



## Managing stress and anxiety during the coronavirus outbreak

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the body's natural response to threat or danger. Both animals and people have 'fight or flight' responses whereby our bodies will set us up to fight or run away from imminent dangers. This is obvious if we think of an example of animals in the wild. If a zebra sees a lion watching or perhaps getting closer, the choice is to try to fight the lion or to try to run from the lion for basic survival. People are not usually being chased by lions, thankfully, so for us it's other dangers.

Imagine you place your hand on something hot, your body will make you take it away quickly, possibly even before you are conscious of it; or if you step out in front of a car, your natural reaction is to jump back out of the way. Stress is another danger for us and can cause the body to start its natural 'fight or flight reaction'. Stress releases hormones that are neurotoxic, which means they are not good for our brains, so our bodies recognise this as a danger and start our natural responses.

A little bit of anxiety and stress can be a good thing for us. For example, people often feel stressed going into an exam or job interview. This is understandable given the circumstances and can actually act to make the person feel "sharper" or more focused for what they are about to face.

### So, when is anxiety a problem?

Anxiety is a problem if:

1. it is happening to you more often than you think it is happening to other people in similar circumstances to you
2. anxiety happens to a greater extent to you than to someone else in your situation so when you are anxious, you are more anxious than others would be

3. it is stopping you from doing the things you want to be doing
4. it has been going on for a while

The list above shows how as Psychologists we tend to think about whether someone is having a difficulty with anxiety. Note that each one is proportional to the situation people find themselves in. At the moment, coronavirus is making everyone anxious so if you are feeling symptoms of anxiety, as described below, it's not necessarily a mental health problem as such, it can be a natural reaction to the pandemic. Regardless of this, the strategies given below should be helpful in managing the anxiety.

## Symptoms of anxiety

**Physical symptoms** – As mentioned, the body's natural 'fight or flight reaction' can be triggered when we are anxious. Everyone will feel this in a slightly different way so you may have some or all of the symptoms listed below:

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Feeling faint
- Feeling very hot or very cold
- Sweating
- Tingling in hands and/or feet
- Feeling like you might be sick
- Feeling like you need to go to the toilet
- Feeling your heart beating fast
- Palpitations
- Shortness of breath
- Breathing fast
- Shallow breathing
- Shaking

**Cognitive symptoms** – When we are anxious, we tend to worry about things. The worries may be about specific things we are facing either immediately in front of us or in our lives in general. At present, this is likely to include worrying about coronavirus, your health and that of your loved ones. They may be about things that have happened in the past or may happen in the future. We may worry about the symptoms we get when we are anxious, for example if we experience the physical symptoms listed above we can worry about our health perhaps thinking we are having a physical health problem like heart attack or asthma attack rather

than feeling symptoms of anxiety. People can start to worry about what all these worries mean or say about us as people. We may worry about why we have so many worries, so we are then worried about worry.

**Behavioural symptoms** – As mentioned earlier, our bodies don't like anxiety and stress so quite often we will try to avoid the things that make us anxious. This might be fairly easy to do if our anxiety is about something specific such as a fear of flying or a fear of dogs. If we can't avoid the things that make us anxious, however, we tend to engage in safety behaviours such as checking on things or carrying something around with us to make us feel safer. These are only a few examples and people can engage in lots of different and sometimes quite extreme behaviours to manage anxiety.

## Self help strategies

### Reducing physical symptoms of anxiety

Physical symptoms of anxiety can be managed with breathing and relaxation techniques.

#### Breathing:

It sounds simple, we all breathe all of the time, but often we are not aware of how we are breathing. There are times when this becomes more obvious to us such as when we have been exercising and feel breathless or are trying to 'catch our breath'. When we are anxious, it is known that many of us take very short, shallow breaths and therefore over-breathe. This can be a natural reaction to the anxiety but if it happens for a bit too long, it can in itself cause some of the physical symptoms listed earlier as part of anxiety symptoms.

The way to manage this is to try to take long, slow, deep breaths. This slows what is happening in the body thereby stopping some of the physical symptoms of anxiety. Also, to take these long, slow, deep breaths, we need to take a minute to focus on our breathing. If we are really focused on this then our brains allocate less attention to the things making us anxious and more to our breathing.

It can be difficult to know whether we are taking long, slow, deep breaths so it might be helpful to try a few things here. Firstly, you could try placing one hand on your chest near the top of your lungs and one hand further down near the bottom of your lungs. If you are taking long, slow, deep breaths, you will feel your lungs filling with air with both hands. If you are taking shallow breaths, only one hand (the one nearest the top of your lungs) will feel the movement.

Alternatively, you can place both hands on your tummy near the bottom of your lungs with your hands slightly overlapped. If you then take a long, slow, deep breath, your hands should move apart as they are displaced by the air filling your lungs.

