



How to deal with stress and anxiety of COVID-19

SDS Seminars Paper #1.3

This is the paper we have put together regarding the psychological effects and management of COVID-19. This paper is specifically a list of brief, rough and ready “first aid” tips and advice for health, social care and psychotherapy workers on how you can manage your own stress and anxiety at this difficult time.

Before we start, make sure you recognise that our current stress comes from two sources:

- our position as a citizen of this country and the personal threat we see in COVID-19 and
- our job role.

The dual roles of us as citizens affected by the situation and professionals caring for other people compete for our attention, create additional stress, and lead to us feeling overwhelmed.

The sudden need to simultaneously juggle personal health and family circumstances; dealing 24/7 with other family members who are worried, panicking or just unruly; worrying about our loved ones who fall under the vulnerable and extremely vulnerable categories; all - while providing psychological help to our clients who are dealing with all of the above AND their mental health problems, is a task both highly stressful and demanding.

If that wasn't enough – we are dealing with a changed work context; changed working schedules (e.g. day times/night time shifts), having to adapt rapidly to completely new roles in order to support COVID response, often feeling out of our comfort zone/and, sometimes, - depth.

On top of all of the above, we experience the urge to get involved in supporting our local community, volunteer to help with delivery, phone counselling etc.

There are MANY competing demands.

The first aid tips below will help you to tackle some of them.

Some may also have practical benefits for your anxious clients.

1. YOUR REACTION TO THE SITUATION

a. Recognise various coping strategies - be accepting and kind

People react differently to difficult situations:

- Some – panic;
- Some – go into helping mode and increase their activity levels;
- Some – getting angry and behave aggressively to those around them, including those on social media;
- Some – withdraw;
- Some go into complete meltdown;
- Some – go into information overload, both seeking it and spreading it;
- Some – make a lot of jokes about the situation;
- Some – deny the problem altogether.

These are different manifestations of coping strategies, both conscious and unconscious, that develop as a result of fear, helplessness and loss of control. They might be different to YOUR coping strategies, but they are still valid. Furthermore, we all very likely will go through most of these coping mechanisms at some point during this time.

Action: Practise kindness to each other and to yourself, even if someone is being aggressive or confrontational. Practise makes perfect. We get better at things we practise.

2. INFORMATION EXPOSURE AND DIGITAL PRESENCE

a. Limit your exposure to information about COVID-19

24 hour news and online media exposure is very unhelpful, it will not make you an expert overnight, but will create additional stress and anxiety.

Action: Decide to watch the news (online or TV) ONCE a day for a set period of time to update yourself and no more.

b. Audit your news sources and only use those that are reliable, and offer practical and realistic support.

The cacophony on them only gives voice to the loudest, most anxiety provoking and contradictory messages. Positive and practical sites are the only way to go. Double check everything you hear, even if the information seems to look reliable.

Action: Decide what channels you watch and weed out all sensationalist and unreliable groups/pages/figures from your social media news feed.

c. Limit and regulate your digital presence according to YOUR needs

Self-isolation created the need for a sudden and rapid increase in our digital connectivity and online presence. In order to stay up-to-date and to stay connected to our various networks – we are having to join various FB groups, WhatsApp groups for locally organised community support; move face-to-face meeting with colleagues and family to Skype/Zoom. This comes with the expectations and desire to constantly respond to new notifications as they are coming through, which in turn creates hyper alertness that limits our focus and attention.

Remember – you don't HAVE to be available for online communications 24/7. Plan your "online social life" as you plan your offline one. Switch off SMS, messenger, and email sound

notifications. Perhaps, mute your phone altogether. We check our phones often enough, so we don't need to worry that we'll miss something important. Choose meetings, online training sessions, and friendly chats when it suits you. Don't worry about not being "in the loop". You won't miss anything important.

Action: Mute your notifications now. Write a list of people you want to contact, write a list of meetings you need to attend. Stick to your choices.

3. SUPPORT NETWORK

a. Distant Support

Support is very important - use email, phone, Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp or texting, the list of possibilities is endless. But use them wisely – see the point above. Do not allow them to create additional stress and demand on your busy time. Try to avoid round-robin communication – it's more prone to becoming a moaning shop. Try and agree rules for how you chat. Starting with a description of what you know that's safe, listing something you're grateful for that day, "At least I'm not...." conversations along with the things you've done successfully and are proud of that day. These will all help boost mood.

Action: Reach out to people who make you feel good, not those who drag you down. If your contact with the latter group is inevitable – establish the ground rules and stick to them.

b. Local Support

There are already plenty of examples of neighbourhood groups on WhatsApp, parents chat groups, co-workers communications, small towns and villages groups on Facebook.

