, your mind clears and tranquillity sweeps over you.

7. **Absorbing Stories:** Since Beowulf, the original 'overcoming the monster' story, we have processed our fears through stories. Plan your day to include absorbing books, films and audio books that rest your mind and resolve anxieties. Don't be ashamed of watching unchallenging TV. Your subconscious mind needs soothing. Miss Marple can be a tonic.
8. **Exercise:** Run, cycle or walk every day to raise mood-boosting endorphins and to help you remain mentally resilient. Just 10 minutes of gentle daily exercise will boost your mood. There are many fabulous online resources. For exercise designed by and for older people see <https://10today.co.uk>.
9. **Ration the News:** Decide when you are going to catch up on the news, ideally before 7.00pm. Catching up on essential news only once stops us obsessing throughout the evening, allowing us to ease down to bed time. Avoid the temptation to look at the phone before you go to bed too.
10. **Call a Friend:** We need to connect with others and to encourage and reassure each other. Luckily, there are so many ways we can stay in touch. You'll find others feel just like you do; and that you are coping better than you think. If you need to, contact local volunteer services, remember they may need you as much as you need them.

Anxiety, withdrawal and exhaustion in a crisis is a normal human response. Staying mentally healthy doesn't mean not feeling. It means experiencing your emotions, accepting them fully and finding ways to process them and get them in perspective. I hope some of these ideas help you to stay safe and well, physically and mentally, during the coronavirus crisis.

The Sense-Ability Relax and Unwind recording is available to all readers of The Wheatley Parish News free. Email me at jane@sense-ability.co.uk

Rewind Trauma Therapy is available online to NHS frontline staff free subject to availability.

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