

# Looking After Our Wellbeing:

## Balancing feelings of anxiety during Covid 19

Psychology and Wellbeing Service

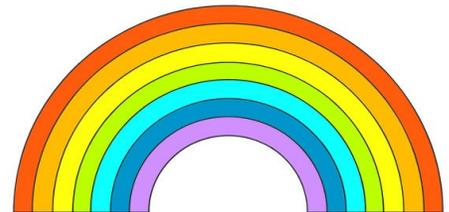
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There is a lot of uncertainty around the current **COVID-19** outbreak, particularly given that the situation is constantly developing and our knowledge about the virus is evolving daily.

Understandably, this can cause feelings of worry and anxiety for everyone. It is therefore important to not only consider your physical health during such challenging times, but also to pay attention to your mental health. It is normal to feel worried, stressed and/or anxious when you are faced with uncertain situations, and the sooner you acknowledge and learn to take care of your mental health and general wellbeing, the healthier and better equipped you will be to cope with the situation we are all facing.

Whilst we all react differently to stressful situations, it is important to remember that how you feel is a **NORMAL** reaction to an **ABNORMAL** event so, whether you are experiencing a little bit of worry, feeling anxious, becoming unsettled by the constant change, loving your new ability to work from home, or enjoying spending more time with family, it's important to take a moment to pause, think and plan what you're doing to look after you, your loved ones and the community around you whilst we are all together in this unique situation.

The media gives us all a lot of information that can help us stay safe and follow the virus guidelines but remember to stick to official sources for the facts. Gov.je also acts as a source of Jersey specific guidance with lots of our most frequently asked questions available for us to review. We've also included more grab packs, just like this one, for you to download if you want to read more on related topics.



### In this grab pack:

- Looking after yourself
- Living with anxiety and building confidence
- What is anxiety?
- Understanding anxiety
- The anxiety curve
- Key points
- Coping
- Strategies



## Looking after yourself

Time is precious, especially when looking after children and family, but on the days when you feel like you can move towards taking greater care of your own wellbeing, try to plan to include something from each of the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' (developed by the New Economics Foundation).

Anxiety is a healthy emotion that is designed to keep us safe. Despite our best intentions, we can all experience moments when feeling anxious prevents us from doing something we really want to do or feels like it's taking over the day. It's going to be really useful to start considering how you are balancing your feelings and what you are doing to look after yourself as best you can.

Jersey has a variety of different agencies offering support so don't be afraid to reach out and talk with someone. You might also feel like you're taking control by understanding a little more about anxiety and trying out some different techniques to balance the feeling when you experience it.

## Living with anxiety and building confidence

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety can be defined as 'a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome'.

Feeling anxious is a normal experience. We all have to face and cope with unexpected, unpleasant and challenging situations. We may worry about numerous things, and have fearful responses to natural and imagined threats.

Most people get through these times successfully, and the source or focus of their 'worry' can rapidly change. This short-term experience of anxiety is normal, and successful coping helps with learning how to manage even better in the future.

### Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived or real threat – it helps the body to prepare for action: the **3 F's – fight, flight and freeze**.

Like all animals, humans are hardwired for survival. Our ancestors who anticipated dangers were more successful than the more optimistic ones. Even though nowadays we do not face the same external dangers, we maintain this negativity bias. We also have a tendency to apply the same rules to internal discomfort as our ancestors did to external discomforts (dangers), which is to try to get rid of it. This approach does not work when applied to internal discomfort.

Over time, chronic anxiety can become harmful, interfering with the ability to cope with life's stresses and strains.

### The anxiety curve

In a situation, which causes anxiety, our level of anxiety will rise to a point, before gradually reducing. This provides feedback to the brain of successful coping, which builds confidence over time.

Often however, people avoid the situation and so do not experience the natural reduction in anxiety.

### Key points

1. Anxiety wants 'certainty' and 'comfort'. Trying to ensure both of these will result in reduced function, reduced confidence and reduced engagement in meaningful activities.
2. Overcoming anxiety therefore is not about stopping thoughts, feelings and sensations, but rather changing our relationship with them. It is about learning to tolerate and accept uncertainty and the uncomfortable feelings of anxiety.

## Coping

### Be **EAGER**:

Expect anxiety to show up when facing a challenging situation. Often we get anxious about the thought of getting anxious. Expecting and accepting anxiety to be present can paradoxically reduce its power

**Acknowledge** the presence of anxiety by naming as though naming it for a friend. For example, 'anxiety is here right now'.

**Ground** self in the present moment. When we worry our minds are focused on the future, often catastrophizing what may go wrong / not being able to cope. Grounding or anchoring can help us to 'unhook' from unhelpful thinking.