Action: Join in, even if it is not within your nature. Reach out to people in your proximity via digital communications. Gradually reduce your list to those groups that have proven to be most helpful. You don't need to keep up with them all.

c. People you are isolating with

They will have the most impact on you and your well-being over the next several weeks and possibly - months. What is important:

- Personal working space, if you are all working from home, agree in advance where each of you will be working from.
- Personal “me” space. Agree on the timings of being together and timings of being apart. You might even need a TV schedule to make sure that every member of your family unit has access and it is clear when and for how long.
- Walk away from arguments as much as you can, see point 1 of this paper.
- Share household chores – establish who is doing what and stick to the plan.

Action: Have this conversation establishing your household ground rules as soon as you can.

d. Help

Ask for it if you need it – don’t suffer in silence.

4. DAILY ROUTINES

Diet, exercise and sleep are essential

These are “old chestnuts” but it doesn’t make them less true. Brutally audit yourself now to see whether you are doing all you can to facilitate these. It will probably mean a change in routine, but you’ve already got a major routine change.

a. Food

Processed comfort food on the sofa or in bed until the early hours browsing Facebook is very tempting, but it will make you feel worse. Decide NOW on what alternatives you can engage in:

- As food sources might be limited, plan your meals in advance.
- Sort the contents of your fridge according to the food expiration dates. You can even put products with different expiration dates on different shelves and eat them in the correct order. That will minimise waste and give you the sense on control of your stocks.
- Cook the same meal for everyone in the household, if their health allows it.
- Plan your shop trips in advance, keep distancing when food shopping, follow the rules, be polite. See point 1.

b. Booze

It might seem a good idea to start on it early and enjoy it through the day, but remember that too much alcohol will make the anxiety worse and it's also a depressant. Be sensible here.

c. Stocking Up

If need to properly isolate you do need to do this, but don't go overboard, remember you are not alone. There are volunteer services who can deliver food. Don't panic if you can't book a delivery slot with one of the large supermarkets. Go local – many small shops have risen to the challenge and even deliver fresh, locally produced food right to your door. Ask your friends on social media who they use – there are more options than you think. To the basics add some treats – if you have to isolate you will feel particularly drawn to things that taste and feel nice. Plan them in advance.

Also don't forget things like lightbulbs, batteries, bin liners and washing powder.

d. Exercise

For exercise try dancing, skipping, cleaning, gardening, if you can do it away from other people, walking, running, cycling, with social distancing. Yoga is great in a small space, but you don't have to limit yourself to it. There are many more ways to exercise than yoga.

e. Nature

Try to spend at least some time every day in contact with nature. If a walk outside is not possible – spend some time looking out of the window – observe change of seasons, the clouds, the sunshine. Really pay attention.

If you have a garden – do some gardening every day. If you don't have a garden, but have some outside space, plant something in pots. Even if you don't have seeds to plant – improvise. I plant onions from supermarkets – they grow quickly and give me the sense of connection with nature and a wonderful supply of spring onions for salads.

Pets are a constant source of amusement and joy and the way to connect with nature too. If you don't have pets – watch birds from your window, anything that brings you that sense of connection with the natural world.

f. Other Activities

Meditate, read, cook, knit, draw, write. Be creative. During a plague quarantine in 1606 Shakespeare composed King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra before the year was over. Be like Shakespeare!

Try to limit screen activities, even though screens are so attractive at this time. Remember that blue light from computer screens and digital devices can lead to digital eyestrain, that represents itself in sore or irritated eyes, difficulty focusing, tiredness, headache. Not something we need right now anyway.

Plan some activities with your loved ones at home, if possible, or via Skype or Zoom. Shared activities like yoga, singing,

meditation, that give pleasure and a sense of achievement are ideal. We know that these automatically raise mood. Try it yourself.

g. Sleep

Establish daily routines with regular wake up and bedtimes. It is easy to stay up through the night and have a lie in in the morning, but the more you do it, the more your sleep gets disturbed, that will lead to tiredness through the day and will affect your immune system.

5. ATTITUDES

a. Concentrate on what is continuing as usual

Part of the stress you are currently experiencing is the speed, at which rapid adaption is demanded in both personal and job lives. This can make you feel punch-drunk and disorientated.

Concentrate on what is continuing as usual.

Most of these things we normally take for granted and ignore. Now is the time to be conscious of them. The clothes you wear, the people you know and talk to, much of the work you do is similar (even when your location is changed), your home, your interests and hobbies. Spring is coming, days are getting longer and warmer – just as they do every year. Indeed there is far, far more continuity than change, even now.

Action: List all the things that continue as usual and concentrate on them.

b. Concentrate on what you can control and stick to it rigidly

COVID-19 is invisible and makes people feel vulnerable and out of control. People respond to this by either going into total denial about the risk; or becoming hypervigilant. Neither is helpful. Concentrate on what you can control and stick to it

rigidly. You already know what it is you can do to make yourself safer. It's not rocket science. Doing it is what's key. At the end of the day, list those things you've done. Concentrate on implementation NOT on the "what ifs". You don't normally say to yourself "What if I go out and a drunk driver knocks me over." You only concentrate on what you can do to keep yourself safe, i.e. look carefully before you cross the road. The situation is the same here.

