

KEEPING CALM AMONGST THE CHAOS > > >

It's not surprising the Coronavirus pandemic is causing heightened feelings of uncertainty and fear. We are all unsure of what the future holds or what the situation will be like in a few days, let alone a month or year. Questions such as 'Will I still be able to work?', 'Will I continue getting paid?', 'Will the British government order a full lockdown?', 'How do I look after the kids?' and 'How long will this go on for?' are just some of the thoughts and questions whirling through our heads.

We are being consumed by the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and, not surprisingly, it's causing a significant impact to people's concentration, work and productivity levels. Findings from an employee study conducted between 13th and 17th March by Inpulse found that nearly two thirds (61%) of employees said that their most common feelings amidst the coronavirus pandemic are anxiety, stress or distraction. Since Boris announced on Monday that, where possible, we should all be trying to stay at home, I think it would be safe to assume that this statistic has risen substantially in the last week.

During these uncertain times, keeping our stress levels at bay will come down to the small, intentional ways we react to the news around us. And it's imperative we take extra time and care of ourselves.

We all have go-to ways of coping with our usual stressors such as going to the gym, watching your football team, going out with friends and family for a drink or a meal. However, these are all off limits now and will be for the foreseeable future. Even getting your one daily walk, cycle or run outside that the government permits is getting harder as more and more councils close local parks to stop people gathering. And so, what else can we be doing to improve our wellbeing?

1 Maintain physical distance but not social isolation

Evidence shows that connecting with others and forming good relationships with family, friends and the wider community is important for our mental wellbeing. There are countless ways to stay close to our friends and family while keeping our distance.

Rather than picking up the phone to catch up with someone, try using FaceTime or Skype it really helps to make you feel more connected and actually in the company of the person you're speaking to.

How many of you reading this usually pop down the local pub on Friday night? Now that too is off limits why not think about arranging a virtual meet up using apps like Houseparty, Zoom or Skype – that's what I'll be doing at 7pm this Friday!

The more connected we stay, the better off we will be – loneliness is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep problems and increased stress and so connect with those around you.

How many of you, went to your front door on Thursday evening and clapped for our amazing NHS? I certainly did and I felt the camaraderie with my neighbours. There it is in practice – the power of human connection.

2 Limit news consumption

In the always connected world we live in it can be easy to get caught up with the 24/7 rolling news. It is important you limit the amount of time you spend consuming news or social media as it's easy to get drawn into it which can make you anxious. Switch off for a while or limit yourself to one or two checks per day.

It's obviously essential to get accurate, up to date information through the pandemic but binge watching the news can negatively impact your wellbeing. Remember that it's okay, and actually good for you, to unplug for a while.

Also remember that there is a lot of 'fake news' being shared online - be warned rumour and speculation can fuel anxiety. Having access to good quality information about the virus can help you feel more in control. You can get up to date information and advice on the virus at Gov.uk, Health Protection Scotland or Public Health Wales.

3 Create a new routine

Building a routine you can stick to in this time of uncertainty may not sound important, but for some people routine is what helps keep them grounded. It is easy to have a structured routine in normal life however coping with the unpredictable period that the Coronavirus Pandemic has cast upon us is more doable if you have structure in place. No matter what's going on in your day, knowing that you will have an evening meal at 7pm and are going to bed at 10.30pm can be a real comfort.

Creating a new routine can help alleviate your anxiety and give you a sense of control. Try to stick to a set schedule, with a consistent sleeping and wake-up time each day and having regular meals.

And don't forget to set a few manageable daily goals for yourself. When you achieve these your brain will give you shot of dopamine and dopamine is often called the 'feel good' or 'happy' hormone. Think about when you tick things off your to-do list your brain receives a spike in dopamine which makes you feel good - that's one reason people like to-do lists. However, be aware of the goals you're setting as goals with no specific aim can be bad for your mental health. If a goal is too vague, non-specific or not achievable it can cause you to feel disappointed or depressed if you don't accomplish it - the exact opposite of what you want to achieve!

4 Stop obsessing and focus on what you CAN control rather than what you can't control

Actively choose not to obsess about the virus and focus on things you can control such as your positive attitude, your own social distancing, limiting your social media and news consumption, your kindness and empathy, and finding fun things to do.

In contrast, let go of the things you can't control such as how others react, other people not following the rules of social distancing, predicting what will happen, the actions if others, how long this will last, other peoples motives and the amount of toilet paper left (or not left) on the shelves!

We know this is a tricky one! If you find yourself thinking of the negatives continuously let someone else know this is what is happening for you. The old sayings are the best – a problem shared is a problem halved.

A great way to manage the feelings of overwhelm or anxiety, in the moment, and become calmer is by using this simple breathing technique. It will reduce the intensity of a stress reaction and help you establish a calm, but alert state.

- Focus your attention on your chest
- Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your chest/heart breathing a little slower and deeper than usual
- Inhale for 5 seconds. Exhale for 5 seconds
- Repeat until you feel a little better

4 Stay active

Keeping our bodies and minds busy is key to our overall wellbeing especially in times of a crisis. On a daily basis make sure you spend time doing activities that you enjoy, whether that's reading a book, doing some DIY, cooking a new recipe or practicing a musical instrument.

Try finding activities that help you stay calm and present such as listening to music, taking a bath or stroking your cat or dog. Download one of the hundreds of apps dedicated to mindful meditation such as Headspace and Calm that guide you through different meditations that help to quieten the mind, stress less and sleep soundly. And what about Home-workouts - have you been one of the many who, along with your kids, have watched (and trained) to the daily PE with Joe Wicks exercise class that is being streamed on YouTube at 9am every morning?

If you find yourself thinking 'I haven't got time', bear in mind that pleasurable activities make us more productive in the long run – so really, it's an investment in becoming more efficient in your day-to-day life.

5 Seek help when you need it

It is important to ask for help if you're feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious.

Remember, it's OK not to be OK!

That could mean talking to friends, family or someone else you trust. It can also mean engaging with a mental health professional. The NFDC's commitment to your wellbeing continues to be a primary focus and so if you are feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious the Construction Industry Helpline provides a safe place for people to contact should they need additional help large or small - you can call the Construction Industry Helpline (24/7) on 0345 605 1956. Alternatively, contact a mental health charity such as Mind or Rethink Mental Illness or call the Samaritans (24/7) on 116 123.

The coming weeks and months will be difficult, and no one can say for certain how long this pandemic will last until we get back to normal. However, if we take good care of ourselves and look out for others we may emerge from the crisis with more resilience and greater mental wellbeing.