**Empower** self / take action. Once we have grounded ourselves, our thinking brain becomes online again. We can then support ourselves to take action based on what we value, by problem-solving and setting goals.

**Review and reward**. It is so important to recognise the courage it takes to take control of our actions in the face of fear / anxiety. Ensure that you explore successes in detail and give yourself encouragement for perseverance.

Primary Mental Health Team, PAWBS 2020



## Strategies

**1. Foundations** – We are more vulnerable to heightened emotions if we are not getting enough sleep; eating a poor diet; not exercising enough; in pain; and / or misusing substances. Therefore it is important to monitor these areas and, if needed, set supportive goals. It is also important to address any underlying causes of anxiety, such as bullying.

**2. The 3 Ps** – plan, prepare and practice (but not too much!). Planning and preparation can reduce some uncertainty. For example, revising for an exam or knowing a route before setting out on a journey. However, as we know life is often unpredictable so we need to be as flexible as possible and adapt to change when necessary. There is a saying 'neurons that fire together, wire together' so practising helpful steps actually rewires the brain.

**3. EATS** – Expect Anxiety to Show! Often we become worried at the thought of being anxious. We can reduce this worry by expecting that in anxiety provoking situations anxiety will show up. Rather than resist this, we can learn to accept it, and at the same time know that we can continue despite its presence.

**4. Name to tame** - Research studies of the brain show that activation in the amygdala (fight or flight part of the brain) reduces just by naming the emotion that is present. It is important though that we name the emotion in a non- judgemental tone (as though naming it for a friend).

**5. Anchor / ground** - Anchoring or grounding are terms used to describe the process of bringing attention into the present moment in a way that can help alleviate heightened emotions. Though some people like to use their breath for this, many people prefer to use their extremities (hands or feet) or their senses.

Pushing your feet into the floor and noticing sensations beneath the feet and in other areas of the legs; or pushing the palms of the hands together and bringing attention to the pressure between the hands and tension in other areas of the arms and shoulders. If feeling agitated brisk exercise can be helpful.

54321 is a commonly used technique to help ground. You firstly notice and silently name 5 things you can see in your environment; then 4 things you can feel; 3 things you can hear; 2 things you can smell or imagine the smell of; and 1 thing you can taste or imagine the taste of.

**6. Externalise anxiety** – For many people who struggle with their anxiety, they feel it is part of them, which can then form their sense of who they are (i.e. 'I am an anxious person'). However, like all emotions, anxiety comes and goes, it passes through. It can be likened to the weather – sometimes grey clouds cover the whole of the sky but at some point the blue sky is visible once again. A way of helping to externalise anxiety is to recognise where it is felt in the body. This is not always easy to do, but there will be part of the body that will be tensing or reacting. Quite often it is felt in the stomach, the chest or the throat. Once the feeling is sensed, you can consider the following...

- What size is this feeling?
- Where exactly do I feel it?
- Does it have a shape to it?
- If it had edges what would they be like (rough, smooth, spiky, knotted, etc.)?
- Does it feel solid, liquid or gaseous?
- Does it move, change shape or size?
- If it had a colour what colour would it be?
- If it had a name what would it be called?

It can be helpful to draw this sense of anxiety as a character and give it a name. When anxiety shows up you can then picture this character being present and consider what it needs to be soothed.

**7. Soothing touch** - When young mammals (including humans) are distressed their caregivers ordinarily respond with soothing touch. When a baby cries a caregiver will hold the baby close and speak to it with gentle tones. The combination of these gentle tones with contact and warmth results in the production of oxytocin to both the baby and the caregiver. This is sometimes called the 'cuddle hormone'. Oxytocin can also be produced when we give soothing touch to ourselves. We do this in a similar way, through contact (of our hand/s), warmth and inner self-talk. If through externalising anxiety we are able to locate part of the body where it is present, we have the option of placing a warm hand on that area, as though applying a hot water bottle or warm blanket.

**8. 7/11 and abdominal breathing** – 7/11 breathing involves breathing in for a count of 7 and out for a count of 11. The outbreath triggers the relaxing parasympathetic response, so extending the outbreath in this way can help promote feelings of calmness. This can feel awkward at first but through practice can feel normal. If possible breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth, gently blowing.

Abdominal breathing (sometimes called 'diaphragmatic' or 'belly breathing') encourages use of the full capacity of the lungs. As you breathe out pull the belly in toward the spine, emptying the lungs. Then notice how when you breathe in your belly naturally rises.

**9. Climbing the ladder** - Sometimes called 'graded exposure' or 'desensitisation', the ladder approach is frequently used in therapies as a way to improve confidence in gradually facing situations which feel anxiety provoking.