Action: List the actions that are within your control and stick to them.

c. Keep boundaries between work and personal life

The boundary between home and work life has become blurred. For many of us it is difficult to create a 'working space' at home, or share such a space with other household members who have to work the same hours; it is much harder to settle in, and feel focused and productive. Because of that we may feel guilty for not being productive or effective enough. As a result we often go into compensatory overworking mode – working much longer hours than we normally do, working harder with less job satisfaction and diminished feeling of achievement. At the end of a working day, it can feel like there's a need to offload after work and, while this can be helpful, it can become an extension of a working day into the evening and beyond.

Boundaries!

If you share your working space – each member of the family working in close proximity to each other should wear headphones.

Breaks – solid 50 min work periods should be followed by 10 min breaks. Longer breaks for lunch and refreshments during the day.

Be kind to yourself: trust that you do as much as and as well as you can in the circumstances within your normal working hours. Be strict with yourself in keeping to those hours. This is when being strict equals being kind.

As for offloading about work with other family members or colleagues – it should be brief and as close to work time as possible – not later in the evening, or even worse – across the whole evening. And be strict again – 30 mins maximum. If all the members of the family work from home – keep to the same principle. Limit work hours, and schedule “debriefing” times.

No work at weekends, unless you work shifts.

Action: Buy headphones. Plan breaks. Plan debriefings. Rest at weekends. Be kind to yourself.

d. Accept and adapt. Recognise these are not normal times.

The behavioural aspect of tackling these changed circumstances and multiple demands is to adopt an attitude of behavioural flexibility or “make and mend”. The reality is that you might not have the resources to deliver the service you would do normally. Whether this is not having the protective equipment you need, or not having adequate IT solutions for your service, or simply not having the time to see the client for as long as you normally would.

Accept and adapt.

Recognise these are not normal times. Simply becoming frustrated is not helpful. Stories of variable severity from therapists talking on the phone for only 5 minutes, through to the adaption of old ventilators, and nurses wearing bin bags to protect themselves are not acceptable in the long run. However they are better than nothing in the current circumstances.

Action: Accept the situation for what it is. Adapt to it in the best possible way in the circumstances.

e. Recognise fluidity of the situation and see good in bad times

Although at first everything seems to be different and going from bad to worse, it won't last. Quite soon this new situation

will develop a sense of “normality”. We’ll develop new routines and adapt to new rhythms. This difficult situation will also bring some unexpected good things: you’ll see the examples of help offered to strangers, communities coming together, acts of kindness happening all around you. And you will be a part of it. You will re-discover your values and priorities in life. Show your love to your friends and family, show that you care. We will get through this situation together.

Action: Make mental or written notes of the good things that this situation brought out in you and people around you.

f. Humour

Very important! Especially - for children.

Don’t be scared of laughter. Laugh yourself and make those around you laugh with you. Facebook memes, good old comedy on TV, silly games – all works. If someone around you losing their sense of humour, take it as a warning sign that they might not be doing OK and need help.

Action: Find some ways to laugh every day. Pass on a good joke when you come across it.

6. LOOK AFTER YOURSELF SO YOU CAN LOOK AFTER OTHERS. BE MORE FLEXIBLE AND COMPASSIONATE TOWARDS YOURSELF

Working with distressed people is difficult at the best of times if you are in a job role designed to relieve distress. At the current time it will be even more difficult. You may be working longer hours; you may feel more helpless in the face of your clients’ problems, you may feel scared and worried that you have less to give to others.

Some of the things listed above require us looking after ourselves so we can do the best job for our clients.

However some of it is related to our beliefs and expectations about what we should/shouldn’t do in our jobs.

“I should be able to make this person comfortable and if I can’t then I’m....” or

“If I’m not making someone feel OK then I must try harder”.

These are beliefs and expectations for a different time and place. Be more flexible and compassionate towards yourself. You have limits.

Action: Practice compassion and forgiveness towards yourself. Ban all “should-s” and negative assumptions from your language.

7. THE POWER OF SMALL THINGS

In times of crisis small acts of kindness mean a huge amount. They can be really small: a direct message on Facebook or WhatsApp, a phone call, an email, flowers added to the shopping you are doing for a self-isolating neighbour, a dishwasher emptied without being asked, a bin taken out. These tiny gestures make a disproportionate positive impact.

Action: Do the little things, no matter how little they seem to you.

Remember, this current situation will not last forever, and it is not selfish to look after yourself. You need to do it in order to look after others.

Stay safe and well.

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SDS Seminars Ltd,
with a special thanks to Lucia Andleif for her valuable contribution.

March 2020

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