
Coping with anxiety during Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The outbreak of coronavirus has changed our lives. We often feel anxious in times of uncertainty and especially when we sense danger and think we cannot do much to protect ourselves from it. Therefore, it is completely natural that many of us will be feeling more anxious than usual.

If you are having cancer treatment now, preparing to have it soon, or recovering from treatment, it's understandable that you might be worried or anxious about how Coronavirus might impact you. Please contact The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline for specialist and personalised advice about your treatment and appointments during this time. **The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 020 8915 6899.**

Below are some strategies that may help to make your anxiety feel more manageable.

Maintain balanced activity in your life

For most people, cancer and its treatment will cause a significant disruption to daily routine. Coronavirus and the need to shield or self-isolate will probably make it even more difficult, or impossible, to do some of the things you want to do. This may have left you feeling that you don't have much control over your life. Therefore, it can be helpful to try to develop a daily routine that's adjusted to the current situation – this can help you to regain a sense of control. Identify activities that are meaningful to you (not others) and that give you a sense of Achievement, Connection and Enjoyment ('ACE').

We're social beings who need some connection with others, so try to do some activities that involve other people who you like and trust. Phone calls and video chats are a great way

of staying in touch, and you could try to find alternative ways of doing things with people that you might have done in the past (e.g. a 'virtual' film night or dinner, online quizzes or boardgames). [Click here](#) to read more about coping with self-isolation.

Try to identify whether your worry is something you can solve now or is more future-oriented and hypothetical

If the worry is something you can solve now then develop a plan (e.g. what/ how/ when you will solve it) and apply it as soon as possible. For example, if you have concerns or questions about your cancer treatment then decide when you are going to call The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline. If you're experiencing hypothetical and future-orientated worries that aren't within your control (or the control of people close to you) then it won't be possible to problem solve them at the moment.

While you continue to worry about these concerns it will increase your distress but not help you to find an answer. In this situation it is helpful to find ways to let the worry go and focus on something different instead. [Click here](#) to use the worry tree guide which can help you to decide how to respond to each worry, and see below for more ideas on letting go of worries.

Try postponing your worry

Letting go of your worries is easier said than done, but some people find they can postpone their worries. Try deliberately setting aside a particular time each day to let yourself worry as much as you want (e.g. 15 minutes before dinner time – try not to set this time too close to bedtime). When worries come up during the rest of the day, write them down briefly and tell yourself that you will come back to them at 'Worry Time', but for now you are going to



engage in something else.

During Worry Time go through your list of worries - if any of them no longer bother you enough to warrant your attention then move on to others that do. Once Worry Time has finished (and do stick to the time slot), screw up the piece of paper with the worries on and toss it in the bin. If you forget to do Worry Time that's OK, just remember to postpone future worries until the next Worry Time. It can feel strange to deliberately worry for a set period of time, but knowing you have this time set aside can make it easier to let go of the worries. It can also reduce the amount of time you spend worrying during the rest of the day.

Focus on the present moment

Learning and practising mindfulness is another way to let go of worries (which are often about the future) and bring ourselves back to the present moment. For example, focusing on your breath or your environment can provide 'anchors' to focus on and as you do this you naturally let go of your worries (even if they come back quickly). To practise the 3 Minute Mindful Breathing Space [click here](#).

Another way of bringing our focus to the here and now is to use a grounding technique such as the Five Areas technique. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or your breathing is becoming quicker, practise pausing for a moment and bring your attention to five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can feel, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste ([click here](#) for animated guidance on this). Neither of these exercises aim to take away difficult thoughts or feelings, however, they can help you to feel more settled while you wait for them to pass. For more mindfulness information and exercises visit or download, for example, Headspace or Calm.

Speaking to yourself with compassion

Lots of people are great at giving compassion to others, but can struggle to give this to themselves. Perhaps you are critical to yourself when things aren't going well? This can become a habit and can have an unhelpful

impact on mood, making it even harder to problem solve and get back on top of things.

Some people think that being self-compassionate is the same as being self-indulgent and letting yourself off the hook, and that giving yourself 'a talking to' is the best way to motivate yourself. If this is your belief then ask yourself this question: if you were sending the most precious person you know to a new planet which of the following two planets would you pick? Planet A: where it is strict and any mistakes are met with a telling off or a punishment and they learn that they aren't good enough. Or Planet B: where it is loving and supportive and any mistakes are met with an understanding that life is difficult and with encouragement to learn from their mistakes so that they can become the best version of themselves that they can be. If you think that you grew up on Planet A, and wish you had grown up on Planet B, try and become more aware of when you are speaking to yourself in a critical way and write down the thoughts that you notice.

Then ask yourself "would I speak like this to a close friend or a young child?" and "if a close friend or young child was going through a similar situation, what would I say to them?" Write out the compassionate response you would say to your friend or the young child and then change the "you's" to "I's". It can help to read this aloud to yourself while talking in a kind tone of voice. For more resources to help you to practise being more self-compassionate [click here](#).

The above is a short summary of strategies that can help you to cope with anxiety. If you would like further advice on coping with coronavirus, other information sheets are available from The Royal Marsden or you may want to visit one of the following websites:

www.copingwithcoronavirus.co.uk

www.thewellnesssociety.org/free-coronavirus-anxiety-workbook

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/anxiety.htm>

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This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

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