Firstly, you need to identify a goal that you would like to achieve, that currently feels unrealistic due to heightened feelings of anxiety. You then need to break down this goal into progressively easier steps (like steps of a ladder). The first step should be something that although anxiety provoking, feels achievable. Once this step is practised and more manageable you then focus on the next step, and so on.

**10. Progressive muscular relaxation (PMR)** – During PMR muscle groups are tightened and then relaxed in a systemic way. Research shows this results in reduced muscular tension. Proprioceptive sites in the body then send messages to the brain, which can result in reduced stress. The effects can be increased by combining the tensing with breathing in and the releasing with breathing out. Caution needs to be applied if you suffer with high blood pressure and / or you have any injuries or recent surgery.



**11. Defusion, such as leaves on a stream** – 'Defusion' is a term used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to describe the process of noticing thoughts and letting them go without indulging with them (fusing) nor pushing them away (avoidance). The Leaves on a Stream visualisation exercise is an example of a defusion practice. Here you imagine yourself being sat or stood by a stream, utilising your senses of vision, touch, hearing and smell. When you notice a thought arise, whether unpleasant, pleasant or neutral, you imagine placing it on a leaf, and then watching the leaf move on down the stream. When the next thought arrives you imagine placing this one on a leaf and watching it move down the stream. Unpleasant thoughts will often move more slowly or even get stuck. The tendency might be to push them along, but instead the advice is to allow them to move at their own pace – neither clinging to them (as is sometimes the case with pleasant thoughts) nor trying to get rid of them.

**12. Problem-solving** – although we tend to do this naturally when we are feeling calm, it is sometimes useful to follow a problem-solving approach when considering a plan of action:

**Step 1** – Identify the problem. Try to be as specific as possible. For example rather than 'feeling anxious' write 'feeling anxious when walking through town on a Saturday'.

**Step 2** - 'Brainstorm'. Think of as many possible solutions to the problem. Don't worry if some of these ideas are unrealistic or silly. The purpose of this step is to be as creative as possible.

**Step 3** – Choose a few possible solutions from the list generated above and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each one. You might give all advantages and disadvantages the same weight or you may choose different weights based on their importance.

**Step 4** – Decide on a chosen solution based on weighing up pros and cons.

**Step 5** – Plan and action solution.

**Step 6** – Evaluate effectiveness and review. If the solution didn't work you return to step 1 and restart the process, including your new learning to the process.

**13. Facing fear = courage.**

**14. SMART goals** – Writing down goals has been shown to improve outcomes. Having a goal written in black and white helps to commit to it. It can give a sense of accomplishment once a goal is completed and can be crossed through and ticked off. SMART is an acronym used to set specific goals. There are variations on the words used. This is one...

**S** – Specific. Write the goal in as much detail as possible.

**M** – Measureable. Consider how will I know when this goal is reached?

**A** – Appealing. What is the purpose of the goal? Why is it motivating? How does it fit with my interests and values?

**R** – Realistic. The importance is not how big the goal is but whether the goal is achievable. If it feels unrealistic, consider how you could break the goal into a more manageable step.

**T** – Time bound. Commit to a time frame. When do you plan to achieve your goal?

**15. Thanking anxiety** - Anxiety can feel extremely unpleasant and can have a majorly disruptive impact on someone's life. It can then seem absurd to consider thanking it!

However, the reason we have anxiety is to survive and keep safe. If we didn't experience anxiety we would not survive. Anxiety also can help motivate us to perform well and do our best. Many performers, such as actors, musicians and athletes talk about how the adrenaline rush increases their performance. We can think of anxiety like a car alarm – if someone tries to break into a car, we want the car alarm to sound. However, we do not want it to be set off by a walker by or a leaf dropping onto the roof. In a similar way to the car alarm, we need anxiety to survive and perform but it can sometimes be overly sensitive and react when there is no need.

**16. 'If, then' plans** – If, then plans are considered prior to a potentially stressful event. Here you predict responses to an anxiety provoking situation and then consider what you would do to help if the response happened. For example, 'IF I think I am not going to get through the school door, THEN I will practise 54321 and remind myself that this is just anxiety talking.'

**17. Bridging.** - When we get very anxious we can become forgetful. This explains how people who struggle with anxiety often forget the times that they are successful. It is therefore important to carefully explore times when steps have been achieved. The following reflective questions can help to embed this success into storage...

- How does it feel now I have achieved this step?
- Where do I feel this in the body?
- How exactly did I do it?
- What skills, strengths or strategies did I use in order for me to accomplish what I have?

Primary Mental Health Team, PAWBS 2020