### **Relaxation:**

People use lots of methods of relaxation and what works for one person may not be so helpful to others. During the coronavirus outbreak, especially when people are at home most of the time, there is likely to be lots of advice about trying to keep busy and active but relaxation is important too and can actually be quite an active process.

One of the things people often try to use for relaxation is imagery. This is where you try to imagine being in a favourite place. The place can be real or imaginary. It can be a place you have been or would like to go to. The main advice here, though, is to try to engage all of your senses when using imagery as this will engage lots of parts of your brain. People often imagine what their chosen place will look like but have you thought about what it will smell like, taste like, feel like, sound like?

Another technique is called progressive muscle relaxation. This is where you think about each muscle group starting from your toes to your head, or the other way around if you prefer, and the idea is to tense the muscle for a few seconds then let it relax and feel how relaxed you feel afterwards. Essentially you are trying to 'teach' your muscles that when you are very tense, the next thing you want them to do is relax. There is evidence of muscles being able to 'recognise' or 'remember' patterns. In the research literature this is often called 'muscle memory'. Your muscles don't actually have memory cells, those are in your brain, but there is evidence that when muscles have repeated a movement lots of times, they start to show some activation in anticipation of the next movement. Some of the evidence about this comes from sports and it's thought to be the difference between experts and novices in sport. So if athletes can teach their muscles patterns they want them to follow, then we should be able to teach our muscles that when we are very tense, we then want them to relax. Remember, athletes don't become athletes overnight so this is a longer term strategy.

## **Reducing cognitive symptoms of anxiety**

Cognitive symptoms of anxiety can be alleviated with distraction, positive self talk and thought challenging.

### **Distraction**

This is a technique where we try to distract our minds from the worries and thoughts causing us anxiety. This is easier said than done because our brains have an attention system that

prioritises what we pay most attention to based on what it thinks is most important to us at that time. Obviously if a worry is so important that it is causing us a fight or flight reaction, changing our physical symptoms in our bodies and so on then our attention system is going to think that's quite important.

The trick here, then, is to do something cognitively difficult which takes up a lot of our attention. For example, counting backwards from 100 in 3s; spelling the names of our friends/family members backwards; listing the songs on our favourite albums; listing the books in our favourite series; listing the full names of the characters in our favourite TV show etc.

Distraction is only a short term solution, however, and although it works, it doesn't take away the thing that has bothered us, it only distracts from it for now.

### **Positive self talk**

This is about thinking positively and trying to think what skills and attributes we bring to different situations that would be likely to help us through those situations. We can think things like "I can do this", "I've got this", "I believe in myself" and/or use our skills "I'm good at problem solving so I'll work this out too", "I'm usually a quick learner so I'll learn how to solve this too" and/or use our experiences "I've been through difficult times before, I'll get through this too", "I remember feeling like this before and it passed" and so on.

It may be helpful to write these down so that when we feel anxious, we can refer to our own thoughts on what we want to think to make us more positive at the time.

### **Thought challenging**

This is where we think about what is bothering us and specifically focus on it. We think about our evidence that this worry is true and often there will be lots of this evidence because regardless of how modest we may be, we actually all think we're right all of the time. Think about it, it would be silly to think otherwise because we don't go around thinking things that we think are silly, we think things that we think are true; therefore we think we're right all of the time!

The trick with this, though, is that we then have to think about any evidence that this worry may not be 100% true. This can be difficult, especially because we've just said that we think we are right, so this is arguing against ourselves. It can be helpful to think about what we would tell a friend about this worry if it were theirs; or what a friend or trusted person may

tell us. We may not come up with a lot of evidence against the thought but any evidence can mean that the thought moves from 100% accurate in our minds to slightly less and if it's slightly less, then the anxiety can also be slightly less.

## Reducing behavioural symptoms of anxiety

As mentioned, one of the behavioural symptoms of anxiety is avoiding the things that make us anxious. It's difficult to avoid coronavirus and information about it at the moment. Also, we need to stay up to date with the latest advice about it to protect ourselves and our loved ones and keep everyone as safe as possible.

The main advice here, then, is to try to stick to official sources of information about coronavirus and avoid speculation and making assumptions where possible. You may want to limit time spent looking at information about coronavirus so if you are finding it overwhelming, chose a time of the date to look at the latest updates and use the strategies in this guide to manage the anxiety around this.

As mentioned, alongside avoidance, another behavioural symptom of anxiety is safety behaviours. These are things people do to try to make themselves feel safer. You may find that you are checking on things a little more often than usual at the moment or finding it comforting to have something close to you most of the time. Safety behaviours can be fine but if they are intrusive or causing other difficulties, then they can be worked on. For example, if you find that you are drinking more alcohol or eating differently, these things may start to become problematic. If you are engaging in behaviours that you don't think other people are likely to be using as a way of managing your anxiety then contact us and we will be happy to support you.