

Coping with COVID-19

Some ideas to help your mental health

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We welcome your comments on this leaflet and the services we provide. You'll find comment boxes at reception, on the wards, in the Iona Café and in Day Therapies.

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Coping during COVID-19

We are living in very unusual and stressful times. Many people will be having moments where they are finding it difficult to cope. It is important to look after yourself as best you can. Here are some ideas for things that can help you to cope.

- Stick to a routine. Try to go to sleep and wake up at your normal times. Write a daily schedule that includes varied tasks (e.g. shopping, exercise). Schedule time for self-care (e.g. hobbies or relaxing activities). It's important to leave some time for things you enjoy.
- Get showered and dress in comfortable clothes, wash your face, brush your teeth. Take time for a bath, shower, facial. Wear some bright colours – dress can impact on our mood.
- Stay hydrated and eat well. It may seem obvious but stress and eating often don't mix well. Drink plenty of water, eat some good nutritious foods. Perhaps now is the time to learn how to cook something new.
- Get outside at least once a day for at least thirty minutes. If you are concerned about social distancing then try first thing in the morning or later in the evening and avoid streets that are normally busy. If you are high risk or living with someone who is high risk, open the windows and blast the fan – fresh air can help lift our spirits.
- Find some time to move each day. If you don't feel comfortable going outside, there are lots of YouTube videos and free movement classes online. If all else fails, turn on the music and have a dance party.
- Reach out to others at least once a day – try to do Facetime, Skype, phone calls, texting – connect with other people to seek and provide support.
- Develop a self-care toolkit to help calm and soothe you. This might look different for everyone. A lot of successful self-care strategies include a sensory component (touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell and movement). Some ideas: cuddle a soft blanket or stuffed animal, drink a hot chocolate, look at photos of holidays or beaches, listen to comforting music, smell lavender or eucalyptus oil, sit in a small swing or a rocking chair, cover yourself with a weighted blanket. You could write a journal, chew mint gum, or drink ginger ale. Ice packs and cold can also be good for anxiety regulation – if you are starting to feel panicky, try holding an ice cube in your hand for as long as you can, to distract from anxious thoughts and focus your attention elsewhere.
- Try a breathing or relaxation exercise.
- Give everyone the benefit of the doubt and give them some space when needed – being cooped up a lot of the time can bring out the worst in everyone. Each person will have moments when they are not at their best – try not to hold on to grudges or to escalate arguments. Remember people are all feeling stressed.
- Help everyone to find their own space to retreat to. Living on top of one another can be stressful and agreeing where you can each go for some private time can help.
- If you are working from home, try to have a separate space where you can switch off and relax.
- Lower your expectations and practice self-acceptance. We are all trying to do too many things at the moment while under considerable stress. It isn't possible to do everything perfectly in these circumstances. Offer yourself self-acceptance – this means you just accept how things are just now, including yourself and your current situation, without question or blame. It isn't possible to fail just now – we are in a situation where there is no rulebook or roadmap, no precedent, and where we are all doing the very best we can at a difficult time.
- Limit your exposure to social media and conversations about COVID-19. Some of the information, especially on social media, can be negative, alarmist or skewed, and this can raise your anxiety. Find a few trusted sources you can check in with, and limit your access to these to a few times a day. Set a time limit for yourself on how much you will read or listen to (we suggest a maximum of 30 minutes a day).
- Make time to notice other things, especially good things such as people supporting one another. It is important to counterbalance the negative with hopeful and positive information.
- Spend time with your pets. This can be very soothing.
- Help others if you can – find ways, big and small, to give back. Check in with elderly neighbours, for example. This can give us a sense of agency when other things seem out of control.
- Find something you can control, no matter how small, and control the heck out of it. Organize your bookshelf or kitchen cupboards, purge your closet of old and unwanted clothes, clear out your spare room, group your toys or equipment. This can help to anchor or ground us when other things in life may feel chaotic.
- Find a long-term project to dive into. Now is the time to start learning how to play keyboard, to undertake a huge jigsaw puzzle, to start a 15-hour game of Risk, to paint a picture, read a series of books, binge-watch a TV series, crochet a blanket. Find something that will keep you busy, distracted and engaged, to help you take breaks from what is happening in the outside world.
- Engage in repetitive movements and left-right movements. Research has shown that repetitive movement (knitting, colouring, painting, clay sculpture, skipping, running, drumming, hopping) can be effective at self-soothing and maintaining self-regulation in moments of distress.
- Find an expressive art and go for it. Find something creative (sculpting, drawing, dancing, music, singing, playing an instrument) and give it your all. It doesn't matter if you don't think of yourself as creative, and it doesn't

