

Virus Anxiety



As the numbers of cases of COVID-19 continue to surge, so do anxiety levels. Anxiety is nature's early warning system and can be paramount to our survival.

As such, it is no surprise to experience a spike in anxiety during a global health crisis. Pandemics are bound to lead to an increase in anxiety, particularly in the modern world where we have 24/7 access to news outlets and updates on the virus, both true and inaccurate versions are available to us within seconds. It can be difficult to 'escape' from the virus and the discussion around it.

Many elements of the virus can cause anxiety and distress and it may not be obvious to you exactly why you feel anxious. You may be anxious about the virus itself and the possibility of catching it, or anxious about a vulnerable loved one and

their health, perhaps you are anxious about the financial implications of the virus, or maybe you are anxious about life in a city that is on lockdown. No-one is sure how long the pandemic will last, and we are all feeling powerless in a new world that has come upon us so suddenly.

There are steps we can take however to try to minimise the levels of anxiety we are experiencing. In this helpsheet, we offer some tips on managing anxiety at this time.

If you need help with the anxiety you are experiencing, please contact us at assist@cic-eap.co.uk

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Recognising Anxiety

Anxiety can manifest in many different ways and it can be difficult to recognise that the 'uneasy' feeling you have is anxiety. Anxiety can also range greatly in its intensity and the effects on the body.

Some signs that you may be anxious are:

- ▶ Continual worry
- ▶ Feeling of dread or fear
- ▶ Restlessness or feeling on edge
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed and a sense of panic
- ▶ Poor concentration
- ▶ Sleep disturbance
- ▶ Rapid heart rate
- ▶ Frequent headaches
- ▶ Minor illness
- ▶ Gastrointestinal problems
- ▶ Eating Disorders
- ▶ Increased alcohol consumption
- ▶ Muscle tension
- ▶ Low energy
- ▶ Change in libido
- ▶ Change in habits and behaviour

Managing Anxiety

Although it is very difficult to eliminate anxiety related to a pandemic, it is possible to lessen and manage anxiety. We recommend the following tips to do so:

- ▶ **Try to see the big picture.** It can be very easy to look at the number of deaths related to COVID-19 and be terrified. To counter this, look at the number of recovered cases, look at the number of cases compared to population levels. Shifting your focus in this way will help to prevent you from catastrophising and allow you to see the wider picture.
- ▶ **Stay informed – to a degree.** It is important that we feel informed about situations such as COVID-19. However, it is even more important that we do not feel overwhelmed by the constant onslaught of news reporting and discussion about the virus. It is also paramount that we follow reliable news sources to limit our exposure to incorrect information that may cause unnecessary worry. Consider limiting the time spent checking news updates.
- ▶ **Exercise control where you can.** Whilst it may not seem so, we are able to have some control over this pandemic and this can help anxiety levels. Be sure to follow your Government guidelines on preventing the spread of the virus. Wash your hands frequently and for at least 20 seconds. Practise social distancing. Keep in contact and help those who are vulnerable. Avoid touching your face, particularly the eyes, nose and mouth. Avoid non-essential travel. Have a plan in place if you need to isolate.
- ▶ **Breathe.** Many breathing techniques can help reduce anxiety levels. It is best to implement these as part of your daily routine but they can be used during an in-the-moment anxiety attack. Get comfortable; you can do this standing, sitting in a supportive chair or lying down. Loosen any restrictive clothing. Let your breath flow comfortably deep into your belly, try to breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe in gently and regularly. Try counting from 1 to 5. Without pausing or holding your breath, let it gently flow out, again counting from 1 to 5. Try to do this for 3 to 5 minutes.

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- ▶ **Be open.** If you are suffering with anxiety talk to somebody. This could be a friend, a family member, partner, a colleague or a counsellor. Whichever one you are comfortable with, it is important that you are able to express your feelings. Anxiety can be made worse by not being shared; as you bottle up those feelings they will increase. In talking about this anxiety, you will likely find others sharing the same concerns, which can be a great comfort in times of difficulty. They can also help you work through your worries and let go of the anxiety.
- ▶ **Remember this is not permanent.** Although it may seem so now, this pandemic is not going to last for ever. Historically, we have faced pandemics and they have passed. Life will return to normal, although this 'normal' may look different. Try to remember that each day that passes is a day closer to this being over. Reading positive news on the virus can help with this. Look at the recent rates of recovery, or progress on treatment and testing. These things can help remind us that this is not permanent.
- ▶ **Try the APPLE technique; Acknowledge, Pause, Pull Back, Let Go, Explore.** Notice the anxiety when it comes, allow time to recognise how you are feeling and take a deep breath, step away from your anxiety, realise it is just worry talking, let these feelings pass, and be in your present moment, explore your current surroundings to reground yourself and let the anxiety pass.