matter whether the end product is 'good' – the point is to focus yourself on something which will keep you occupied.

- Find lightness and humour in each day – cat videos on YouTube, a stand-up comedy show on Netflix, a funny movie.
- Reach out for help. If you have a counsellor or psychiatrist, they are available to you, even at a distance. Keep up your medications and your counselling sessions as best you can. If you are having difficulty coping, seek out help. Seek support groups online or use telephone helplines. Although we are physically distant, we can always connect virtually.
- If you are feeling anxious, Anxiety UK has a number of useful resources: www.anxietyuk.org.uk/coronanxiety-support-resources

If you have children

- Set up virtual playdates using Skype, Zoom, Facetime or similar – your kids will be missing their friends too.
- Spend extra time playing with children – children rarely communicate how they are feeling verbally but will often express themselves through play. Don't be surprised to see themes of illness, doctors visits and 'social distancing'. Understand that play is cathartic and helpful for children – it is how they process their world and solve problems.
- Expect some behavioural issues in children and respond gently. We are all struggling with disruption in routine and this can be particularly difficult for children, who usually rely on routines created by others to make them feel safe and to help them know what comes next in any day. Expect increased anxiety, worries and fears, nightmares, difficulty separating or sleeping, testing limits, and meltdowns. Now is probably not the best time to introduce major new behavioural plans or consequences – hold stable and focus on emotional connection.
- Try to keep some routine in the day, even if it is as simple as breakfast, some school work, playtime, lunch, etc. You can think about writing a basic schedule on a piece of paper, so children know what to expect during the day.
- Help children identify a place they can go when feeling stressed. You can make it feel cozy with blankets, pillows, cushions, beanbags, tents and 'forts'.

- Help children create a "comfort box" – a shoe-box or container they can decorate and then fill with things that comfort them and help them calm down when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Focus on safety and attachment. We are living with unprecedented demand – meeting work deadlines, home-schooling children, running a sterile household, and making entertainment in confinement. We can easily get wrapped up in meeting all these various expectations but we must try to remember these are scary and unpredictable times for children. Focus on strengthening your relationship by spending time with them, following their lead, using touch to comfort them, play, reading and by verbally reassuring them.
- Ask them how they are feeling and if they have any questions and take some time to talk over any worries they might be having.
- Keep alarming conversations and news out of children's earshot to stop them becoming very frightened by what they are hearing. If you need to keep up with the news, try to do this in a way that limits your children's exposure. If your children want to know what is happening in the world then think about letting them watch something like BBC Newsround, as it is age appropriate and likely to be less overwhelming.
- Manuela Molina has written a short story for young children which helps explain Coronavirus in a simple way they can understand: <https://www.mindheart.co/descargables>

If you would like further information or support for yourself or your family, contact us on 0131 551 7751 or by email at access@stcolumbashospice.org.uk and the Access Team will direct you to the most appropriate services for your needs.

If things are becoming too stressful and you are worried about your mental health:

SAMARITANS
116 123

BREATHING SPACE
0800 83 85 87
(Mon–Thu 6pm–2am; Fri pm–Mon 6am)

EDINBURGH CRISIS CENTRE
0808 801 0414

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Updated: 31/3/2020
Adapted from an original post by psychologist Shawna Bots.