Anxiety in Children and Teenagers

Although they may not verbally express it, children and teenagers will be feeling anxiety during this time as well. It is important to get them to engage in some behaviours to reduce this anxiety:

- ▶ **Talk to Them.** We may want to protect our children from the frightening things that happen in the world. However, this is not always the best thing to do. Our children need to understand the world they live in. When talking to your children, keep your tone light and casual, and try to avoid expressing any fear you are feeling. Begin by asking what they know or have heard about the virus. Reassure them as much as you can but do not give them a false sense of security. Ask how they feel about what is going on. In the case of teenagers and older children in particular, try to check that they are getting information from reliable sources.
- ▶ **Teach them techniques.** Many techniques that adults use for calming anxiety can also work for children. Teach breathing exercises, the APPLE technique, practise mindfulness and grounding exercises. There are many apps that help children and teens with anxiety: Calm, Dreamy Kid, Kids Yoga Deck and Breathe, Think, Do Sesame are all very good free apps. By teaching our children these things, we are equipping them with tools to deal with anxiety that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

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- ▶ **Stay Connected.** Social lives are important for all of us, but particularly for children and teenagers. Make sure they stay in regular contact with friends and family members. They can write letters and emails, make phone calls, have video-calls, and play online games with each other. This will help to keep some normalcy in their lives during this time and alleviate any anxiety they may be feeling due to recent changes in their lives.
- ▶ **Keep a Journal.** Journaling is a useful and highly recommended tool for managing anxiety for both adults and children. It is particularly useful for those who are not comfortable with talking about their difficulties. A journal provides a safe space for children with anxiety to share their deepest emotions, secrets and let out their innermost distresses or needs. Releasing all of this from their minds and hearts and into a journal can have a profound effect.
- ▶ **Create a 'Calm' Kit.** Put together a box of things that your child can utilise when they are feeling anxious. This can include a colouring book, a stress toy, a blanket, a favourite snack, photographs of fun memories, a soft toy, books and music. This is something your children can use on their own to create a safe space for themselves when they are feeling overwhelmed. Creating this kit together can also teach you about the kind of things your children need when they are feeling anxious.

Anxiety at Work

On March 23rd, the UK Government instructed all who could work from home to do so and closed many businesses. Unfortunately, working from home is not a possibility for many. This includes not only our healthcare staff, but also those working in supermarkets, petrol stations, takeaway food services, postal services and many others. Business during a pandemic can cause its own anxiety, especially as you notice more and more people working from home or unfortunately losing their jobs.

- ▶ **Talk to your Employer.** Let them know that you are feeling particularly anxious about working through the pandemic. Ask them for any help that can be given, such as changing your shift times or perhaps reducing your hours. Your employer has a responsibility to take care of their staff and so it is important you let them know if you are feeling unsafe or uncomfortable.
- ▶ **Follow Guidelines at Work.** It is of the utmost importance that your place of work adheres to government and health guidelines on reducing the risk of spreading the virus. Ensure all surfaces are cleaned regularly, that people are washing their hands thoroughly when required, and maintain a distance of 6 feet between people where possible.



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- ▶ **Make use of your EAP.** CiC are here to support you through this difficult time, our AdviceLine is open 24/7 for you to make contact. You can talk about any anxieties you are feeling, managers can use the service to learn how to help their teams through this difficult time, and other services such as legal or financial advice may be available to you. CiC is here to support you during this time as in any other. To make contact with CiC you can email us at assist@cic-eap.co.uk or make use of our Live Chat on www.well-online.co.uk. If you would like any promotional material to send to your team, please contact your account manager.
- ▶ **Find a Safe Space.** Unfortunately, there are likely to be times when you feel overwhelmed at work during the pandemic. It is important to have a safe space to go to during these times. This can be an outside area that you can go to for some fresh air, a staff room which can offer a different environment or it may simply be a quiet area of the building. Identify a place you can go to for a few moments to gather yourself if it is needed. The fear of getting overwhelmed in front of others can often trigger anxiety in itself, and having a special space for yourself can help calm your feelings.
- ▶ **Be sure to take breaks.** Although it can be tempting to work through our lunch or stay late when we are stressed and busy, try to avoid this as much as possible. It is important that you do not experience burn-out. Take the time you have to eat a good meal, drink some water and step away from your work for a moment. Leave your work place during your breaks, if you are safely able to do so. . This time is invaluable as a moment to recharge.
- ▶ **Support each other.** You and your colleagues are all going through this together. It is important that you can support each other through a difficult time. Providing support to someone you care about can also help you feel better as you are making a positive impact and research has shown us that the brain itself is affected by volunteering or being kind to others. Kindness stimulates the production of serotonin, which calms and increases happiness. It may be useful to schedule in some team time. This could be a group lunch, so that you can spend some casual time together, catch up with each other,

and enjoy some light conversation. Alternatively, it may be good to have a time that is dedicated to airing any anxieties you may all be experiencing and to work through these together. CiC can offer managerial support to help you think through options.

Useful Resources

Mind on Coronavirus and Wellbeing:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

NHS on Coronavirus Anxiety:

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips/>

Young Minds on Children & Anxiety:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>

GOV on Business Guidelines:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close-guidance>

Contact Us

If you are struggling with any of the subjects covered in this helpsheet, we urge you to make contact with our AdviceLine who will be happy to help you. Currently, due to large call volumes, it is more efficient to make contact with us via email. A member of our team will then get back to you as soon as possible.

Email: assist@cic-eap.co.uk